

Degree Program in International Relations

Course of Geopolitical Scenarios and Political Risk

**The DPRK's nuclear issue: geopolitical analysis and
implications of the North Korean nuclear program**

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Abstract

Since the early 1990s, the DPRK's decision to develop a nuclear program has raised numerous concerns within the international community. The main purpose of this thesis is to make a geopolitical analysis of the implications deriving from the North Korean nuclear issue. To do so, the research is divided into four chapters. The first one studies the historical development of the DPRK's nuclearization process from the Cold War period until the present day. This section also provides an overview of the way the first North Korean leader Kim Il Sung's experiences shaped the nation's decision-making and its politics. The second chapter aims at analyzing the role played in the matter by two of Pyongyang's main allies, namely China and Russia. More in depth, an historical study of Sino-North Korean and Russian-North Korean ties is provided. The third chapter provides an overview of the policies implemented by the international community to tackle the North Korean nuclear issue that is considered to be a great concern at the global level. For instance, the United States, South Korea, and Japan's response to the threat posed by the DPRK as well as their respective relations with the latter country are taken into account. The fourth and last chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the implications that the nuclear program has for the international community. At last, the last section provides a future forecast and recommendations that would enhance the current insecurity in the Korean Peninsula. As the Sino-American rivalry is on the rise it is very unlikely that the DPRK will cease its nuclear advancements. Cooperation to find an agreement on the matter is thus fundamental. Furthermore, international organizations such as ASEAN could play a greater role in the issue. Their neutral stance and mediation capabilities could be further explored to reach a feasible long-term solution.

Introduction

In the last three decades the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)'s decision to develop a nuclear program has brought concerns among the international community. In spite of the

numerous efforts employed by the latter, none has been able to efficiently tackle the problem and negotiate a solution with the Pyongyang government. Even though some states have been able to ease tensions for a short period of time, a long-term solution is yet to be found. This thesis seeks to analyze the geopolitical implications of the North Korean nuclear issue. To do so, the work is divided into four chapters that take into account specific factors. First and foremost, the work presented studies the DPRK's nuclear program in depth. In fact, the first chapter aims at making the reader understand the evolution of the North Korean nuclear program. More in depth, the former section begins with an historical overview of the DPRK's nuclear policy, analyzing at first the developments since the foundation of the nation after the end of the Korean war until the early 1990s. In this part the work explains how Pyongyang gradually changed its negative view on nuclear weapons as an instrument used by the United States (US) for propaganda to a useful tool for economic growth. Eventually, at the end of the Cold War the DPRK began to advance in its nuclear program in spite of all the financial constraints the country was facing. For instance, the 1990s were characterized by the first nuclear crisis. As a matter of fact, North Korea's lack of transparency on its actions led to tensions with the international community, involving actors such as the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Republic of Korea (ROK) but also the US. Eventually this period of insecurity resulted in the stipulation of the Agreed Framework in 1994. However, tensions once again arose with the DPRK's decision to withdraw from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2003. Following this, the Six Party talks began to try to solve the issue, but they were unsuccessful as in 2006 North Korea conducted its first nuclear test. As a consequence to this latter action, Pyongyang was subjected to sanctions by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) as well as to a complete isolation from the international community. The first chapter also gives an overview of North Korean political history. More in depth, the former analyzes the way the personal experiences and beliefs of the first North Korean leader Kim Il Sung greatly contributed to shaping the nation's political system. As a matter of fact, as leader Kim joined the Chinese communists during the Chinese civil war, he developed a nationalist sentiment. Moreover, the former was able to view the way the Soviet Union as a communist state was able to mobilize people and resources to build a strong economy. The so-called *Juche* ideology theorized by the leader Kim is at the foundations of the DPRK's political system. The former underscores that a strong military apparatus, party's rule, and a socialist ideology are at the basis of the North Korea political strategy. The *Juche* ideology was followed by all Kim's successors. In particular, the current leader Kim Jong Un decided to reinforce this strategy. For instance, this chapter explains that the international community was a strong believer of the new leader's capabilities of changing the current North Korean situation both from a humanitarian but also military point of view. This came as a consequence of Kim Jong Un's background as a student in Europe as well as his young age at the time he came into power in December 2011. However, soon after this latter date, states and non-state actors were shown the new leader's real intentions as he conducted the country's third nuclear test. In addition to this, the North

Korean leader Kim committed to the *Juche* ideology as well as its military-first policy that was based on reinforcing the DPRK's military capabilities. Since Kim Jong Un took power, great advancements on North Korea's nuclear and missile programs were made, increasing tensions at the regional and international level as well as the Asian state's isolation. Because of the high level of sanctions imposed, Pyongyang tried to open up to the outside world when in 2018 Kim Jong Un met with American president Trump and South Korean president Moon. However, tensions once again arose with the DPRK's further development of its nuclear program and, as of today, no major steps forwards on the resolution of the issue were made. In addition to this, the outbreak of the Ukraine war and the consequent deepening of Russian-North Korean ties have contributed to increased insecurity. At last, the first chapter analyzes the way the North Korean issue has impacted the domestic situation. At first, it is explained that since its foundation the country has been subjected to both internal and external instability and that the government has adopted different measures to improve the situation. However, these policies were not successful and sometimes the Pyongyang government had to rely on external aid. Furthermore, the imposition of sanctions by the UNSC has not contributed to any improvement. However, contrary to what they were imposed for, these sanctions have not worsened the domestic situation. This is because the DPRK demonstrated to be a nation that has strong resistance to economic sanctions. In addition to this, North Korea's allies such as the PRC and Russia have helped Pyongyang to neutralize these latter.

The second chapter of this thesis makes an analysis of the PRC and the Russian Federation's ties with the DPRK as well as their reaction to the nuclear program. At first, this section takes into account the Sino-North Korean political, economic, and social relations and it studies how these have developed since the end of World War II (WWII). For instance, even though the two neighboring states have shared common ideas and experiences such as the Japanese colonization in the first half of the XX Century, the two have not always been able to maintain good and strong ties. As a matter of fact, the two states have developed mistrust of each other, and this contributed to rising instability both at a regional and at the international level. Moreover, the Sino-North Korean ties have brought great worries within the global community. More specifically, actors such as the US, the ROK, and Japan have been concerned about the Chinese strong presence in the Korean Peninsula. This latter point has been further exacerbated for the role played by Beijing in the North Korean nuclear issue. This chapter makes an overview of the role the PRC played and continues to play on the latter problem. The former section argues that China did not play a major role in the first nuclear crisis in the 1990s. More in depth, the former state did not adopt a firm stance on the issue, as on one hand it wanted to solve the dispute but on the other one it did not want to undermine the integrity of the DPRK regime. This uncertain stance was also adopted by Beijing during the early 2000s when the Six Party Talks took place. During this period of time, this lack of position led China to slowly begin to be losing credibility at the international level as well as diminishing its relations with Pyongyang. This situation was further

exacerbated when Kim Jong Un and Xi Jinping took power in 2011 and 2012 respectively. This was due to the former's decision to carry on with nuclear tests despite Beijing's attempts to stop the development of the nuclear program. In fact, the PRC publicly condemned Pyongyang's actions and this led to cooling off the Sino-North Korean relations. More in depth, this period of time was characterized by a policy shift by Beijing. As a matter of fact, while until that moment China's main objective was to maintain its neighboring state's stability and avoid a collapse of the regime, this switched to a willingness to ensure stability in the region. This eventually resulted in the DPRK's decision to rely on other actors. However, the progressive worsening of Sino-American relations led Beijing to rethink its stance. For instance, the latter voted against sanctions imposed by the UNSC in 2018 and began to aid North Korea evading those already imposed. As of today, the situation between the two neighboring nations remains the same. The section also highlights that these ties brought instability both at a national level for both countries taken into account and regional level. In addition to the above, the second chapter also analyzes the role played by the Soviet Union and Russian Federation on the North Korean nuclear issue from the beginning of the Cold War until the outbreak of the Ukraine War. Evidence shows that the Soviet Union was essential for the establishment of a nuclear research program in the DPRK during the 1950s. However, the former did not impact the latter's policies as China did during that period of time. Moreover, during the Cold War period Moscow's and Pyongyang's stances on different matters greatly differed, leading to a worsening of the Soviet-North Korean ties for most of the XX Century. Due to this situation, the newly formed Russian Federation was prevented from playing an impactful role during the first North Korean nuclear crisis in the 1990s. The former was in fact excluded from the talks. This position changed when Vladimir Putin took power in 2000. The former wanted to restore Russian influence in East Asia and among the strategies adopted, he wanted to enhance ties with the countries in the Korean Peninsula. The two states maintained good relations for the last twenty years. In addition to this, more recently the two further strengthened this link. The complete isolation from the international community that the DPRK and the Russian Federation are both subjected to make them grow closer. For instance, with the outbreak of the Ukraine War in 2022 Moscow needed a close ally at the military level. However, the military exchanges the two states had in the last two years increased instability within the international community and raised worries among state and non-state actors.

The third chapter studies the role played by the international community in the North Korean nuclear issue. In particular, this section takes into account different actors and non-state actors that have been very active on this matter or that could play a greater role. First and foremost, the chapter makes an analysis of the role the US has played in shaping the East Asia regional order according to its own interests in the area. The former has been very successful in its attempts, however, in recent decades, the rise of China and the decadence of Japan have mined Washington's position. This precarious environment has been further worsened by the development of the North Korean nuclear

program. More in depth, in spite of all the different attempts, the United States has been unable to find a long-term solution to the issue. This section also highlights the way both domestic and international factors have influenced Washington's policy making towards the DPRK. While some administrations such as those of Clinton and Trump were able to find short-term solutions that mitigated the insecurity in the region, as of today none negotiated a long-term stance. Another nation that has been affected by the development of the North Korean missile and nuclear programs is Japan. For instance, this latter had to change its approach to the issue in the course of decades as the pacifist approach adopted after the end of WWII resulted to be ineffective. More in depth, during that period of time, Tokyo decided to renounce its military assets and rely on the US. In fact, Japan joined the American nuclear umbrella to be protected in case of a nuclear attack. However, the development of a missile and a nuclear program by the DPRK since the first North Korean nuclear crisis in the 1990s was essential in influencing Tokyo's policy making. This section analyzes the way the case of abduction of Japanese nationals by North Korean authorities played a central role in Japan's policies as well. For instance, the latter state considered the nuclear issue and the abduction issue as one single problem that needed to be resolved together. In negotiations talks with the DPRK and international fora such as the Six Party Talks this aspect remained central. However, this led Japan to be sometimes isolated during multilateral talks. More recently, when Shinzo Abe took power in Japan things further changed on a military level. For instance, nowadays it is evident that Japan is seeking to play a more central role in the security of the region. The former is in fact investing more in the military field, abandoning the pacifist strategy adopted the last Century. In addition to this, the Japanese government is now discussing the possibility of withdrawing from the NPT and becoming a nuclear power to face the DPRK and the growing territorial threat. In addition to this, the third chapter makes an overview of inter-Korean relations and the position taken by the ROK facing the growing North Korean nuclear threat. This section explains that the two countries in the Peninsula adopted two different economic, political, and social trajectories after the Korean War. South Korea was able to become a global middle power in just a few decades and gain a position in the international arena. Due to the differences between the two states, North and South Korea did not develop ties after the end of the Korean war in 1953. For instance, the former two did not have any interactions until the first North Korean nuclear crisis, when the ROK attempted to open a dialogue with Pyongyang. This section also makes an analysis of the different strategies implemented by the Seoul government since the first nuclear crisis until today. However, the outcome of this overview is that the DPRK's mistrust towards its southern counterpart and lack of transparency on the nuclear program prevented the ROK from finding a long-term solution to the issue. Tensions in the Korean Peninsula are high, as South Korea is discussing developing a nuclear program to counterbalance the North Korean nuclear threat, security in the region is at risk. Non-state actors have also been very active in trying to solve the North Korean nuclear issue. More particularly, the United Nations (UN) acted as a mediator during the first North Korean nuclear

crisis. In addition to this, the UNSC played and continues to play a primary role on the matter, as it is the forum most used at the international level for decision-making on the issue. However, the sanctions adopted proved to be ineffective; this section argues that it is essential for the international organization to revise its approach in respect to the DPRK to find a long-term positive outcome. The chapter also highlights the way two international organizations could play a greater role on the matter. First and foremost, the European Union (EU) could be a good mediator. For instance, the neutral stance adopted as of today could lead the EU to be a bridge between the DPRK, the US, the ROK, and Japan. Secondly, the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) is another non-state actor that the international community needs to further take into account. The former institution in the course of decades has been able to establish good relations with North Korea. For instance, it is the only international forum in which the DPRK engages for what concerns nuclearization matters. It is key to further investigate the ways ASEAN could be consulted to find a successful strategy on the resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue.

Finally, the fourth and last chapter makes an analysis of the implications the North Korean nuclear program has on both state and non-state actors. The former section begins with research of the negative impacts this program had on the DPRK. Due to the unilateral sanctions imposed by the international community, the latter nation has not been able to effectively face the domestic challenges that arose during the years. In addition to this, Pyongyang's decision to not take Beijing's requests led to a decrease of Sino-North Korean cooperation and trust. However, as China is the primary source of aid for the DPRK this situation has not been optimal. In spite of the negative effects, one positive outcome deriving from North Korea's military developments is the enhanced cooperation between Pyongyang and Moscow. For instance, as mentioned, in the last years since the outbreak of the Ukrainian war, Russia began to increasingly rely on the DPRK for military matters. In fact, evidence shows that some missiles sent towards the Ukrainian territory were fabricated in North Korea. In addition to this, some scholars analyze that this military cooperation could be brought even further, as there are possibilities the two states might carry on some nuclear exchanges. This increasing insecurity is leading countries such as the Republic of Korea and Japan to discuss the possibility of developing a nuclear program themselves. This strategy is being considered also because of the former two states' increasing mistrust towards the US and its reaction capabilities. More in depth, Seoul and Tokyo in the last years have been questioning the extended nuclear umbrella system implemented by Washington and its efficacy. This situation is negatively impacting the US, which is gradually losing its influence in East Asia. Another aspect contributing to the latter situation is South Korea's decision to enhance its cooperation with China. As the former is one of the countries most affected by the North Korean nuclear issue, in the last years the Seoul government has been considering expanding its alliances in the region to face this threat. However, non-state actors and the international system as a whole have been affected by the development of the DPRK's nuclear program as well. For instance, the efficacy

of the NPT and the IAEA's response capabilities have been largely questioned by the global community. More in depth, the former's inability to face the DPRK made it lose credibility at the international level. Furthermore, the international humanitarian system has been questioned as well. In fact, the work carried out by international humanitarian organizations and NGOs such as the World Food Programme (WFP) has been greatly undermined by the development of the North Korean nuclear program and the consequent imposition of sanctions. On the other hand, ASEAN is an institution that has been positively impacted by the DPRK's nuclear issue. For instance, the former started to gain more visibility at the international level, as countries such as South Korea began to rely more on the organization to seek a feasible solution to the North Korean nuclear threat. As the international community remains very concerned for this issue the fourth chapters also propose a future forecast. Generally speaking, the last section highlights the unlikelihood the DPRK will choose to stop the development of its nuclear program. As the latter is considered to be essential for the regime's survival, the increasing insecurity in the East Asian region is not contributing to make Pyongyang think otherwise. In particular, the Sino-American rivalry that is on the rise is one of the main aspects influencing the DPRK's decision-making. However, it is key for countries to cooperate on the matter, as finding a single approach is essential for raising the possibilities of a positive outcome. A settlement such as the Agreed Framework signed during the first nuclear crisis is extremely needed. State and non-state actors should negotiate each other's necessities and priorities to find a common ground of agreement. In this sense, the section underscores the important role that international organizations such as ASEAN could play on the matter. For instance, its non-proliferation strategy, as well as the good reputation the organization has in North Korea and at the international level makes it a perfect player. To avoid a worsening of nuclear proliferation in the Korean Peninsula and the East Asian region as a whole, as well as finding a feasible long-term solution, taking into account the aspects analyzed is essential.

1.The DPRK

1.1 Historical Overview of the DPRK's nuclear program

This paragraph seeks to make an overview of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)'s nuclear program. In particular, it analyzes the latter's development since the foundation of the state after the Korean war until the early 2000s, characterized by the Six Party Talks and the firsts nuclear tests. This section will explain that while during World War II North Korea had a negative

view of nuclear weapons and nuclear power as a consequence of the United States' propaganda, after the Korean War the leadership of the Asian nation started to change its ideas. In fact, with the influence of the Soviet Union, the DPRK began to discuss nuclear energy and the positive outcome that this would have brought to the state. However, the paragraph will study how lack of resources and economic constraints prevented the Pyongyang government from fully developing a nuclear program during most of the Cold War period. Following this, this section will highlight the first North Korean nuclear crisis that took place in the 1990s. It will explain that the DPRK was able to advance in its nuclear program starting from the second part of the 1980s and that its lack of transparency on the outcomes reached led to an international crisis, involving actors such as the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Republic of Korea (ROK) but also the United States of America (US). This paragraph will also analyze how the DPRK's nuclear program began an issue for the international community, leading to the Six Party Talks. The latter had the main objective of trying to prevent the Asian state from continuing developing its nuclear program. However, the section will demonstrate that the talks were not fruitful, as North Korea withdrew. Lastly, this first paragraph studies the firsts two nuclear tests conducted by the DPRK in 2006 and 2009 respectively, as well as the complete isolation from the international sphere that the latter had to face due to its actions.

1.1.1 The Cold War Period

During World War II (WWII) the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), as the majority of Countries in Asia, conceived nuclear power as a tool that the United States was exploiting to prevent the reach of nuclear-free war. In fact, the Asian state during that period of time started to advocate for the prohibition of atomic weapons production and use. (Woo, 2023). This was mostly due to the fact that the western power made several explicit threats to employ nuclear weapons throughout the Korean War. In addition to this, it is key to highlight that Washington sent a significant amount of strategic nuclear weapons to South Korea following the conflict. As a matter of fact, since 1950 until the early 1990s the Republic of Korea (ROK) has arranged nuclear weapons to be used in case of nuclear attack. (Mazarr, 1995).

However, especially after the end of the Korean War in 1953, North Korean leader Kim Il Sung and important political figures in the Nation began to develop the idea that nuclear power could have led to economic prosperity. Thus, it was asked to scientists in the DPRK to strengthen their knowledge on the matter also by learning from other countries' strategies, especially the Soviet Union. As a matter of fact, this latter nation is considered to have been essential for Pyongyang to be able to develop a nuclear arsenal. For instance, North Korean researchers were able to take part in the so-called Soviet Peaceful Atoms program after the two countries signed a deal for techno-scientific dialogue in February

1955. It is fundamental to underline that there are two factors that primarily influenced the DPRK's choices during the beginning of the Cold War period. First of all, the latter state wanted to be able to counterbalance the presence of the United States' nuclear weapons in East Asia. Secondly, North Korea was willing to imitate the Soviet Union in the use of nuclear power for financial benefits. (Woo, 2023).

For instance, on 9 September 1958, the DPRK officially decided to detach itself from its neighbors' approach to nuclearization. In fact, while the majority of states in East Asia after World War II were determined to maintain the region denuclearized, North Korea chose to explore a different path. (Solingen, 2009). As already mentioned, this was also a consequence of the United States' decision to base some nuclear weapons in South Korean territory. In fact, as a consequence to what was perceived by North Korea as a serious threat, Pyongyang decided to strengthen its alliance with two of its main allies, China and the Soviet Union, by concluding mutual defense agreements with both of them. (Akhli, 2018). Furthermore, on the date above cited, the DPRK officially began its journey towards nuclearization. More in depth, in 1958 an exhibition on the Peaceful Use of Atomic Energy in the Soviet Union was presented in Pyongyang. The North Korean Physicist To Sang Rok claimed in one of the leading newspapers in the Nation that this exhibition paved the way for North Koreans to use nuclear technology for planned economy management. In fact, it is possible to say that during this exhibition North Koreans were given the opportunity to learn about the positive outcomes that nuclear power would bring to the economy of the State. This incentivized thoughts on the implementation of such tool in the nation. (Woo, 2023).

The following year, in 1959, the DPRK and the Soviet Union reached an agreement that consisted in the former receiving technical support for the peaceful use of nuclear energy from the latter. As a consequence to this partnership, a research center that became operational in the 1960s was created. (Mazarr, 1995). However, the financial hardships that North Korea was going through at the time prevented the latter from efficiently developing nuclear power. In particular, in the 1960's the lack of experts and research capabilities did not allow the Asian state to reach the objectives expected. This situation did not change until the 1980s, when the North Korean leader Kim Il Sung highlighted the importance of investing in nuclear power generation. For instance, during that period of time this started to become a topic of discussion among North Korean scientists and experts in the field.

During that period of time the international community was completely unaware of Pyongyang's intentions on nuclear power. However, after the matter became known at the international level some years later, many began to question the DPRK's decisions. For instance, as already mentioned, the latter state at the time was having economic issues. For this reason, the global community was concerned on the way the DPRK had decided to manage its resources. In particular, the Asian country's actions were perceived as worrying as it decided to prioritize investments on the nuclear program over the society's wellbeing. In addition to this, it is key to note that North Korea's leadership was perceived as insecure. This has greatly contributed to make foreign actors think that the

former leader Kim Il Sung has always been very keen on building his own nuclear arsenal and not just exploiting nuclear energy for economic purposes. In spite of this, some studies show how throughout the course of the Cold War, the former leader's nuclear intention was indeed centered on how to use atoms to power the DPRK's industrial economy rather than to build its own arsenal. However, because of financial unsustainability by the time the nation's first research reactor was operational the Pyongyang government was unable to carry out its goals.

It is key to underline that there is lack of evidence that the former North Korean leader Kim Il Sung was actively seeking the implementation of nuclear power in the DPRK for intimidation. However, it is also important to highlight that the latter nation was subject to numerous attack threats by Washington during the course of the Cold War. As a result of this latter factor, despite the lack of available clear evidence on the matter, it is difficult to establish whether the North Korean leader's real intentions were to build a nuclear arsenal for military reasons or not. (Woo, 2023).

1.1.2 The 1990s

In the 1990s the first North Korean nuclear crisis took place. In fact, in spite of all the economic hardships that the DPRK had to go through during the Cold War that prevented it from fully developing, in the 1980s and 1990s the government had decided to keep investing in nuclear power. (Hecker, 2010). There is lack of clear evidence on the reasons why the government decided to pursue this nuclear path, however, there are some factors that could have contributed to this choice and that it is worth analyzing. In terms of security issues, it is key to highlight that despite the presence of nuclear weapons in its neighboring state's territory, Pyongyang did not feel that its security was seriously threatened enough to try to develop such a weapon until South Korea started to increase its welfare in the late 1970s. In fact, as above analyzed, the DPRK had started to be predisposed to advance on nuclear power mostly for economic reasons, namely, to increase its financial prosperity. However, there are high possibilities that economic progress in the ROK made Pyongyang take the decision of using nuclear weapons to increase its security. (Kang, 1995). As a matter of fact, evidence shows that North Korea was able to construct its first experimental reactor in 1986, followed by another reactor soon after. This indicates that North Korean experts were in fact able to progress in the field quite fast. However, there is little evidence on the DPRK nuclear activities during this period of time. This is mostly due to the fact that, unlike bigger countries such as the Soviet Union, at the time the Asian State had no obligation in providing evidence on its nuclear program. (Hecker, 2010). In fact, the latter throughout this period of time was able to operate without providing updates to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), as well as other international organizations and States dealing with nuclearization. The main reason for this is that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was not a party of the Treaty on the Non-

Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, more commonly known as the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). (Kang, 1995). In addition to this, the Pyongyang government had not disclosed any information that officially proved the existence of such a program. In fact, all the information available was provided by satellites that recorded the presence of unannounced nuclear facilities in the Country.

The international community firstly became aware of the North Korean nuclear development in 1989. In particular, at the time the Republic of Korea was able to leak the data recorded by Americans through satellites and other tools and it decided to release the information to the public. (Hecker, 2010). Thus, in 1989, Washington and Seoul for the first time concretely acknowledged the possible threat that a nuclearized North Korea would have posed. The US immediately urged to take action to face what was considered as a great issue for the region's security. In fact, the following year the former American president Bush tried to push the DPRK to become a party of the International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards agreement. The Washington government's main purpose was to stop the advancement of the North Korean nuclear program. To convince Pyongyang, the US implemented different incentives. More in depth, among the incentives used, Washington offered the removal of American nuclear arsenals from South Korean territory, the termination of the annual military drill between the US and the ROK, and the organization of a diplomatic meeting between the US and the DPRK. This latter was indeed arranged in New York in January 1992, and it was considered to be by observers the most significant American-North Korean exchange since the Korean War. In the meantime, it is also important to emphasize that two historic inter-Korean agreements were signed by the end of 1991. The first one was a non-aggression and reconciliation agreement that was intended to be a starting point for inter-Korean political and financial exchanges. On the other hand, the second agreement concerned a denuclearization deal between Pyongyang and Seoul that outside of the IAEA safeguards framework called for inspections in the North Korean territory. This was adopted by the North Korean Supreme People's Assembly in April 1992. However, this latter deal did not have the expected results. As a matter of fact, the denuclearization agreement resulted in major disputes over the course of 1992 and 1993. (Mazarr, 1995). It is key to highlight that the DPRK officially signed the NPT in 1985. The Soviet Union's decision to build light-water reactors (LWRs) in the DPRK in exchange of North Korea's NPT membership resulted to be crucial in this commitment. However, it is also fundamental to underline that because of the Soviet Union's fall in 1991, these reactors were actually never built. (Hecker, 2010).

In spite of the commitment towards the denuclearization of the country the DPRK engaged in, the latter did not respect the agreement. For instance, in May 1992, IAEA's then Director General made an investigation tour to the nuclear facility in Yongbyon, and soon after, the Agency's inspection group reached the site as well. (Mazarr, 1995). IAEA inspectors found differences between the international organization's measurements and those that were declared by the DPRK not long before. As a consequence of these discrepancies, while the latter formally had to declare the existence of its nuclear

program in 1992, it quickly had to close it. At this point, evidence gained by the IAEA's inspections demonstrated that the experimental reactor in North Korea was annually producing heat and electricity more or less equivalent to about one nuclear bomb. As a response to the public accusations made by the IAEA, the DPRK soon declared its intention to officially withdraw from the NPT that had ratified not long before. In addition to this, it is important to mention that in 1994, North Korea released the information of having a reactor estimated to contain twenty to thirty kilograms of plutonium. Following this, the US firmly condemned the North Korean nuclear program, and the two countries nearly went to war until former American President Carter intervened and was able to mediate a ceasefire. (Hecker, 2010). In fact, when the US President Jimmy Carter visited North Korea in June 1994, North Korean leader Kim Il Sung proposed an end to the nuclear dispute: in return for a series of advantages, the DPRK would suspend its nuclear program. In spite of the Clinton administration having conflicting reactions to former president Carter's visit and role in the dispute, on June 21 of the same year, the Washington government sent Pyongyang a letter requesting for the acknowledgment of this proposal. It is important to say that for the US the total denuclearization of the Asian state as well as a total stop on nuclear advancements was not negotiable. On their part, the American government committed to high-level talks with North Korea. As the latter agreed to the proposal made, Washington soon declared that it would have stopped threatening the implementation of sanctions towards the DPRK. (Mazarr, 1995). In October 1994, following different interactions between Washington and Pyongyang, the latter two signed what is known as the Agreed Framework. As of today, this is considered to be the most important negotiation reached with Pyongyang on denuclearization talks. For instance, this document drastically altered North Korea's nuclear trajectory at the time. (Hecker, 2010). In fact, the Agreed Framework consisted in the DPRK's promise to stop advancing in its nuclear program, as well as to follow the NPT's guidelines of allowing inspection visits customarily. In addition to this, North Korea committed to initiate inter-Korean talks. On the other hand, the Asian State was reassured by the US that it would not be attacked with nuclear weapons. On this matter, it is key to underline that Washington and Seoul had already removed all nuclear weapons from the South Korean territory. (Mazarr, 1995). Most importantly, it is fundamental to highlight that Pyongyang mainly agreed to this negotiation as the US, the ROK, and Japan committed to the provision of two LWRs by 2003. (Hecker, 2010).

According to American observers, this period of time was crucial to make the international community understand that the DPRK was trying to seize every opportunity to start a war with South Korea. (Kang, 1995). As a matter of fact, despite the Agreed Framework, the Asian country was very demanding on economic and financial contributions from the United States, and it emphasized its opposition to let the ROK develop its own nuclear arsenal. (Mazarr, 1995). In addition to this, in spite of the agreement, North Korea proceeded with the expansion of its missile program, even launching a missile over Japan in 1998. Furthermore, Pyongyang investigated uranium enrichment as well. It was

thus evident the Agreed Framework could not provide a definite solution to the North Korean nuclear issue that, in fact, still persists today. (Hecker, 2010).

1.1.3 The early 2000s

The beginning of the new century did not start on a positive note for what concerns the North Korean nuclear problem. For instance, the newly elected US president Bush and his administration made clear their aversion to the Agreed Framework, as well as the DPRK's stance in general. In particular, it is worth mentioning that in the first meeting between Kim Il Sung's successor, the North Korean leader Kim Jong Il and the American president, the latter accused the Asian Country of still trying to pursue a nuclear arsenal in spite of the stipulation of the Agreed Framework and of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. As a consequence to this statement, the DPRK decided to officially put an end to the Agreed Framework. In addition to this, in 2003 Pyongyang chose to withdraw from the NPT. North Korea was the first country since the NPT was created to decide to commit such an act. As a consequence to this withdrawal, IAEA inspectors could not enter the DPRK anymore. Also, the latter state began to refuse to answer any kind of question on nuclearization. Contrary to what the international community was trying to pursue, the Pyongyang government declared its intention to carry out the nuclear program's development. (Hecker, 2010).

To face the consequence of this American-North Korean disputes, the DPRK, the United States, the Republic of Korea, China, Russia, and Japan decided to engage in what are known as the Six Party Talks. These latter were supposed to start in 2004 after a proposal from the Bush administration. The idea was to stipulate a deal with the DPRK that envisaged that after three months of preparation the North Korea's nuclear program would be temporarily shut down for an indefinite period of time. In addition to this, according to the parties involved, the Asian state would have had to declare its nuclear components and infrastructure, cease all nuclear operations in the country, and permit efficient international inspections from the IAEA and other international actors. In exchange to this plan, South Korea and Japan committed to benefiting North Korea with oil supplies. Also, security assurance as well as North Korean protection from a potential American attack was part of the deal. In addition to this, American-North Korean talks were also supposed to focus on the American embargo. It is key to underline that the parties involved had already begun to examine North Korea's energy status. However, soon after the beginning of the process Pyongyang decided to boycott the Six Party Talks.

Nevertheless, these latter were then resumed the following year in 2005. At this stage, despite pressure from South Korea and the People's Republic of China, the US refused to grant the DPRK the restore of diplomatic relations. The main reason behind this stance was the Bush Administration persistence in claiming that stipulating a resolution on the DPRK's human rights violation was essential

for the normalization of American-North Korean ties. It is essential to say that the US refused to negotiate its stance towards the DPRK during the Six Party Talks. In addition to this, the former often criticized the Asian state's positions and its public statements during that period of time. Washington's main attempt was to strongly oppose North Korean propaganda which prevailed during the previous Talks. However, the United States' firm position and continuous backlash towards Pyongyang led the DPRK to refuse another Six Party Talk consultation. In fact, the latter considered the Western Power to have a hostile policy towards its government, and refused to resume the Talks unless the US showed its willingness to cooperate and mediate its stances. In addition to this, it is key to underline that North Korean officials stated that they were willing to discuss the cessation of their nuclear project in exchange for the normalization of ties with the United States. Also, the former requested the remaining American nuclear technologies in South Korean territory to be removed. As a matter of fact, this demonstrated that North Korea's main objective during that period of time was to concentrate on South Korea. As a matter of fact, it is believed that the DPRK was convinced that the ROK would have been more willing to compromise than the American government for what concerns the American-South Korea military cooperation. For instance, since 2006 North Korea began to pressure the ROK to cease its joint military drills with the Western state. However, the stance adopted by the former irritated Washington, which from its side adopted the decision of rejecting any bilateral meetings with Pyongyang. (Niksich & Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade Division, 2003).

Due to the lack of transparency by the DPRK on the matter, it is difficult to trace a roadmap of when the Asian Nation managed to develop its first nuclear bomb. In fact, the latter denied ever having created such a program, despite abundant proof to the contrary. However, it is evident that while participating in the Six Party Talks, Pyongyang developed its nuclear arsenal capabilities that were shown to the rest of the world over the course of the following five years. In fact, the latter had started to conduct nuclear tests during that period of time. (Hecker, 2010). As already mentioned in previous paragraphs, secret intelligence services, especially in the United States, started to investigate the DPRK's nuclear program as early as the Cold War. At the beginning of the new Century, the media leaked findings demonstrating that at that point Pyongyang could launch an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of reaching the American territory. In addition to this, in 2002, American intelligence services announced that North Korea could be able to produce two nuclear devices a year by 2005. According to other intelligence assessments, the Asian Country could also be able to start producing bombs between 2005 and 2007. (Niksich & Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade Division, 2003).

As a matter of fact, by 2005, for the first time since the first North Korean nuclear crisis, the DPRK officially admitted to having developed a nuclear arsenal. Furthermore, in 2006, the Pyongyang government conducted its first nuclear test, becoming the first new state in the East Asian region to do so since 1964. As this test came as a surprise for the international community, the consequences were very harsh. As a matter of fact. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) imposed sanctions

towards the Asian state. In spite of these, the DPRK was able to neutralize the effects of these sanctions through diplomatic means. From this moment, North Korea started to consider itself as a nuclear power. (Hecker, 2010). When Obama was elected American president in 2008, many observers were convinced that this would have benefited the North Korean proliferation issue. More in depth, following the 2008 election, the American government's shift from Republican to Democratic appeared to be a starting point of a new era of foreign policy and American diplomacy. This belief was a consequence of the newly elected president Barack Obama's promise of flexibility and negotiations with leaders of all nations. Among these latter, Obama included those countries that presented greater challenges to the US and the international community as a whole such as the DPRK. (Grzelczyk, 2012). However, the second North Korean nuclear test conducted in May 2009 left no chance for any change. As a result of the DPRK's actions more UN sanctions were imposed. From the other side, Pyongyang decided to use the imposition of such measures to justify its choice to abandon its global responsibilities and commitment in order to be fully dedicated to its nuclear project's advancement. (Hecker, 2010). It is important to mention that, opposed from the expectations from the international community, ever since Obama took office, the Six Party Talks completely stopped. In spite of the promises made by the Obama administration, the latter found it difficult to delineate a new approach in a short period of time. In fact, while the Obama administration adopted different strategies towards other nations in the region such as China, the Republic of Korea, and Japan, this process was not applied to the DPRK. On the other hand, the Western country's openness towards its neighbors caused the Pyongyang government to decide not to reestablish diplomatic dialogue with the former. As a matter of fact, the situation further worsened as North Korea decided to conduct new missile tests, despite warnings from Six Party Talks members not to move forward with its intentions. In addition to this, soon after the DPRK decided to officially withdraw from the Six Party Talks, exacerbating even more the already precarious situation with the international community. The United States tried to ameliorate the situation by establishing a cooperative dialogue with North Korea. For instance, in the summer of 2009 former American president Clinton tried to engage in a meeting with the North Korean leader Kim Jong Il. In spite of the efforts implemented by Washington to exhort the Pyongyang government to resume dialogues with foreign states as well as rejoining the Six Party Talks, the DPRK showed a lack of willingness to mediate a solution. Thus, despite the initial beliefs, Obama's mandate did not reach the expected results and on the other hand, the situation remained unchanged throughout all that period of time. (Grzelczyk, 2012).

1.2 The DPRK's political system

This paragraph highlights the political history of the DPRK. More in depth, it analyzes how the first North Korean leader Kim Il Sung's background greatly contributed to shaping the country's political system. The leader Kim was involved in communist activities from a young age, militarily joining the Chinese communists during the Chinese civil war and developing a strong nationalistic sentiment. This section also explains that the first North Korean leader was able to discover the Soviet Union and its ability to mobilize people and resources. All of this contributed to shaping the political and economic view of the government, as creating a strong military apparatus and focusing on the economy became the main objectives of the DPRK. In addition to this, the above text studies the changes that the North Korean political system went through during the decades. The following section makes an analysis of the political classification of the Asian nation, as well as analyzing the *Juche* ideology that further develops the fundamental ideas of Marxism-Leninism. In general, the paragraph highlights that a strong military, the main party's rule, and a socialist ideology remained as the three core elements of the DPRK since the country's foundation until today.

1.2.1 The political history of the leadership

In order to comprehend North Korea's decisions regarding nuclear power, it is essential to delineate the politics of the Country as well as the factors that have shaped it. First of all, it is important to understand the geography of the nation. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea is located in the Korean Peninsula, which is divided between the DPRK in the north and the ROK in the South. The former borders with the latter, as well as with the Russian Federation and the PRC in the north. These actors mentioned have all been historically very present in the DPRK and especially the last two, they have greatly contributed to influencing the politics of the state. (Fonju, 2021). North Korea has been shaped by different factors such as the traditional Korean political and social culture but also by the Japanese colonization, the Korean War that resulted from Cold War tensions between Moscow and Washington, as well as the personal military experiences of the State's founder Kim Il Sung. (Buzo, 2017). For instance, it is key to analyze that the Japanese colonization proved to be essential in impacting the future leader's ideas. In fact, this period of time was characterized by a repression of Korean culture that led to a greater nationalist sentiment of the Korean people right before and during the Korean War. (Fonju, 2021). For this reason, it is possible to state that Kim Il Sung's experiences and views of the meaning of politics is what has mostly delineated the DPRK's stance throughout the last seven decades.

It is thus fundamental to study the former's leader's life to better understand this aspect. When he was just 14 years old, Kim started to become involved in communist activities and he started to grow an anti-Japanese sentiment and a nationalist feeling. This latter point was mainly influenced by

Tokyo's colonization of the Korean Peninsula in the early years of the XX Century. In 1931, following Japan's occupation of Manchuria he decided to join the Chinese communist Party and, during this period of time, Kim started to develop its military mindset and capabilities as well as to fully consolidate its political views. In general, at the time the main goal was the one of liberating the Korean Peninsula from the Japanese. As a result of these objectives, Korean Communists began to develop a strong feeling of cultural belonging and nationalist sentiment. Furthermore, Kim was able to visit the Soviet Union following the country's Nazi invasion in 1941. During this occasion, the future North Korean leader was able to witness firsthand the results carried out by a socialist state. It is possible to say that the former's exploration of the Soviet Union has been essential. In particular, what struck the leader's mind was the effective way this socialist state was able to effectively mobilize people and resources.

As a matter of fact, in 1946 the North Korean Provisional People's Committee directed by Kim Il Sung was created. In this environment, the DPRK's future president implemented policies that were greatly influenced by his past experiences. More in depth, the new leadership tried to emulate the success of the Soviet Union. In particular, the future strategies of the North Korean government were delineated during this period of time. For instance, Kim Il Sung decided to focus on the economy and the military spheres. In particular, the creation of a strong military apparatus was considered as the foundation of the future North Korean State. This aspect is really important as it demonstrates the decision to develop a nuclear and a missile program derived from Kim Il Sung's strong beliefs and experiences in this field. The DPRK needed to be a strong military state that did not have to depend on any external entity. (Buzo, 2017).

1.2.2 Politics of the DPRK

It is not very easy to categorize the DPRK into a specific political system. As a matter of fact, North Korea has the traits of a socialist state, but the majority of observers perceive the nation as a theocracy. (Frank, 2012). In particular, it is worth mentioning the concept of "routinization of politics", which is a key idea in the explanation of a socialist society. More in depth, this refers to the idea that a socialist nation forces its own norms of conduct on the population as a whole as well as the entities that take part of the society, encouraging them to internalize ideology, propaganda, and specific rules delineated by the socialist government. In addition to great repression and harsh sanctions, this kind of state uses a variety of methods to implement the strategies above mentioned. In addition to this, citizens of a socialist state are educated to embrace devotion to the state as well as the leaders of the country. (Choi, 2013). The Democratic People's Republic of Korea finds its political foundations on this concept but also on what is known as centralization. The latter can be described as a combination of a strong cult of personality, widespread state terror, and a significant amount of social mobilization and personal

autocracy. (Buzo, 2017). However, the reason why the DPRK can be defined as a theocracy resides in a concept developed by the first North Korean leader Kim Il Sung. After WWII, the latter integrated his own concept of Korean independence, known as *Juche* ideology, into the fundamental ideas of Marxism-Leninism, further developing them. *Juche* literally means "subject," and it literally refers to the subject who acts and thinks to be able to rule the world. (Wrobel, 2021).

Since the foundation of the State, the main tools used by the three North Korean leaders to implement these ideas were the military and the party, the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK). All socialist societies in the course of history have used the military language and its values to reach their objectives, and the DPRK is no less. However, it is fundamental to underline that in North Korea both the party and the military are controlled by the same entity, which is the Kim family. This implies that it is almost impossible to have a rivalry between the institutions that, on the other hand, will generally decide to work together. This results in a great benefit for the country. (Frank, 2012).

Nevertheless, keeping in mind the previously mentioned, it is crucial to examine how the nation experienced a number of institutional and balance of powers innovations during its existence. More in depth, since the 1940s when revolutionary movements against the Japanese occupation started, these values were to play a central role. (Dukalskis & Lee, 2020). However, while at the time the main idea was to emulate a Soviet political, social, and economic system, in the 1960s the DPRK underwent some changes to adopt a political structure resembling the Chinese one. For instance, the main idea was that party committees at all tiers had to hold a horizontal concentration of political authority. (Choi, 2009).

To better understand which was the change the DPRK went through, it is worth making an analysis. For instance, in the previous model, the WPK and the state were split as each had its own administrative structure. In addition to this, the party rule over the state was established only at the top of the hierarchy. However, with the reform above mentioned, political influence was horizontally distributed on party committees at every level. Similarly, regional party committees had the same structure. In fact, the former had authority over parallel institutions as well. (Jung, 2010). To sum up, with this new administrative model, the role of the party became even more central as it gained additional power at all levels.

Another political major factor that is worth mentioning is that in 1998, just four years after becoming leader, Kim Jong Il amended the constitution. The most significant aspect of the revised constitution was the party's diminished authority over the armed forces and the government as a whole. More in depth, the Cabinet replaced what was known as the State Administrative Council, with the expectation that it would have been more involved in internal matters such as governance and economic affairs. In reality, at that point the former functioned as the head of the executive body. Overall, it is possible to say that these reforms led to a declining role of the WPK at the expense of a greater importance of the military. (Choi, 2009).

Since Kim Jong Un took over as head of the nation after his father's death in December 2011, additional changes in the country's political system have been implemented. More in depth, contrary to what his predecessor did, the new leader of the DPRK has decided to give the communist party more control. For instance, the current leader adopted several policies that granted the military apparatus more power. This consequently diminished the latter's influence in politics. As a matter of fact, observers note the way this transformation made in the last decade seems to be strictly related to the Pyongyang government's willingness to reinforce the nuclearization program of the Country. In fact, it is quite evident that the current leader of North Korea wants to closely monitor every policy and prioritize the country's goal of becoming a nuclear power over any other action. (Park, 2016).

1.3 Kim Jong Un era of nuclear power

This paragraph studies the North Korean nuclear program since Kim Jong Un took power in 2011. More in depth, it analyzes the expectations the international community had on the new leader, and it explains that these have not been met. As Kim decided to reinforce his predecessor's stance towards nuclear power, this paragraph highlights some facts that occurred during this period of time. In fact, this section underscores two main factors that were very important in shaping the international community's expectation on Kim Jong Un: the current leader was raised abroad, and he was very young when he took power. These increased the hope that he would have changed the trajectory of the DPRK's nuclear program. However, the paragraph will underscore that soon after taking power, Kim showed the world his intention of not going against his predecessor's ideas but, on the other hand, reinforcing them. He committed to the *Juche* ideology as well as the military-first policy. This section explains that this last decade was characterized by great advancement on the nuclear and missiles program, leading to an increase of sanctions and isolation from the international community. Even though in 2018 the Pyongyang government tried to open up to the outside world, meeting with the US president Trump and participating at the winter Olympics with the ROK, lately things have changed. As of today, and especially after the outbreak of the Ukrainian war, the nuclear issue of the DPRK and the relation with the outside world remains the same.

1.3.1 Kim Jong Un's ideas and policies

Nowadays, it is reasonable to argue that the current North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has been successful in enhancing its authority both from an international and domestic point of view. For instance, the former has been successfully able to reassure on any questions or concerns regarding the longevity of his mandate. However, it is fundamental to highlight that right after Kim Jong Un took

power in 2011, observers had many questions on what would change in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, especially due to the young leader's young age. In particular, many observers believed that the latter, due to his young age but also the fact that he is fluent in multiple European languages and that studied in Switzerland, could be able to lead the Asian nation towards an important domestic transformation as well as global integration. (Park, 2014). However, the majority had the feeling that the nuclear program's existence and development would have remained the same. In particular, as already explained in previous paragraphs, the Asian Country employs nuclear weapons as a deterrent and it is a key tool in this sense. In addition to this, it is key to underline that the nuclear program represented one among the few significant accomplishments that the previous head of state Kim Jong Il managed to develop. But, above everything, it is good to remember that the nuclear program is what keeps the international community to give attention to North Korea, as both states and non-state actors are worried about nuclear proliferation. This latter point highlights the DPRK's willingness to stay relevant at the international level. (Frank, 2012).

Almost immediately, it was clear that the new leader had decided to follow the same pattern of his predecessor. More specifically, both of them had adopted a strategy that consisted in maintaining a quite aggressive position against the international community, primarily the Republic of Korea, as well as the adoption of a strong military strategy. More in depth, the new leader Kim Jong Un developed the so-called *byungjin* policy framework. This latter strategy consists in the concurrent search of nuclear weapons (*byung*) and economic growth (*jin*). When the new leader announced this, for the first time it was clear that he was willing to create his personal policy agenda. (Buzo, 2017). In fact, Kim Jong Un believed that both a powerful armed forces and an economically strong country were necessary in order to consolidate the DPRK's regime. However, it was clear in the early stages of his mandate that the former decided to place a higher priority on military development to then reach economic expansion. For instance, the production of nuclear weapons became the mean to secure a peaceful environment that, as a consequence, would benefit economic and financial development. In fact, in the leader's view, achieving both military and economic growth would have represented a necessary step toward his primary objective of building a strong and powerful DPRK. (Lee, & Roehrig Eds., 2023).

It is fundamental to focus on military power. As a matter of fact, it became quite clear soon after he took power that Kim Jong Un had acquired a firm control over the North Korean military. In particular, this was evidence by the latter's numerous and quite regular field assessments of the military apparatus as well as the level of devotion expressed by top military officers during military displays in the capital city. In particular, in these latter occasions it was sure that the new leader had the intention to follow his predecessors' path. For instance, leader Kim soon remarked his commitment to follow the founder of the state's *Juche* ideology as well as his father's military-first policy strategy.

In addition to this, two months after officially taking power, on 29 February 2012, the new leader signed an agreement on cooperative nuclear proliferation with the United States. However, this was broken around two weeks later. This deal included the provision of food aid by the Western nation in exchange for a temporary suspension of both nuclear and missile testing. In addition to this, the DPRK had to stop its uranium enrichment process at the DPRK's primary nuclear complex. However, this deal was soon after broken by Pyongyang as on April 13, 2012, the regime moved forward with the launch of a long-range missile called *Unha-3*. This demonstrated Pyongyang's total indifference towards its own promises and the opposition of the global community. To reconfirm his ideas, following the missile test the North Korean leader Kim once again confirmed his adherence to his predecessor's military-first policy. In addition to this, the former promised to increase the portion of state budget that had to be located to the military apparatus. (Park, 2014).

However, in recent years there seemed to be a shift in the priorities of the government. For what concerns the economy of the DPRK, the North Korean leader remarked his commitment to the nation's economic growth. This has been demonstrated since 2016, when a policy shift for what concerns the head of state's complete control of the party, the military, and the government was adopted. During this period of time, words such as "nuclear" were removed from the country's annual grand strategy. At the international level, this fact raised hopes that a major change in the DPRK's domestic and foreign stances could be happening. In addition to this, the slogan "Public People-First Policy" was once again emphasized during the eighth Party Congress in 2021. Observers indicated that this latter could completely replace the military-first policy previously analyzed. Furthermore, these last changes in Pyongyang's political trajectories seemed to demonstrate a willingness to improve the economic situation of the state. In addition to this, many believe that this was a strategy adopted also to ameliorate the DPRK's relations with the international community, especially with states and non-state actors outside of the East Asian region. This situation raised hopes that Kim Jong Un would seriously take into account resuming denuclearization talks with foreign entities, with the main objective of removing the sanctions imposed by the UNSC which are preventing the nation from fully developing from an economic point of view. However, it is key to consider the DPRK's obsession with advancing nuclear and missile programs at all costs. This latter point also includes mining the financial well-being of North Korean society in order to secure the regime's longevity. More in depth, scholars analyze that it is unlikely Pyongyang is intending to let go of its nuclear program as this latter is perceived as the primary way of maintaining the regime's legitimacy and avoid a collapse. In particular, as this work will further analyze in next chapters, as of today, this belief has been further enhanced by the outbreak of the Ukrainian war in February 2022.

It is possible to state that since he became head of State, Kim Jong Un's approach towards nuclear power is something that was never seen before in the course of the history of the Asian state.

It is worth analyzing the reason why the current leader's approach towards this matter highly differs from those of his predecessors. (Kim, 2024).

1.3.2 The DPRK's nuclear program during Kim Jong Un's mandate

As expected, and as previously mentioned, the current North Korean leader decided to increase the development of the nation's nuclear program, with a consequent enhanced isolation from an international point of view. At the same time, the former strongly tried to oppose the advancement of any reform-oriented economic stance. In fact, it is key to underline that Kim Jong Un conducted more nuclear tests during his mandate than his predecessor Kim Jong Il. Almost immediately, the intentions of the new leader became very clear as in December 2012 the DPRK conducted a long-range missile test, while shortly after in February 2013, Pyongyang conducted its third nuclear test. Following the first test mentioned, the UN Security Council adopted a resolution denouncing Pyongyang's action. As a consequence, North Korea responded with a strong stance. The Asian state, among other matters, decided to remove the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula from the negotiation agenda. Tensions further exacerbated at the international level after the nuclear test that followed soon after. (Buzo, 2017). It is key to highlight that nuclear development was conducted simultaneously to the DPRK's missile program development. Evidence showed that the country's missiles more than once overflowed the United States, leading to a serious crisis with the latter. (Pry, 2021). In addition to this, one factor that further exacerbated tensions is the apparent North Korean leader's decision to deploy the so-called Strategic Forces as the supreme command and control state organization for nuclear weapons and missiles.

Another factor that it is important to mention is that Kim Jong Un amended the DPRK's constitution in April 2012. This event was remarkable as, for the first time, in the preamble, the country declared itself to be a nuclear weapon State. More significantly, the Nuclear Weapons State Law was passed by the Supreme People's Assembly the following year. The DPRK implemented its nuclear principles through the Nuclear Weapons State Law. This latter greatly impacted the nation's future policies on nuclearization. Generally speaking, different national policies were adopted on this matter. The Nuclear Weapons State Law illustrates North Korea's stance towards its nuclear weapons program from a diplomatic and military point of view. More in depth, it appears that the Pyongyang government's final objective is denuclearization achieved with a nuclear weapons control talk with the United States. (Kim & Cohen, 2017).

As previously mentioned, in 2016, North Korea started to enhance the frequency of nuclear tests and missile launches. The justification for these actions were that such weapons were essential to the DPRK's defense. However, as the Asian state had not received any attacks from foreign powers

since the Korean War, observers remarked how this justification was hiding another truth behind this decision. The fourth DPRK's nuclear test took place on January 2016. At this point, it is important to mention that the Asian state started to gain even more international attention than before. For instance, the international community became aware of the former's capabilities of easily reaching the American continent as well as its historic enemies Japan and the Republic of Korea through missile launches. In addition to this, this nuclear test was also interpreted as Kim Jong Un's attempt to show the nation's technological capabilities and increase the regime's legitimacy. As previously mentioned, as at the beginning of his mandate many both domestically and abroad questioned Kim's capabilities of ruling the nation, such tests may have served as a tool to show the North Korean leader's capabilities. In particular, from a domestic point of view the former was willing to demonstrate that he was capable of acting on his own merits and not after his deceased father's. (Nah, 2016). It is also fundamental to mention that the same year, the DPRK once again reiterated its commitment not to reopen the Six Party Talks.

According to South Korea Ministry of National Defense's 2014 Defense White Paper, Pyongyang had been working to increase the size of its nuclear arsenal as well as conducting nuclear tests underground. The ROK's neighboring state has a uranium-enrichment system but it also possesses approximately forty kilograms of plutonium. Furthermore, North Korea has been working continuously to reduce the size of its warheads so that missiles with different ranges can carry them. It is important to highlight that evidence showed that the Asian state tested five nuclear weapons in September 2016. Pyongyang's main goal was the one of confirming the viability of lighter and thinner nuclear weapons. At the same time, North Korea has been attempting to enhance its logistics infrastructure. (Kim & Cohen, 2017). In fact, the fifth nuclear test conducted in 2016 marked the highest point of insecurity in the East Asian region. More in depth, with this, it became clear to the international community that the DPRK was at this point able to build mass-produced nuclear weapons. Also, some observers indicated that since this moment, Pyongyang's nuclear testing would become ordinary, increasing worries within states but also international organizations. (Choi, & Bae, 2016).

The United States' elections in November 2016, and the consequent shift of administration, led to a new switch between the DPRK and the international community. It is important to underline that in early 2017, the Pyongyang government sharply increased missile testing as part of the already mentioned *byungjin* strategy. The former's missile tests boosted the DPRK's military capacities and enhanced Kim Jong Un's leadership domestically. In addition to this, these tests also served as a way to test the newly elected American president Trump's America First strategy. Furthermore, the DPRK's objective was to challenge the US-ROK alliance. For instance, in occasion of his 2017 New Year's speech, the North Korean leader declared his intention to test an intercontinental ballistic missile. The US' response to Pyongyang's missile launches was very harsh. In fact, scholars for the first time started to question Washington's traditional stance towards risk aversion. More in depth, some doubts arose

after President Trump threatened the DPRK and, in September of the same year, in a speech at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) declared that the American administration was ready to face the Asian State. However, this insecurity led to a positive outcome. More in depth, against any guess the Pyongyang government decided to reopen diplomatic talks with the outside world. More in depth, after that in November 2017 Pyongyang tested what is still nowadays known as the country's largest missile, the leader of the Asian state announced that the DPRK's nuclear development could be considered finished. In addition to this, Kim justified his past actions by once again remarking that he had developed North Korean missile capacities as a means of the country's prevention towards external dangers. However, he also noted that North Korea was ready to start its journey in international diplomacy and engage with foreign actors.

As announced, 2018 was characterized by a series of meetings and summits between the DPRK and other states. Among others, it is worth mentioning the Olympics that took place in the Republic of Korea which witnessed dialogues between North Korea and the United States as well as the joint participation of South and North Korean athletes in one team. The same year, during a summit in Singapore, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un announced that he was willing to work on complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. This stance greatly reassured both American president Trump and South Korean president Moon. However, the circumstances this would happen as well as the definition intended by the DPRK on denuclearization were not established. For instance, North Koreans refused to engage in working-level negotiations to define the details of this matter. As a consequence, some challenges arose and prevented the parties from moving forward. On the other hand, the situation gradually started to worsen when in January 2019, the DPRK and the US had a second summit in Hanoi. During the latter, the two parties were not able to reach an agreement on denuclearization as, before being able to achieve the goal, the US president Trump decided to leave the talks. This irreversibly worsened the American-North Korean relations, but also the DPRK's ties with other actors such as the ROK. In this regard, it is fundamental to mention that, as the next chapter will further analyze, the heavy missile and nuclear tests conducted by the DPRK during the last years also caused China to align itself more closely than ever with the US against North Korea's nuclear and missile choices. (Lee, & Roehrig Eds., 2023). As the rest of the international community, the PRC, was concerned about how in recent times previous to this, in particular following the collapse of the US-North Korea summit in Hanoi in 2019, North Korea had made impressive advancements in its nuclear deterrent. (Kim, 2024).

In spite of further attempts, as of today the nuclear issue of the DPRK and the relation with the outside world remains the same. It is worth mentioning that in order to deal with what he perceived as a hostile policy from the United States, Kim openly acknowledged military and defense achievements during the party's Congress in 2021. (Lee, & Roehrig Eds., 2023). Furthermore, in September 2022, the Law of Nuclear Forces Policy, which is a revised and updated nuclear doctrine, was approved by

the Pyongyang government. The DPRK once again wanted to remark that the State would not give up its nuclear weapons as the maintenance of the current regime was the leadership's main goal. (Kim, 2024). It seems safe to say that it is very challenging to convince the North Korean leader to start a denuclearization process, as this is considered as key to the country's survival. (Lee, & Roehrig Eds., 2023).

1.4 Internal problems

This paragraph shed a light on the internal situation of the DPRK. As the latter has been characterized by both external and internal instability, this part highlights some measures adopted by the North Korean leaders to mitigate the situation. In fact, during the course of the nation's history, the DPRK never reached economic and social stability. Moreover, this section will highlight the Pyongyang government's unsuccessful efforts to try to revitalize the situation. Due to the economic constraints, the leaders received aid from the outside, especially from their allies the PRC and the Russian Federation. In addition to this, this paragraph studies the social instability of North Korea, in which a great violation of human rights is present. Furthermore, the section explains the way that the economic sanctions imposed by the international community affected the DPRK. Opposite to what the sanctions were implemented for, these increase stability in the Country both from an economic and social point of view. This is because the nation has a strong internal resistance to economic sanctions, but also because help from the PRC, but mostly the Russian Federation, neutralized the effects of these sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council.

1.4.1 Social, economic, and political instability

The DPRK was characterized by instability since the beginning of its existence, both from an economic and social point of view. More in depth, the division of the Korean Peninsula resulted in a severe economic shock. In fact, when Korea was a single nation, it had the resources to grow into a wealthy state, but after it was split, it struggled to survive. In 1948 the two Countries in the peninsula took two very different paths. In particular, the DPRK adopted a centrally planned economy with the hope to receive aid from the PRC and the Soviet Union. However, as the next chapter will analyze in depth, while initially the late leader Kim Il Sung managed to cooperate with both its neighboring countries, in the 1950s Pyongyang decided to take distance. More in depth, this is when the latter adopted the already mentioned *Juche* ideology and tried to develop a nation that does not need to rely on any external entity. For instance, this doctrine's main feature was the willingness of guaranteeing

the survival of the DPRK at all costs. The main hardship with the concrete success of the *juche* doctrine was the structure of the North Korean society, in particular of the elite. More in depth, the majority of those making part this latter part of society were illiterate individuals, frequently descended from peasants, and orphans that were mainly instructed with the aim to defend the State. Despite being excellent fighters, they had very little knowledge of the infrastructure needed to establish a strong economy, and this was what mainly prevented the country to go through a financial boost.

In addition to this, it is worth mentioning that when the DPRK was founded, the Pyongyang government adopted the traditional communist model of State management of natural resources in which collective farms and cooperatives served as the production system. In particular, what is known as the Public Distribution System was used to distribute agricultural products among the population. (Napoleoni, 2018). It is possible to state that the DPRK was pretty much able to contain both social and political instability until the 1990s, when this continuous situation of insecurity led to an unsustainable situation. This was also exacerbated by natural disasters and economic disruption. In fact, the end of the XX Century in the DPRK was characterized by a famine that broke out in 1994. This situation could be mainly attributed to the government's mismanagement of certain issues as well as the inability to quickly react to crises. (Jinwook, 2006). However, it is important to mention that this disaster was also caused by other factors, like the negligence of the post-Cold War years as well as climate change. More in depth, the DPRK heavily relied on the import of cheap energy. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union undermined the import of such energy. At the same time, since the 1980s, widespread land degradation was caused by the increased clearing of forests and marginal land for the agricultural sector. This contributed to massive floods that impacted the country in the 1990s. During this period of time, the government was unable to implement the Public Distribution System, which led to the decision of letting North Korean people trade food. (Napoleoni, 2018). This generated social unrest, as North Koreans started to illegally leave the country and go to the PRC to seek food and money. There, these would often face human rights abuse, such as illegal human trafficking. In addition to this, defectors were subject to forced return to the DPRK, in which they could have risked execution for their actions. (Jinwook, 2006).

The leader at the time Kim Jong Il undertook different measures to try to solve the situation, such as the implementation of what is known as the marketisation of the economy and of the system of licenses for import-export. However, these were primarily adopted to save the political status quo and not to improve the domestic critical situation. (Szalontai & Choi, 2014). Still as of today, to maintain the latter, the DPRK leadership has adopted a system of purges. The main goal also for what concerns the justice system is just to keep the regime in power. Generally speaking, evidence demonstrates that the North Korean regime is in charge of organizing public executions and murders with the main objective of frightening the general public. The final goal is to avoid that the North Korean society might consider opposing to the leader and the regime in general. Whatever the

crime against the leadership, they must face the appropriate penalties. As explained, these measures are undertaken for the sake of the survival of the regime; however, this shows the reality of the DPRK political fragility and instability.

In addition to the above, it is worth analyzing that North Korea is characterized by a widespread violation of human rights. In the last decades this alongside the nuclear program and the lack of transparency on the matter has triggered the imposition of heavy economic sanctions by the international community. The latter led to a worsening of the economic situation domestically as well as Pyongyang decreased willingness to cooperate with the outside world. As explained, the country's financial stability is strictly correlated with the regime's ability to survive. For instance, due to the latest hardships in this field, the idea of military first has in recent years been modified by the idea of economy and the army first by the North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. (Napoleoni, 2018). However, the Pyongyang government has not been able to stabilize the economy of the Country. In fact, as explained above, famines have characterized the state since its foundation. (Jinwook, 2006). Nowadays, the DPRK is seeking to avoid total collapse due to what are known as *jangmadang*. The latter are illegal markets which are, however, the center for the informal economy of the State. More in depth, these are fundamental especially in rural areas, as they are the only means that allow the North Korean society to sustain itself and to avoid another crisis similar to the one of the mid 1990s. (Napoleoni, 2018).

The main question that was raised by observers is why mass protests have never occurred in the DPRK. As already explained, the *juche* ideology has led the North Korean society to consider the nation's leader as an entity such as a god that needs to be worshiped. In addition to this, according to testimonies given by North Korean refugees, the strong repression that is being exercised on any kind of dissidence has brought people to be afraid to contest the regime's imposed ideas. (Szalontai & Choi, 2014).

1.4.2 Impact of the nuclear proliferation issue on the domestic situation

Many questioned the impact of the nuclear crisis in the domestic situation of the country. Some observers argued that debates on the former matter and the consequent imposition of sanctions by the international community led to unexpected results. For instance, it seems like the situation helped the DPRK increase its internal stability, especially from a social and political point of view. (Choi, 2009).

First of all, it is worth analyzing the effects of the economic sanctions imposed by the international community that derive from the nuclear program. Due to the lack of transparency and cooperation that the Pyongyang government has shown to the international community, the UN Security Council (UNSC) has imposed economic sanctions. (Noland, 2009). According to Chen, the

latter can be defined as “the use or threat of use of economic capacity by one international actor, be it a state or international organization, or by a group of such actors, against another international actor, or group of actors.” (2017, 3). Usually, economic sanctions are imposed with the main aim of forcing a State to modify a political behavior. (Chen, 2017). In North Korea, these were implemented right after the state conducted its first nuclear test back in 2006 through Resolution 1718. The sanctions prevented countries from exporting and importing certain products, with the aim of worsening the domestic economy of the DPRK and induce the government to abandon its nuclear activities. However, today it is possible to state that the outcome was not the one expected from foreign entities. (Noland, 2009). In fact, economic sanctions were imposed eight additional times since 2006, but this did not lead the Pyongyang government to revise its nuclear program.

It can be argued that the DPRK is an example of the kind of nation that has a strong internal resistance to economic sanctions. Even an entirely operational sanctions regime would be very unlikely to stop North Korea from pursuing nuclear weapons if this issue is not addressed. It is important to analyze that the latter and the outside world have different ideas behind the scope of the sanctions. According to some observers, the main aim of this tool for western states and international organizations such as the United Nations or the European Union is to reopen dialogue and negotiation opportunities with the Pyongyang government. Moreover, according to them, these can prevent the Asian country from having access to materials that are essential to build a nuclear and missiles arsenal and to lead it to abandon its plans. On this matter, it is essential to underline that actually the objectives of the DPRK face challenges due to restricted supply of necessary components, weapons, and technology. Nonetheless, the Pyongyang government is still able to facilitate the transfer of assets as it has enough government revenue. More in depth, the latter is able to achieve this through smuggling and clandestine trade networks which nowadays are very hard to control. For this reason, economic sanctions should be directed towards the state's primary sources of government revenue. However, finding the exact target in terms of North Korea's revenue remains more challenging, in particular, due to the lack of the data concerning the country's political and economic system. In addition to this, it is fundamental to note that this latter idea was not taken into account until 2016. As a matter of fact, in the year just cited, the United States and the European Union decided to expand these measures to attack the whole economy of the Asian state, and not only the state's primary sources. However, this created an opportunity for the Pyongyang government to develop its arsenal. In addition to this, trade partners of the DPRK, especially China but also the Russian Federation, are often accused of undermining the efficacy of the sanctions, as evidence also demonstrates.

On the other hand, North Korea considers the actions of foreign actors as one step forward the recognition of the country as being a nuclear state. Moreover, the main domestic factor that allows the state not to receive backlash from the economic sanction imposed is the lack of social mobilization. More in depth, although the higher classes have not been negatively hit by the effects of economic

hardship deriving from the sanctions, this does not apply to lower classes. In order to lead the North Korean society to react to this matter, there must be sufficient pressure to cause the higher classes to be affected and decide to mobilize. Nonetheless, observers note that political opposition is unlikely to arise in an authoritarian state characterized by force and repression. In fact, despite some indications of internal anti-government activity, the DPRK's social cohesiveness appears to have even strengthened in the last decade. More in depth, by using the threat posed by foreign actors, the government has shown that it is able to control its own population as it was able to maintain the consensus towards the elite. On the other hand, the use of this tool has led to increased depreciation of North Korean society towards the international community. To sum up, according to some observers North Koreans are highly resistant to economic sanctions because of the high levels of social unity. More in depth, these tools demonstrated to be able to make the DPRK more unified than to spark large-scale movements against the government and the leader. One lesson that it is possible to draw from this analysis is that in case foreign actors will continue to implement economic sanctions, a significant humanitarian crisis is expected. (Chen, 2017).

1.5 Chapter I conclusions

The development of North Korea's nuclear program was very gradual, and it was influenced by different factors. During World War II, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea viewed nuclear power as a dangerous tool. Initially advocating for nuclear disarmament, the DPRK shifted its position after the Korean War, seeing nuclear technology as a path to economic prosperity. Collaborating with the Soviet Union, the DPRK began exploring peaceful nuclear energy use in the late 1950s. This culminated in the establishment of a research center in the 1960s. During this period of time North Korea's nuclear intentions seemed more focused on economic development than military might. In addition to this, there is limited evidence which suggests that the DPRK's pursuit of nuclear power was for intimidation or harm.

In spite of economic hardships experienced during the Cold War, the Asian state carried on with its nuclear program and this led to the first North Korean nuclear crisis in the 1990s. While initially motivated by economic prosperity, nuclear ambitions of the Pyongyang government escalated due to South Korea's advancements. Some data that was leaked in 1989, led to the international community's awareness of the DPRK's intentions and consequently to efforts to denuclearization. During the same period of time, the Asian country joined the NPT as a result of negotiations, but disagreements later surfaced. In addition to this, the 1994 Agreed Framework, which stopped North Korea's nuclear program in exchange for financial assistance and security guarantees, was the result of intense

diplomatic efforts. But as North Korea continued to test missiles and demand economic concessions, tensions would not go away. (Woo, 2023).

In the early 2000s, US President Bush's administration opposed the Agreed Framework with North Korea, accusing them of pursuing nuclear weapons. In response, the DPRK withdrew from the agreement and from the NPT in 2003, strengthening its nuclear program. Six Party Talks were proposed, but North Korea boycotted them. The Pyongyang government's approach towards nuclearization has always been characterized by the lack of transparency. However, this ceased to be the reality when the first official nuclear test was conducted in 2006. Intelligence services had already announced the country's abilities to produce nuclear devices, which was confirmed by the second nuclear test that took place in 2009. The US president Obama's election raised hopes for dialogue, but the DPRK's actions led to further sanctions and withdrawal from talks. However, every effort to resume dialogue failed. (Grzelczyk, 2012).

North Korea's nuclear decisions are deeply rooted in its historical and political context, shaped by factors like Japanese colonization, the Korean War, and the personal experiences of the nation's founder Kim Il Sung. The latter's early involvement in communist activities and guerrilla movements increased his anti-Japanese and nationalist sentiments. Also, Kim was inspired by the Soviet Union. During his mandate, the North Korean leader prioritized economic and military development, mirroring Soviet strategies. In particular, Kim viewed a strong military as essential for the foundation of the nation. These early experiences and beliefs profoundly influenced the DPRK's political trajectory and its pursuit of nuclear power. Understanding the vision and the historical forces that shaped the first leader of the country provides crucial insight into the latter's nuclear motivations and actions. (Buzo, 2017).

North Korea is a Nation characterized by the centrality of the ruling party and of the military. (Frank, 2012). In addition to this, Kim Il Sung's incorporation of the *Juche* ideology further shaped the Country's political system by emphasizing self-reliance. Since its founding, the military and the WPK have been key tools in implementing state ideology, both controlled by the Kim family. (Wrobel, 2021).

Despite of initial hesitation by the international community, the current leader Kim Jong Un was able to strengthen its power. (Park, 2014). While the international community was expecting changes due to Kim's education abroad, the latter has largely continued his predecessors' policies, seeing a strong military as crucial for national security and economic growth. His *byungjin* policy prioritizes both military and economic growth, with military expansion seen as essential for economic development. The leader's firm control over the military is evident through regular assessments and public displays of loyalty from top military officials. In addition to this, the latter seems to be firmly determined to maintain a nuclear deterrent as this is seen as essential for the survival of the political regime. (Lee, & Roehrig Eds., 2023).

In fact, since assuming power, Kim Jong Un has solidified North Korea's nuclear program. In particular, under his leadership, North Korea conducted more nuclear tests than under the predecessor Kim Jong Il. In spite of condemnation by the international community, the DPRK intensified nuclear testing and missile launches, asserting its defense capabilities and leading to increased tensions. (Kim & Cohen, 2017). However, Kim also signaled a willingness to engage diplomatically with foreign actors by participating in summits and dialogues with the US and South Korea. Nonetheless, the failure to reach agreements on denuclearization at the Hanoi summit in 2019 highlighted persistent challenges. In fact, despite international pressure and sanctions, North Korea continues to prioritize its nuclear program. (Kim, 2024). In addition to this, the approval of the Law of Nuclear Forces Policy in 2022 reiterated North Korea's commitment to its nuclear arsenal. (Lee, & Roehrig Eds., 2023).

The DPRK has faced economic and social instability since its foundation. The regime's survival is ensured through purges, public executions, and human rights violations, perpetuating fear and obedience among citizens. In addition to this, economic sanctions and isolation by the international community seems to have worsened domestic economic conditions from an economic point of view. (Napoleoni, 2018). More in depth, the nuclear crisis has sparked debate over its impact on the domestic situation in North Korea. The latter led to the imposition of economic sanctions by the international community which aimed to pressure Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear activities. However, these have not led to the expected results. (Noland, 2009). In fact, despite economic hardship, social cohesion and government control have remained strong, reducing the likelihood of public unrest or a change in the political regime. In addition to this, foreign actions are negatively seen by North Korean society, and this further solidifies domestic support to the government. Overall, it is possible to state that economic sanctions are more likely to unify North Korea than to lead to significant opposition against the government. In fact, continued sanctions could exacerbate the humanitarian crisis without achieving their intended objectives. (Chen, 2017).

2. The PRC, the Russian Federation and the North Korean nuclear issue

2.1 Relations between the DPRK and the PRC

This paragraph is going to analyze the relationship between the DPRK and the People's Republic of China. More in depth, it will study the economic, social, political ties that the two States have developed since the end of World War II. This section explains that while the two neighboring countries have always shared common experiences and ideas, such as the Japanese colonization and

the communist ideology, the two have not always had good ties. In fact, this first paragraph will outline the instability that marked the Sino-North Korean relations, highlighting all the different phases. The section emphasizes that, as of today, the PRC and the DPRK strengthened their ties, also due to the intensification of hostilities between the former and the United States. Moreover, this paragraph will deal with the implications that these relations have had at the international level. In particular, it draws attention to the fact that foreign actors, more specifically the US, the ROK, and Japan are concerned about the Sino-North Korean relations. In fact, they see this link as a threat to the security of the East Asia area. Finally, this section underscores that the DPRK and the PRC have been impacted by these relations as well, as the two don't really trust each other, this contributed to enhance instability and security concerns both at a national and at a regional level.

2.1.1 Historical, political, and economic ties

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the People's Republic of China, most commonly just known as China, have shared close ties since their foundations, respectively in 1948 and in 1949. As the following paragraphs will demonstrate, the two states did not always have close ties and, on the contrary, these have been characterized by instability. However, since early times they shared common experiences and ideas. For example, the two nations were both subject to Japan's occupation before and during World War II. In addition to this, prior to the liberation of the Korean Peninsula from Japanese domination, many North Korean communists moved to the PRC and collaborated with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). As analyzed in the previous chapter, the first leader of the DPRK Kim Il Sung was among these. More in depth, the latter was one of these anti-Japanese guerrilla fighters that joined the CCP in Manchuria in 1931. Kim and other North Korean communists maintained close ties with the latter also right after the end of World War II. In particular, many North Koreans assisted the CCP in fighting against the Kuomintang-led Republic of China during the civil war. In addition to this, during the Korean War, the PRC intervened in the conflict to support the DPRK against South Korea and the United States that were supporting the latter. China's intervention in the conflict resulted to be essential to prevent the complete destruction of the army guided by Kim Il Sung. Following this, when the armistice agreement between the two Koreas was signed in 1953, the PRC still maintained troop presence in the DPRK. Furthermore, China also contributed significantly to the latter's post war reconstruction.

However, from this moment until today, a high level of instability marked the Sino-North Korean relations. In fact, soon after the end of the Korean War, things started to complicate. The starting point was when the new North Korean leader Kim started to minimize the PRC's efforts during the period of time above analyzed, leading to a cooling of relations between the two countries. However,

during the Cold War, there was another shift. After the new Soviet Union leader Khrushchev criticized Stalin, the Pyongyang government tried to reconcile with both Moscow and Beijing. During this period of time, the latter started to strengthen its economic ties with the DPRK and provide aid. For example, in 1960 the PRC gave 230 thousand tons of food aid to North Korea. (Wertz, 2019). On this matter, the China-North Korea Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty, which was concluded in 1961 by Kim Il Sung and Zhou Enlai, was essential to enhance the Sino-North Korean cooperation. In particular, it is important to mention that article 2 contains a reciprocal defense clause that requires the two neighboring states to guarantee each other's security. (Neves, 2020).

In spite of this, even though for just a brief period of time, the relations between the DPRK and the Beijing government once again worsened when in 1966 China undertook the Cultural Revolution. On this matter, it is important to highlight how evidence demonstrated that some clashes between the troops of the two countries were detected. However, ties between the two nations quickly improved as the Cultural Revolution's most extreme phase came to an end in 1969. In addition to this, during the same period of time, the PRC publicly opened up to the United States in the 1970s. On this occasion the North Korean leader Kim backed his ally's choice describing this strategy implemented by China as a smart play against the Western counterpart. In fact, the first North Korean leader Kim was particularly invested in the matter as he was viewing these new Sino-American relations as a chance to make US' troops withdraw from the Korean Peninsula and improve the relations with the ROK under Pyongyang's terms of agreement. Nevertheless, the PRC opposed the DPRK's idea to carry out a unification of the two Koreas, as it was against the idea. In fact, Beijing's main objective was to maintain its influence on its neighbor to keep a close ally in the area. For this reason, regardless of these sporadic disputes, throughout the Cold War period the two neighboring countries remained connected by their shared history, ideology, and strategic objectives. As mentioned, China provided North Korea with economic and military aid, but also, to diplomatic backing in relation to the latter's arguments with foreign actors. However, the PRC's main geopolitical focus at the time was not the DPRK, but the end of the Cold War. The turning point of this strategy can be found in the first North Korean nuclear crisis.

As a matter of fact, after the end of the Cold War and right when the new leader Kim Jong Il came to power, some geopolitical changes in the East Asian region shifted the PRC's interests towards the DPRK. More in depth, it is essential to highlight the ROK's sudden economic development and increased influence in the international context. This latter scenario greatly affected China's strategy towards the two Koreas. At this point, Beijing's focus remained on the stabilization of the Korean Peninsula in order to avoid the complete collapse of the North Korean regime. As mentioned, maintaining a strong alliance in the region and having influence on this nation was the main priority for the Beijing government. In addition to this, the emerging interest of the latter towards nuclearization increased the Chinese government's fears. During this period of time, this unstable situation made the

latter decide to strengthen bilateral economic relations with Pyongyang. In fact, while the DPRK was hit by a major famine in 1994, China had agreed to easier conditions for its fuel and food exports to North Korea in order to improve the country's internal situation of total destruction and a consequent regime's collapse.

Relations between the two states remained almost unchanged until 2008, when the North Korean leader Kim Jong Il suffered a stroke. At this moment, there seems to have been a desire in the two Asian nations to get even closer to avoid issues during the leadership transition. This change in strategy was announced during Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's 2009 visit to the neighboring state. In this occasion, the two countries signed a number of agreements to strengthen economic relations and develop new infrastructure. In addition to this, in the last two years in power, 2010 and 2011 the North Korean leader Kim Jong Il visited China four times. Also, in spite of UN sanctions targeting the DPRK's nuclear program that were adopted during this time, Chinese trade and investment in the latter country increased significantly. From its side, North Korea decided to adopt what is known by observers as reform without opening. More in depth, market forces were given additional space to operate in Pyongyang's economy, which led to a decentralization of economic decision-making and a cohabitation of the government-owned and private industries. It is fundamental to highlight that these decisions were the result of the numerous unilateral and multilateral sanctions imposed in the framework of the UNSC that severely restricted North Korea's trade with a great number of trading partners. This situation led Beijing to have full influence of its neighbor's foreign trade and the development of the economy.

Nevertheless, when Kim Jong Un and Xi Jinping took power in North Korea and the PRC respectively, the Sino-North Korean relations once again decreased. More in depth, soon after Kim became the new leader of the nation, he remarked his desire to gain more independence from the Beijing government from an economic point of view. In addition to this, it is important to mention that in 2012 a private Chinese company that was one of the biggest foreign direct investors in the DPRK accused its North Korean partners of wrongdoing and expropriation in public and discouraged other Chinese companies from making similar investments in the neighboring state. This situation highly contributed to the commercial crisis between the two nations. More in depth, after this case unfolded, the Chinese society started to criticize North Korea and its leadership. As a consequence of this situation, the Chinese authorities decided to shift its policy towards the neighboring country while at the same time strengthening the ties with the ROK. Still, the PRC was attempting to maintain good relations with the DPRK. However, the advancement of the North Korean nuclear program and Kim Jong Un's continuous nuclear threats led to further cooling of alliance between the two states.

However, it is essential to underline that China played an essential role in strengthening its neighbor state's ties with South Korea and the United States in 2018. Beijing supported the North Korean leader Kim in his intention to open up to the international community and worked to mediate

between the parties. (Wertz, 2019). Currently, the war in Ukraine that started in February 2022 further strengthened the relations between the PRC and the DPRK. More in depth, the intensified hostilities between China and the US and Russia and the US led Pyongyang to reinforce dialogue with Moscow and Beijing. (Kim, 2024).

2.1.2 Concerns and drawbacks of these ties

As analyzed in the previous paragraph, since the end of World War II the relations between the DPRK and the PRC have not been consistently positive. However, the two states have always shared close historical, political, and economic linkages that have led other nations to be concerned about the possible implications of these ties. More in depth, countries that feel the most insecure about North Korea's nuclear proliferation issue have developed a strong fear towards China as well. The Republic of Korea is among these States. In particular, the latter views the Beijing government as a threat to its security. While there are different reasons why South Korea and the PRC regularly clash, it is possible to state that the DPRK is at the top of the list. The main problem that prevents reaching a solution to ease the tensions is that the two countries have different views on each other's role in the North Korean issue. In fact, Seoul seems to disagree with China, which claims that the growing tension on the Korean Peninsula is the result of the ROK's strong connection with the US. On the other hand, according to South Korea, Beijing's stance is based on its insistence on maintaining this firm position in favor of their neighbor regardless of its harmful actions. Moreover, according to some observers, at this stage in history Beijing may believe that in case it stops supporting the DPRK's decisions on foreign policy and nuclearization, the latter state might want to switch sides to the US. As Sino-American rivalry is on the rise, one of China's main objectives is to avoid Washington's influence in the region's further expansion. To sum up, these disparities regarding their neighbor might keep creating complex issues for what concerns the Sino-South Korean ties. (Chung, 2012).

Another nation that reacted worryingly to the insecurity that the ties between the PRC and the DPRK brought in the Asian region is Japan. More in depth, it is fundamental to analyze the shift that the latter adopted in the last decades towards its pacifist policy embraced after the end of WWII. In fact, especially since the end of the Cold War, Tokyo started to slowly adopt a harder position in relation to China and North Korea, especially to the latter. Furthermore, this gradual distance from the pacifist ideas embraced after the end of World War II was further exacerbated with the rise of Japanese Neo-Conservatism (JNC). Since the late 1990s, the latter developed some policies that aimed to safeguard Japanese interests and safety while adopting a hardline stance towards both Pyongyang and Beijing. For example, at the end of last century Japan began to strengthen its defense by cooperating with the United States in terms of military training. This position has been further enhanced in recent years. In

fact, as already mentioned in the previous chapter, Japan's military preparations increased due to the direct threat posed by the DPRK's missile program. More in depth, the JNC has connected the North Korean nuclear and missiles issue with China's position on the matter. Thus, it is possible to state that, how next chapters will further study, North Korea's situation has greatly affected Japan's policy-making. (Takahashi, 2010).

Moreover, it is important to analyze that the United States has been growing concerns towards the ties that the PRC and the DPRK have developed. More in depth, during the last decades the Western country has shown aversion towards the aid that China continues to provide to North Korea. Moreover, the Washington government started to develop some policies that aimed to persuade Beijing to cooperate and try to solve the North Korean nuclear issue. In fact, Beijing, which is frequently cited by the former as the key actor on a possible resolution of this issue, has become a source of frustration for the US. As the PRC is the Pyongyang government's closest ally, the American administration has been convinced that in order to find a long-term solution to the North Korean nuclear issue China needs to act immediately. However, in spite of the pressure received, Beijing's reaction has always been in support of its neighbor. In fact, contrary to what was hoped, the former has greatly criticized the US and the rest of the international community's position towards the DPRK. (Bandow, 2016)

Furthermore, the two allies have been impacted by their close ties as well. First of all, it is essential to analyze that neither Beijing nor Pyongyang see each other as trusted allies. More in depth, as analyzed in the previous paragraph, the two Nations have not always had good relations. In particular, during certain periods of time the ideas and sentiments of the two highly diverged. Some observers underline that the ties between the DPRK and the PRC remain mostly because of the dislike that they both have towards other foreign states, particularly the United States and its presence in the East Asian region. However, the precariousness of this bond had consequences also on the decisions and policies that North Korea and China have adopted after the Korean War until today. More in depth, it is key underlining that this has an effect on the decisions that the Pyongyang government undertook regarding nuclearization. In fact, as analyzed in the previous chapter, the latter decided to work on the idea of self-reliance to be able to counterbalance external threats without any help. For instance, the decision to develop a nuclear and missile arsenal is influenced by the desire of enhancing its security and safeguarding the country from possible foreign attacks.

On the other hand, the PRC is firmly convinced it does not want to put its neighbor in an adversarial position. More in depth, as the former has not developed positive ties with other countries in the region such as Japan and the ROK, but also and especially with the United States which is a key actor in Asia, China has firmly decided not to worsen the situation by going against the DPRK. In fact, even though Beijing's interests have been adversely impacted by the latter's nuclear program and military threats against other nations, from a geopolitical point of view, the Chinese government considered choosing not to adopt harsh measures against Pyongyang. (Chung & Choi, 2013).

Nevertheless, it is key to underline that over time, Beijing has permitted the UN sanctions against its neighbor to gradually get tighter while refusing to impose potentially disastrous economic restrictions. In addition to this, the PRC has occasionally temporarily stopped oil shipments to express its disapproval of North Korean policies, and the relationship has become increasingly tense, particularly since Kim Jong Un and Xi Jinping took power. Despite this, trade increased significantly during that time. In spite of this, as already analyzed in the previous paragraph, plans for significant Chinese investment in infrastructure, as well as economic initiatives were put in practice. China's academic community, think tanks, media, and even the government have been debating the Country's relations with the DPRK as a result of the latter's actions in recent years. It appears that Chinese disapproval for its neighboring state has increased. This work will later analyze the consequences of this general dissatisfaction in the PRC. Firstly, it is fundamental to make an analysis of the latter's position towards the North Korean nuclear program. (Bandow, 2016)

2.2 Historical implication of the PRC in the North Korean nuclear issue

This paragraph seeks to analyze the role that the PRC played in the past and continues to have today in the North Korean nuclear issue. In particular, it studies the Chinese positions on the matter since the XX Century with a particular focus on the first crisis in the 1990s. The section argues that on this occasion, Beijing did not adopt a firm position as while it was willing to solve the dispute, it did not want to undermine the integrity of the North Korean regime. For this reason, the former tried to persuade the international community in not applying harsh sanctions. The paragraph then proceeds in explaining the position taken in the early 2000s, from the Six Party Talks to the first two nuclear tests. During this period of time the ties between the two neighboring states began to worsen. Also, the PRC started to put the North Korean nuclear issue at the top of the agenda, as the Six Party Talks became one of the major programs in the nation. Lastly, the paragraph explains the PRC's role during the era of Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un. This section highlights how China for the first time in history publicly criticized the DPRK action, cooling off the relations with Pyongyang.

2.2.1 Cold War and end of the XX Century

After the end of the Civil War, the PRC undertook a specific position regarding nuclear weapons. More in depth, the traditional Maoist view that developed during that period of time was that these tools could represent a good possibility to stop the hegemony of the United States. In fact, the Chinese leader at the time Mao Zetung was promoting the spread of nuclear weapons especially to

third world Countries in Asia and all around the world. This position remained unchanged until Beijing started to open dialogue with western nations. In particular, starting with a meeting between Ronald Reagan and Zhao Ziyang at the White House in 1985, the Asian state began to slowly change its trajectory on the matter. In fact, the PRC started to lean towards cooperation with the international community in the fight against nuclear weapons proliferation. It is fundamental to mention that China signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1992. At this moment, Chinese diplomats started to engage with American diplomats to discuss nonproliferation. For instance, the two sides both shared the idea that the development of nuclear weapons would cause insecurity in the Asian region. In particular, they both agreed that the nuclearization of states bordering China such as North Korea would be greatly destabilizing. At this point, as already mentioned, the PRC started to face a dilemma. In fact, while the latter did not want to openly go against the DPRK, at the same time it did not want to support its neighbor's nuclear program. At the same time, it is important to underline that the international community has always been aware of the potential role that China could play in the North Korean nuclear proliferation issue. For this reason, the former, and the United States in particular, has frequently tried to persuade the Beijing government to cooperate to stop North Korea from further developing its nuclear ideas. This dilemma could be detected since the first North Korean nuclear crisis took place. (Wit et al., 2004).

As analyzed in the first chapter, in the 1990s the first North Korean nuclear crisis took place. At that moment, Beijing's top priority on this case was to lessen the destabilizing effects of the DPRK's development of nuclear weapons and long-range missiles, but more in particular, avoid any potential regional and western reactions to this advancement. However, it is key to emphasize that though this has long been an explicit objective of Chinese policy, denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula has been a less important goal. (Wertz, 2019). More in depth, the PRC was very keen to maintain security in the region and avoid the further escalation of tensions that could lead to the outbreak of conflicts.

During the first North Korean nuclear crisis in the 1990s, at a certain point the situation began to escalate dramatically. In particular, in 1994 the crisis made people believe that a military conflict between the DPRK and the United States was possible. At this moment, the Beijing administration decided to actively intervene to prevent a possible war in the area. However, as already mentioned, it is fundamental to remember that maintaining stability and the status quo on the peninsula was China's primary objective, rather than the complete denuclearization of its neighboring state. For instance, reassuring the DPRK was Beijing's priority. More precisely, to show its commitment to maintain the alliance with Pyongyang, in 1994 the PRC carried out a large-scale military exercise. (Lee, 2014) Further analyzing the first North Korean nuclear crisis, it is possible to state that Beijing's lack of firm position against the matter played a key role. At first, the latter tried to persuade the international community, in particular the IAEA, to adopt firm positions against its neighboring Country. More in depth, the Chinese government shared its skepticism that the DPRK was able to build nuclear weapons.

The former's aim with this statement was to persuade the international community, and the US in particular, to prevent the UNSC to act against Pyongyang and to impose potential harmful sanctions. On the other hand, while doing this, the PRC decided to endorse IAEA's inspections in North Korea. In addition to this, the executive board of the agency voted on a resolution that aimed at urging North Korea to fulfill its IAEA safeguards obligations within a month. On this matter, two concessions were made in the resolution in order to gain influence over China, which, as said, it was reluctant to put too much pressure on its longtime ally. In fact, the board allowed Beijing to act and prevent the presentation of the issue to the UN Security Council.

These conflicting signals indicated how this situation was challenging for the PRC. The latter was concerned that its neighboring state's nuclear weapons might influence other nations globally but, in the region more specifically, to start a nuclear arms race and cause instability in Asia. However, Beijing was also worried that the imposition of economic sanction would lead to the overthrow of the North Korean regime and a flood of refugees into its northeastern provinces. In fact, since 1994 when the DPRK experienced a famine, the presence of North Korean refugees in China started to increase, becoming a concern for the Beijing government. To avoid the exacerbation of this precarious situation, the latter did not show aversion towards the US' attempt to solve the situation. More in depth, Chinese diplomats encouraged South Korea to mediate the communication between the Pyongyang's administration and Washington, as they believed this would represent the most effective way of resolving the situation.

However, this lack of position caused the DPRK to grow negative sentiments towards its neighboring nation. More in depth, the idea that the PRC was ready to give its support to the international community began to spread among North Korean leaders, raising distrust and worry for this new stance. For the latter, the main concern was that China could decide to approve economic sanctions towards Pyongyang, as foreign countries were pushing for a UNSC's resolution. Eventually, as the situation was becoming difficult to manage, the DPRK decided to cooperate with the United States and other countries and discuss possible solutions that could benefit both parties involved in the issue. In this environment, the Agreed Framework was signed in 1994. This latter prevented the final decision of implementing unilateral sanctions within the UN Security Council. (Wit et al., 2004).

2.2.2 The early 2000s

The Sino-North Korean relations slowly began to worsen after the first nuclear crisis. In fact, 2003 marked the beginning of the slow distancing between the two countries, for two main reasons. Firstly, it is key to underline that during that period of time the DPRK formally informed foreign actors that it possessed nuclear weapons. This led China to adopt the decision of closing the oil pipeline

between the two states for three days. This action was seen by many Chinese and foreign observers as a strong message to Pyongyang. In particular, the latter gets the majority of its oil from China and considering its severe economic conditions and severe energy scarcity, Beijing was well aware that a blockade in the supply could have led to negative consequences for North Korea. (Moore, 2008). Second, the early 2000s were characterized by greater concerns towards the DPRK's nuclear program. More in depth, the new Century started with a great effort from the international community to try to prevent nuclear proliferation in the East Asian region. As analyzed in the previous chapter, the Six Party Talks began in 2003, with the aim to denuclearize North Korea. In fact, the countries involved, the US, the ROK, Russia, Japan, and the PRC, wanted to bring more security in the area. All the parties, including the DPRK, put a lot of effort in the process to try to increase global security. Among them, the Chinese government paid great attention to the matter from the beginning. More in depth, the Beijing government considered the Six Party Talks at the top of its foreign affairs agenda. Moreover, different Chinese government's departments cooperated to support the talks and delineate a coherent strategy. In addition to this, the two Chinese presidents at the time of the Talks, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, were highly involved in this process. They also engaged in personal and direct discussions with the late North Korean leader Kim Jong Il to try to find a long-term solution to the issue.

It is key to underline how the Six Party Talks gained so much attention and became one of the major programs in the PRC for different reasons. For instance, it is key to emphasize that by engaging in this framework, the latter nation deliberately committed to a series of clauses that could potentially damage the Sino-North Korean bilateral relations. Moreover, it is important to highlight that there are different reasons why the Beijing government decided to commit to the Talks. First of all, China wanted to control the situation in order to make sure that the Six Party Talks would have secured its own interests. Second, at the time of the project, the former was rising from an economic point of view. This latter factor highly influenced Chinese policy-making in this sense. For instance, in order to gain even more influence globally, the Beijing government had started to engage more in the international environment. Third, observers note that since the beginning of the new century the PRC started to have the perception that the bilateral relations with the US were slightly improving. More in depth, the latter state had adopted a series of decisions that were favoring China. An example can be found in the Taiwan issue. For this reason, scholars note that there are chances that the Beijing government felt the responsibility to return the favor.

In spite of the above, it is important to highlight that in the early stages of the Six Party Talks the PRC was not keen in playing a central role, preferring to remain neutral. In fact, the main reason for this was that few Chinese leaders were convinced that the DPRK's nuclear weapons could cause any harm to China. More in depth, the former believed that this was mainly an issue concerning other nations such as the United States and the ROK. However, after a short period of time the Beijing government took into account that the proliferation issue would entail a security issue for them as well.

In particular, they were afraid that the problem could harm regional stability and the PRC's rising economic expansion. For instance, for the first time since the beginning of the DPRK's nuclearization program, China started to play a stronger role in the resolution of the problem. (Shulong & Xinzhu, 2008).

The turning point of what concerns the PRC's position towards the DPRK's nuclear issue can be found in the latter's decision to withdraw from the Six Party Talks and conduct its first nuclear test. For instance, although Sino-North Korean relations had slightly started to improve once again in 2004, with the leaders of the two nations visiting each other's countries, tensions further increased when the Pyongyang government announced its decision not to participate in the Talks anymore or any other international fora. At this moment, the Chinese media broadcasted international condemnations of North Korea's actions and demanded that it return to the Six Party Talks, demonstrating for the first time since the nuclear problem arose an unusual firm position against the neighboring country. For instance, during this period of time the PRC condemned the test and voted in favor of economic sanctions in the UN Security Council. The latter imposed sanctions which included an embargo on luxury goods sales to the DPRK, a ban on tourism and financial freeze on anyone involved in the nuclear and missile activities, inspections of shipment entering or leaving the country, as well as prohibitions on the export or trading of military equipment and nuclear or missile-related components to or from Pyongyang. Following the nuclear tests, evidence showed that the PRC adopted several actions against the latter. Following this resolution, Beijing apparently decided to control trucks entering the DPRK from China and, in addition to this, it ordered the country's biggest banks to stop engaging with its neighboring state.

However, the PRC never ceased to engage with North Korea. For instance, while China was openly addressing the problem and ally with other actors such as the US, the state was also maintaining a strong relation with the DPRK. More in depth, in accordance with the World Food Programme (WFP), Beijing continued to provide food aid to North Korea, as in 2005 it provided 500,000 tons of food. This represented a rise from the previous year's supply. Also, the PRC continued to be North Korea's top supplier of trade and assistance in 2005. In fact, according to some studies, Chinese policy was aiming at convincing North Korea to restore the negotiation process while at the same time preserving its national interests to avoid the collapse of the regime. (Moore, 2008).

Nevertheless, this change in trajectory from the Beijing government towards the DPRK led to the latter's development of negative feelings towards the former. In particular, while the Six Party Talks parties were discussing to resume the talks, the UNSC president made a statement against North Korea that was not well perceived by the government. As China agreed with the statement that was delivered, the latter felt betrayed. While it did not mention the country explicitly, the DPRK denounced Beijing for siding with this declaration. It is key to underline that in such a hostile international environment, with the lack of support from its closest ally, North Korea believed that self-defense was the only way

to protect itself. For instance, this situation contributed to Pyongyang's decision to carry on with its second nuclear test in 2009. This further exacerbated already existing tensions with the PRC and the rest of the international community.

Between 2009 and 2010, the North Korean leader Kim Jong Il traveled to China three times, in an attempt to ease the tensions. Nevertheless, the situation did not change much during this period of time. (Nakato, 2012). This is also because Beijing was aware that every attempt to resume the Six Party Talks or any other negotiation process was idealistic at that point. (Cheng, 2013).

2.2.3 Beginning of the Kim Jong Un era and the PRC's reaction

As already mentioned in the previous chapter, when the new leader of the DPRK Kim Jong Un took power after his father's death, the international community had high expectations on a resolution to the nuclear issue. However, soon after Kim started to exercise his new role, it became clear that he had no intention to distance himself from his predecessor's ideas. On the other hand, the North Korean leader decided to follow Kim Jong Il's footprints and concentrate his focus on military capabilities. More in depth, as analyzed, the Pyongyang government at this point had already made the development of long-range missile technology and nuclear weapons its top security priority. The third nuclear test was conducted in February 2013, finally showing the DPRK's intention to carry on with the program. In addition to this, it is fundamental to note that during this period of time Pyongyang issued a statement, claiming that the Six Party Talks nor any other dialogue on the possible denuclearization of the Korean peninsula would take place. (Cheng, 2013). Moreover, the same year the Pyongyang government issued another statement announcing that they were willing to further work on nuclear advancements to officially become a nuclear power. After this, different nuclear tests and missile launches took place in the last decade, bringing additional security concerns among East Asian nations and the international community as a whole. (Hoshino, & Hiraiwa, 2020). In particular, what other countries found to be scary was Kim Jong Un's apparent lack of fear of consequences.

This whole situation led to different reactions from the international community. These latter represented a threat for the PRC. For example, the United States soon decided to reinforce its military presence in the region, especially in the Korean Peninsula, possibly creating a regional imbalance. (Cheng, 2013). Moreover, it is fundamental to understand Xi Jinping's stance. Since he became general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party in 2012, the new Chinese leader remarked his hostility towards the DPRK's nuclear program. Also, he stated that the PRC was willing to cooperate with the international community to face the issue, distancing himself from the position of neutrality his predecessors had adopted towards this issue. (Hoshino, & Hiraiwa, 2020). In addition to this, it is fundamental to mention that Kim Jong Un's actions led the Beijing government to further denouncing

the DPRK. This led to an enhanced exacerbation of Sino-North Korean ties. (Cheng, 2013). This latter situation occurred due to the fact that Beijing immediately condemned its neighboring country's actions and subsequently, it decided to invest in strengthening its ties with Seoul, which is one of the DPRK's main enemies. To further understand the situation, it is important to study in depth the circumstances that occurred. First of all, the PRC for the first time announced its worries for Pyongyang's action when at the beginning of 2013, China's Deputy Foreign Minister Zhang Zhijun addressed the issue. At this point, the Beijing government had decided to breach its policy of neutrality towards North Korean affairs. In addition to this, it is key to mention that a Chinese editorial for the first time conducted an analysis on the neighboring state's missile launch strategy, condemning it. In particular, the newspaper highlighted that in the global nuclear debate, the DPRK caused the greatest harm. In addition to this, it was analyzed that, contrary to what North Korea affirms, the strategy will not ensure Pyongyang's security and counterbalance other states' military stances. Furthermore, it was underlined that the PRC's safety remains the most important factor that can primarily contribute to ensure its neighbor's long-term stability. To sum up, for the first time in history, the Chinese government and the Chinese media suddenly started to express their concern and indignation towards the DPRK's nuclear stance and its military actions in general. However, despite Beijing's condemnations, Pyongyang's government decided to carry out its nuclear and missile programs. It is fundamental to remember that at that point the former was the latter's main source of economic aid, as well as its main political ally. Also, the international community was well aware of this. For this reason, during that period of time China's failure in convincing its neighboring nation to stop committing such acts worsened the international position of the former. More in depth, the whole North Korean situation challenged China's previously known ability to influence other East Asian nations' policies. This was acknowledged by the global community and mined the PRC's credibility at the international level.

On the other hand, as mentioned, Beijing's above analyzed statements and actions towards the DPRK, led the latter to publicly criticize its ally. For this reason, Pyongyang decided to continue enhancing its nuclear capabilities. Following the third nuclear test, China decided to undertake a firm position and announced the adoption of punitive sanctions against its neighbor in case of lack of cessation of these continuous military tests. Nevertheless, soon after the Chinese leader Xi Jinping tried to mediate the situation, as he was fearing that the worsening of tensions could have led to the outbreak of a war in the region. For this reason, after a first period of negative sentiments between the two Asian nations, the Chinese leader decided to once again change the trajectory of its government's policies towards the DPRK to try to ease the tensions. As the next paragraph will explain, the main concern for the PRC at this point became the maintenance of security in the region and avoiding the outbreak of a war. More in depth, it became crucial to ease the tensions in the Korean Peninsula to avoid further issues due to North Korea's nuclear program. (Cheng, 2013).

2.3 Changes in the PRC's role in the North Korean nuclear issue

This paragraph seeks to analyze how the PRC's policy towards the DPRK changed after Xi Jinping came to power in 2012. More in depth, it explains the former's switch in priorities; while before the main objective was to maintain its neighboring state's stability and prevent the collapse of the regime, it then switched to its willingness to maintain stability and safety in the Korean Peninsula and the rest of the region. For this reason, China adopted a firm stance against Pyongyang leading to a worsening of the Sino-North Korean ties. However, this section highlights how the PRC pushed the DPRK to open up towards foreign actors. In 2018, the consequent deterioration of the Sino-American relations led Beijing and Pyongyang to be closer; the former began to aid the latter evading the sanctions imposed by the UNSC. Also, this paragraph studies the implication that these changes entail both in the PRC and in the DPRK. The main outcome of this analysis was that these brought increased instability both at a national and at a regional level.

2.3.1 The PRC's policy shift

It is safe to say that even though the relations between the two states had already started to worsen since the first North Korean nuclear crisis in the 1990s, since Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un came to power in 2012 and 2011 respectively, the PRC's position towards its neighbor underwent a fundamental change. Indeed, observers often divide China's policy in two phases, before and after Xi Jinping. More in depth, as analyzed in previous paragraphs, the first phase was characterized by Beijing's willingness to maintain stability in the DPRK and prevent a total collapse of the regime. On the other hand, the former's position after the new leader came into power is dominated by the attempt to maintain stability and safety in the Korean Peninsula.

As stated, the turning point for what concerns Beijing's policy shift during the Xi Jinping era can be found in North Korea's third nuclear test conducted in 2012. First, as already mentioned, at this point the Korean Peninsula's stability and preservation of the status quo became the primary strategy, replacing the previous one concerning the assurance of the Kim family's regime survival. For instance, the PRC demonstrated that it is no longer willing to bear the costs necessary to preserve the North Korean regime's collapse. This is mostly because doing so would compromise the nation's security as well as its interests, also at the international level. A second aspect relates to Sino-North Korean ties. From Beijing's perspective, there was a shift from ally relations to regular state-to-state relations, which consequently resulted in a decrease of the ties between the two neighboring states. (Neves, 2020). As a result of Pyongyang's attitudes, Beijing decided to distance itself from the DPRK. In addition to this,

China started to criticize its neighbor's conduct, and, at the same time, it increased its collaboration with the US on denuclearization. (Kim, 2024). In addition to this, two important actions followed. For instance, in 2013, following the nuclear test, Beijing decided to reject North Korea's status as a nuclear power. In addition to this, the former decided to show its support to the UN sanctions imposed on the DPRK. As a result, there has been a noticeable increase in tensions between Beijing and Pyongyang during this period of time, with the former losing influence on the latter and applying more diplomatic pressure. However, observers highlighted that this diminished commitment to maintaining preferential ties with the North Korean system does not imply that China would support the fall of Kim's regime. In fact, China still continued to support the survival of the DPRK regime during that period of time, but it simply was unwilling to do so if this would have jeopardized its main national interests. Third, the PRC slowly started to enhance its relations with the Republic of Korea, both from a political and economic point of view. More in depth, the former's aim was to balance its cooperation with the two Koreas to put more pressure on the DPRK, while, at the same time, trying to weaken American-South Korean ties. Similarly, this latter strategy was adopted against Japan's interests, with the overall goal of increasing South Korea's vulnerability. In 2017, China was Seoul's top import market and trading partner. For instance, Beijing's ultimate target was to mine two of the US closest allies in the region in order to decrease the latter's influence in the area.

To implement this new policy, two different actions were adopted. First of all, China wanted to revoke article 2 on mutual defense obligations from the Sino-North Korean mutual defense treaty signed in 1961. This was a consequence of North Korea's increased threats and the subsequent fear by the PRC that it could start a conflict. Since 2010, Beijing has interpreted article 2 in a different way. In fact, the new interpretation implied that Beijing would not assist or back North Korea should it assault first and start a conflict. More in depth, China would protect its neighboring country only whether the latter faced an assault and was obliged to defend itself. It is key to underline that this had a significant effect on Pyongyang, as this caused the regime to seek assistance from other nations, particularly the Russian Federation, as well as to act independently without first consulting China. The second part deals with China's implementation of economic sanctions against the DPRK in response to requests from the UN Security Council and other actors such as the United States. Examples of these sanctions include the ban on coal imports from Pyongyang, a pause of oil sales, as well as the restriction by Chinese banks on the DPRK's banking operations. It is fundamental to highlight that in this instance, the Moscow government intervened and provided Pyongyang with the necessary commodities, neutralizing the PRC's sanctions. (Neves, 2020).

As mentioned, the Beijing government's main goal was to maintain security in the region. To maintain this position, during the Xi Jinping era the Chinese government decided to intensify its dialogue with countries that until that moment were considered enemies, such as the United States and the Republic of Korea. (Kim, 2024). In fact, the North Korean attempt to build a nuclear and missile

arsenal in the last decade has been at the top of the agenda of most states directly affected. In particular, the United States has been very focused on solving the issue. As a matter of fact, observers stressed that this topic was central for the development of Sino-American relations. For example, after a nuclear test in 2017, the American president Trump condemned the actions carried out by the Pyongyang government. In the same occasion the former president acknowledged that these acts undermine Beijing's security. In addition to this, Washington also expressed his willingness to cooperate with China on the matter. However, it is also important to underline that the former lacked in informing Beijing of certain ideas that it was willing to implement in relations to the DPRK and the nuclear issue. (Mastro, 2018). However, in 2018 the PRC adopted a policy reversal. (Ross, 2023). Unexpectedly, that year, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un declared that he wanted to decrease the security tensions in the region and concentrate on enhancing the country's economic prosperity. In fact, probably to ease the sanctions imposed by the UNSC, the former started to engage in diplomatic activities. First of all, the DPRK started to enhance its relations with its southern counterpart. In fact, the two reached an agreement to jointly take part in the 2018 Winter Olympics that took place in South Korea. Similarly, the former decided to open up towards one of its main historical enemies, the United States. In fact, during the same period of time, an American-North Korean summit was planned. This new policy stance adopted by the Pyongyang government had an effect on the Sino-DPRK ties as well. More in depth, it is important to mention that during his first years in power, as his predecessor did, Kim did not meet with the Chinese leader Xi Jinping. But to ease the tensions, in March 2018 the North Korean leader visited Beijing. It is also fundamental to highlight that Chinese officials have consistently advocated for the United States and North Korea to resume talks. For instance, the PRC began to be greatly involved in this matter. In 2017, one year before Pyongyang's decision to enhance its diplomatic ties, the PRC presented a proposal that North Korea cease nuclear and missile testing in exchange for the United States suspending joint military drills with the ROK. For instance, North Korean leader Kim made three more trips to China during the course of the following year, meeting with Xi both before and after the Singapore summit and before the second US-DPRK summit in Hanoi. The renewed friendship between North Korea and China extended further. In fact, shortly after, as Kim Jong Un declared that economic development was the nation's top priority, he sent a delegation of senior officials to visit industrial sites in China. This demonstrated how Sino-North Korean cooperation in the economic field was still very relevant. In addition to this, alongside these closer relations, China's commitment to enforcing sanctions weakened. Also, generally speaking, there was a significant increase in Chinese travel to North Korea since 2018. (Wertz, 2019).

During the same period of time, the Sino-American relations once again started to deteriorate. In 2018, the cooperation between the US and China on nonproliferation came to an end due to increasing tensions from a political and economic point of view between the Beijing government and Washington. (Kim, 2024). For instance, the PRC decided to lower its support to US diplomacy. In fact,

in 2019 the former called for lifting some economic sanctions directed to the DPRK. In addition to this, during the same period of time, China with Russia's support started to block the United Nations' firm position against North Korea's nuclear activities. Moreover, the Beijing government began to aid Pyongyang evading the sanctions by providing the necessary tools North Korea was prevented from importing due to sanctions. However, it is important to note that this increase in Sino-North Korean relations did not prevent the PRC from continuing to build strong ties with the Republic of Korea. (Ross, 2023). The link and cooperation between China and North Korea further ameliorated when the war in Ukraine started in 2022, and the next paragraphs will better explain this matter. (Kim, 2024).

2.3.2 Causes

As explained in the previous paragraph, the PRC's policy has changed, and Beijing primarily attributes this to geopolitical factors related to the US' increased presence and regional alliances, which are aimed at mining Beijing's interests. These factors are a result of the growing threat posed by the DPRK. In fact, according to China, the US used Pyongyang's unilateral nuclear program developments and threats as justification to increase its military presence in the East Asian region. (Neves, 2020). Furthermore, the PRC is greatly afraid of its own safety. More in depth, some scholars report the former's concerns of an invasion through the Korean Peninsula, as the Japanese did in the previous century. (Plant & Rhode, 2013). In addition to this, although there are very recent indications that this may be changing, domestic support for North Korea among the Chinese has decreased as a result of rising costs in the nation exacerbated by the DPRK's refusal to implement reforms and to follow the PRC's model. Furthermore, China suffers greatly from North Korea's economic and social problems, which are reflected in an increase in cross-border aid and refugee flows. This latter issue in particular is creating great troubles for the Beijing government as the Chinese society is increasingly complaining. (Neves, 2020). For this reason, the former's aim in past years had focused on urging its neighboring country to follow the Chinese steps in the economic field and imitate its past reforms to increase the country's economic prosperity. In addition to this, it is important to highlight that until the 2010s, Beijing was aiming at increasing the DPRK's economy especially because it wanted to prevent the sale of nuclear technology or components. (Plant & Rhode, 2013). Moreover, more mistrust of North Korea has been fostered by Pyongyang's visible disrespect to Beijing. This was mostly shown by the former's nuclear test conducted in early 2016 for the first time without notifying Beijing beforehand. In addition to this, another factor that is important to note is that in order to maintain its international reputation, defend the nuclear power privileges, and, most importantly, avoid nuclearization of the ROK and Japan in revenge for the DPRK's proliferation, Beijing strategically

committed to upholding the international regime of non-proliferation. However, the latter has been greatly undermined by the Pyongyang government's strategy of nuclear proliferation.

Nevertheless, even though the PRC adopted different policies and a firm shift towards North Korea, these growing problems have not been resolved, but on the other hand they grew even more. As previously mentioned, Beijing's inability to control the action of the Pyongyang government as well as the decreased influence that the former was able to obtain were seen as a risk of loss of international prestige. Beijing was at that point keen to get some distance from North Korea to guarantee that, should the North Korean regime collapse, it would not have affected the former. For instance, should this happened, it would have lessened its authority in the region. As this work has analyzed, the PRC's primary goal is to safeguard its interests, and it is evident that it wants to be one of the major players in the Korean Peninsula. On this matter, it is fundamental to underline the dilemma that the former is facing. One of the Xi government's worst-case scenarios is that the hypothetical collapse of the North Korean regime would lead to a reunification of the Korean Peninsula with the US and the ROK being the leaders and playing a key role based on their personal interests. On the other hand, China's image internationally is suffering as the international community is perceiving the PRC as an entity that is giving political and financial support to a nation that is jeopardizing international security. The North Korean nuclear proliferation issue is the most delicate and dangerous global issue for the PRC, as it is testing its ability to counter US' influence in the region. The Beijing government is aware that if it fails to achieve its goals, there is a significant chance that the nation will be harmed also from a domestic point of view. Furthermore, China views a peaceful and stable regional setting as essential to the continuation of its financial achievement and growth. The former is conscious that its neighbor's actions are compromising this latter goal. (Neves, 2020).

Nevertheless, as analyzed in the previous paragraph, at one point in 2018 North Korea and China both put security of the region at the top of the agenda. Frequent meetings between the Chinese leader Xi Jinping and the North Korean one Kim Jong Un during that period of time led to a slow decrease of tensions between the two. More in depth, the two neighboring states were both motivated to mend their relationship as soon as possible due to North Korea's diplomatic outreach to the ROK and Washington that happened during that period of time. The reason why this happened is that as the DPRK got ready for negotiations with the United States, it needed China's support; for the PRC, on the other hand, the main goal was to guarantee Beijing's interests in the negotiation process. On this matter, Pyongyang demonstrated that it was willing to partner with its neighboring state when it unilaterally declared an end to both nuclear and missile testing and indicated that it was open to talks on the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in exchange for security assurances. (Wertz, 2019).

As mentioned, this did not prevent the PRC from continuing to cooperate with the ROK. In fact, nowadays the former's main objective above everything is to decrease the United States' presence and influence in the East Asian region. More in depth, the idea is that in case the latter decides to

continue to impose economic sanctions, it can find itself to be more isolated as China and South Korea further develop their bilateral relations and Washington becomes increasingly marginalized. (Ross, 2023).

2.4 The Russian Federation and the North Korean nuclear issue

This last paragraph of the chapter seeks to analyze Russia's policy towards the North Korean nuclear program since the beginning of the Cold War until the ongoing Ukrainian conflict. More in depth, it will first study the Soviet Union's stance towards Pyongyang while then explaining Russia's position. For what concerns the Soviet Union, while this proved to be essential for the formation of the DPRK during the Korean War as well as for the establishment of a nuclear research program in the country in the 1950s, soon after the ties between the two began to worsen. As the section will highlight, the DPRK was beginning to seek increased sovereignty over its own territory and did not want to be considered as one of the Soviet Union's so-called satellite states. The USSR did not agree with the former's actions and decided to cut the aid that was being provided. This paragraph studies that the situation remained unchanged for most of the last Century, when the newly formed Russian Federation was prevented from actively participating in the negotiation of the first DPRK's nuclear crisis in the 1990s. This section then explains that the situation changed when Vladimir Putin was elected in 2000. In fact, the new leader's main goal was to establish balanced relations between both States of the Korean Peninsula as a broader goal to restore Moscow's influence in the East Asian region. The two states maintained good relations. For example, Russia more than once used its veto power in the UNSC to block the implementation of sanctions against the DPRK following its nuclear tests. Finally, this paragraph will illustrate the impact that the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022 had on relations between the two countries, highlighting recent development. The complete isolation from the rest of the international community led the two to increase their ties. While this stabilized the North Korean-Russian relations, it increased instability in the region and raised concerns among other actors.

2.4.1 The XX Century and the early 2000s

The Soviet Union (USSR) and the DPRK during the XX Century were seen by the outside as being very close. In fact, the two countries shared common ideas and their respective internal policies complemented each other. (Ha, 1982). Moreover, the former played an essential role in the creation of North Korea, helping to maintain territorial sovereignty in the northern part of the Korean Peninsula after the Japanese surrender. Also, as analyzed in the first chapter, the Soviet Union proved to be

essential for the establishment of the North Korean nuclear research program in the 1950s, as it provided essential knowledge on the topic. (Lee & Roehrig, 2023). However, despite the similarities, the relations between the two States underwent different stages that showed instability and distrust. The first stage concerns the period of the 1940s and 1950s, when North Korea was not an independent nation yet. This period of time was characterized by an attempt from the USSR to make the DPRK one of its so-called satellite states. The second period of time goes from 1951 to 1960, when the DPRK just started to form and create its internal politics and institutions. This moment is when Pyongyang gradually started to remark on its independence. In fact, North Korea broke away from the USSR's total control. The last stage is characterized by Pyongyang having total autonomy and distance from the Soviet Union.

Initially, the USSR provided great help and aid to North Korea, especially during the Korean War. More in depth, the former supported the latter giving military and economic assistance. In fact, until the first decade of its formation, the DPRK was almost completely dependent on the Soviet Union on these areas. However, it is fundamental to note that the North Korean leader Kim Il Sung was not pleased by this level of control. In fact, he searched for gaining complete independence and autonomy. It is fundamental to underline that the 1960s, when the DPRK was beginning to seek for increased sovereignty over its own Nation, the East Asian region was characterized by increased tensions between the Soviet Union and the PRC. At this point, for both States concerned, North Korea became a very important geopolitical asset from a strategic point of view. The North Korean leader Kim took advantage of the situation by relying on China to try to counterbalance the USSR's presence in his government's internal affairs. With his behavior, the former tried to prioritize his interests. In fact, the PRC was able to effectively regulate the Soviet Union's actions in North Korea, but, as opposed to Moscow, it was not able to meet Pyongyang's military and economic demands at the time. At the same time, this Sino-Soviet dispute affected the USSR's attitude towards the DPRK. The Moscow government slowly became completely intolerant with regard to the North Korean leader Kim's political goals. One of the main aspects of concern from the former was that in addition to the fact that the PRC was challenging its position as the main leader of the communist world, North Korea was beginning to align with the Chinese model of socialist development. However, even though the Soviet Union tried to pressure the DPRK into not abandoning its soviet model, Pyongyang tried to remain neutral. Consequently, Moscow decided to completely cut economic and military aid to North Korea. After this decision was adopted, the latter slowly increased its cooperation with Beijing. For the majority of the XX Century, the Soviet Union did not shift its instance towards the DPRK. In fact, even though the latter was strategically important in the region for the former, because of the good Sino-North Korean relations it did not radically change its policy. (Ha, 1982).

Since the international community first acknowledged the establishment of a North Korean nuclear program, the newly formed Russian Federation almost immediately expressed its negative view

on the DPRK's nuclear objectives. In fact, as it happened for the PRC, the former viewed this program as a potential threat to Russia's regional security, as well as to its economic and diplomatic relations with foreign actors. However, it is important to underline several aspects that make the Russian-North Korean relations different from the one that Pyongyang holds with Beijing. More in depth, it is fundamental to highlight that since the first North Korean nuclear crisis, the Russian Federation was excluded from any kind of negotiation regarding this issue. In fact, the latter was not part of the talks that led the DPRK to negotiate on the construction of a light-water reactor. This was mostly because after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the establishment of the Russian Federation the latter gradually lost the little influence it had on North Korea. As a matter of fact, in the early 1990s Moscow decided to cut its supply to Pyongyang of energy and other Russian goods which aimed to make the DPRK pay the debt it owed since the Soviet period. On the contrary, Russia decided to strengthen its ties with the Republic of Korea, which was slowly emerging as an economic power at the time. The Russian government's main goal was to secure investment and technology from Seoul. However, this strategy did not lead to the desired results. Indeed, the ROK did not see Moscow as a useful link to Pyongyang anymore, but on the other hand, it started to increase its relations with the PRC to build a tie aiming to pressure the DPRK to stop its nuclear weapons program. Russia was primarily a spectator throughout the first North Korean nuclear crisis, which demonstrated its declining influence on its neighbor. When the Four Party Talks between China, the US, and the two Korean states started in 1997, this situation remained unchanged.

Nevertheless, these circumstances evolved positively for the Russian Federation when Vladimir Putin took power. The new leader's main goal was to establish balanced relations between both states of the Korean Peninsula as a broader goal to restore Moscow's influence in the East Asian region. Putin visited the DPRK in 2000, marking the first visit of a president of Russia in the nation. While there, the Russian leader and the North Korean leader Kim Jong Il signed a new treaty on friendship, good neighborly relations, and cooperation. The new agreement also allowed for formal discussions about shared threats. Putin also made an effort to limit the tension surrounding North Korea's rocket development program by giving Pyongyang the possibility to join the Russian Federation's space program. Following all these achievements, a few years later Moscow was able to join the Six Party Talks. In general, during this period of time, Russia believed that these talks could be a basis for creating a future multilateral security system in the region. The former's main strategy towards the North Korean nuclear issue was very similar to the one that the PRC adopted. In fact, as the Moscow government wanted to maintain close ties with Pyongyang for security but especially for economic reasons, it tried to maintain constant communication with the DPRK both at a bilateral and multilateral level. Also, when the latter carried out the first two nuclear tests in 2006 and 2009 the Russian Federation tried to leverage its position as a permanent member of the UNSC to use its veto power and either stop or mitigate the sanctions that the Council proposed. On this matter, it is important to

underline that Russia prevented the use of certain wording that would have permitted the use of force against North Korea to lead the government to comply to the UN Security Council resolutions. In this matter, it is important to highlight that according to Russian officials, sanctions against North Korea typically offer only limited influence over Pyongyang and are insufficient to resolve the country's nuclear issue without concurrent talks and strategies guaranteeing the stability of a non-nuclear DPRK. The Moscow government frequently feels that sanctions are ineffective because they exacerbate the latter's isolation and its aggressive foreign policy position. In addition to this, there is evidence that confirms that Russia helped North Korea avoid some sanctions imposed. For example, the former helped North Korean citizens and enterprises open illicit bank accounts. Having analyzed this, it is safe to say that the DPRK's nuclear issue remained one of the main concerns for the Russian president Putin since he took power in 2000. However, the next chapter will demonstrate that the ties between the two countries further improved when Kim Jong Un took power of the DPRK in 2011. (Lee & Roehrig, 2023).

2.4.2 The Kim Jong Un's era and the Ukraine war

As mentioned previously, Putin has always been very active in the North Korean nuclear issue. Since Kim Jong Un succeeded his father Kim Jong Il, Russian-North Korean relations have improved greatly. This is mostly because the Russian Federation was able to take advantage of the negative situation that was developing between Pyongyang and Beijing. As analyzed in the previous paragraph, during this period of time the PRC and the DPRK had poor ties and Putin was able to leverage on this to increase his influence over the Pyongyang government. Between 2014 and 2017, China imposed stronger sanctions than the Russian Federation against North Korea. In addition to this, the Moscow government distanced itself from Beijing's strong stance against the DPRK. As mentioned, Russian leaders attempted to fortify their relationship with the North Korean leader Kim, who seemed to view Moscow as a possible solution to the PRC that did not seem to want to exercise influence on Pyongyang anymore, as well as the hostility of the United States. As a result, during these years the two nations strengthen their ties, signing different bilateral papers concerning diplomatic but also economic and social matters. Also, in the same period of time Kim Jong Un sent a representative to Moscow, showing the former's engagement in maintaining close ties with President Putin.

However, it is fundamental to note that the Russian Federation and the PRC always tried to maintain good relations. In fact, the latter supported the invitation that the former sent to the North Korean leader. At the same time, the Moscow government has always remained in contact with China on topics concerning the DPRK. More in depth, since 2015 the two nations have established a regular ministerial dialogue on Northeast Asian security. In addition to this, it is important to remember that

the two have often taken common stances in different fora concerning North Korea, such as the UNSC and other United Nations' agencies as well as the Six Party Talks. Also, they released numerous joint declarations on the North Korean nuclear program and other topics concerning this. In fact, the Russian Federation and the PRC also coordinated on how to deal with the sanctions that the international community sought to impose on the DPRK. According to scholars, the two had the most fruitful discussions in 2017. This year they developed what is known as the "three-stage roadmap" which foresees a stop of the North Korean nuclear and missile programs as well as the suspension of major joint military exercises between the United States and South Korea. This also called for several rounds of bilateral talks, including face-to-face meetings between the Pyongyang leaders and the United States, as well as the return of the Six Party Talks which both States believed would offer a framework for addressing nuclear but also non-nuclear issues in order to create a long-lasting East Asian security system.

The good relations between the DPRK and the Russian Federation further developed, reaching the nuclear agenda. In fact, 2018 marked an important year in this sense. More in depth, as mentioned, avoiding nuclear proliferation still remained one of the main priorities for Moscow. To keep the situation under control, during this period of time the latter suggested its neighboring country to construct an operating nuclear power plant in the North Korean territory, in exchange of a limitation to the nuclear program the DPRK was developing. The two also signed other bilateral agreements that boosted Russia's role in the nuclear issue and the Korean Peninsula's dispute. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and the DPRK's decision-making instability on the topic did not lead the Russian Federation to reach the level of influence that the PRC has on their neighbor. (Lee & Roehrig, 2023).

What has been game-changing is the Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In particular, the former found itself to be isolated from the rest of the international community and, in addition to this, its ties with certain actors such as the United States and the European Union further exacerbated. As a consequence to the latter, the Moscow government found itself to be closer to states that are traditionally their allies. Among these, it is possible to mention the DPRK. In fact, in the last two years the two neighboring nations engaged in different talks that made observers believe they were ready to cooperate under different aspects. For example, in September 2023 a summit between the two leaders Kim and Putin took place. On this occasion, scholars believe the two exchanged dialogues on mutual aid, as Moscow would be in need of weapons and military tools, Pyongyang would need to secure other resources such as energy or food. (Kim, 2024). In particular, it is important to mention that there is significant evidence showing that North Korea has provided armaments to Russia for the war in Ukraine. For example, according to American sources, since September 2023, the Russian Federation has launched no less than 10 missiles provided by the DPRK to Ukraine. This demonstrates the growing significance of these ties for the Moscow government. In addition to this, in March 2024, Russia used its veto power in the UNSC to stop a resolution that would renew sanctions against North

Korea. More recently, in June 2024 a major step further was completed. For the first time in 24 years, the Russian president Putin made a visit to the DPRK. On this occasion, the two signed a new strategic partnership; the last one dated back to 2001. This deal foresees different partnership agreements, among which it is possible to mention mutual assistance in case of aggression. On this occasion, Kim Jong Un expressed his firm position in favor of Russia in the Ukrainian war framework. The former acknowledged his counterpart's rights to gain complete sovereignty on what he described as Russian territories. During this meeting that lasted a couple of days, the North Korean leader Kim and the Russian president Putin also firmly reinforced their positions against foreign actors, the United States, Japan, and the ROK in particular, that are considered to have a harsh position against the two nations. This meeting and the concluded agreement once again shed light on the relations between the DPRK and the Russian Federation. More in depth, the international community's biggest concerns went back to the nuclear proliferation issue. In fact, there is a big question mark on whether the Russian Federation will begin to play a role in enhancing this problem, by exchanging knowledge and nuclear and military technology with the Pyongyang government. It is possible to state that currently, the tensions in the region and in the whole international community are on the rise. (McCarthy, 2024).

2.5 Chapter II conclusions

This chapter analyzed the relations that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea share with the PRC and the Russian Federation and their role in the North Korean nuclear issue. For what concerns the Sino-North Korean relations, these have always proven to be complex and unstable. As they shared in common the communist ideology and past experiences such as the Japanese occupation, China helped its neighboring country gaining independence during the Korean War. However, during the cold war the ties between the two worsened, mainly due to the fact that the PRC was trying to reach economic stability and the DPRK was not instrumental in reaching this objective. Everything started to change after the Cold War, when Beijing put more attention into the security of the East Asian region and of the Korean Peninsula in particular. More in depth, the former proved to play an essential role in the nuclear issue as one of the main actors involved in the Six Party Talks in the early 2000s. (Wertz, 2019) Nevertheless, China's role has been greatly criticized both by the international community and the DPRK itself. As the former wanted to maintain its control over the latter, while at the same time maintaining under control the nuclear proliferation, its actions during those decades have been characterized by ambiguity and lack of a firm position. Moreover, during this period of time the Sino-North Korean ties exacerbated. The turning point was the first nuclear test conducted by the DPRK in 2006 and the withdrawal from the Six Party Talks. The PRC's main concerns derived from its incapability of influencing North Korea's policies on this issue. (Shulong & Xinzhu, 2008). The

situation further worsened when Kim Jong Un and Xi Jinping took power. More in depth, the former decided to carry on with his predecessor's programs and, in addition to this, he decided to put even more emphasis on the nuclear program, concluding a nuclear test in 2013. At this point, the Beijing government openly criticized the position adopted by Pyongyang and, among other things, opposed to what was done in the past, it decided not to take a firm position in the UN Security Council's resolutions against the DPRK. (Cheng, 2013). It is possible to state that this period was characterized by a policy shift from China's point of view. While before the latter was also aiming at maintaining stability of the North Korean regime, after Xi Jinping became leader of the country, the focus shifted to stability of the region. (Neves, 2020). In addition to this, to reach this objective the PRC also strengthened its partnerships with other states such as the Republic of Korea, exacerbating the already compromised relations with Pyongyang. However, since 2018, the two states began to slowly recover the ties worsened by the tensions, with a cooperation that started to increase especially after the outbreak of the Ukraine war in 2022. (Kim, 2024).

On the other hand, the path that the Russian-North Korean relations followed was slightly different. While as it happened with the PRC the USSR was essential for the reach of the DPRK independence during the Korean War, the ties between the two were not at its high during the Cold War. (Ha, 1982). In addition to this, even after the fall of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation did not play a major role in North Korea. For example, Moscow was completely excluded by the negotiations of the first North Korean nuclear crisis. The situation improved when Vladimir Putin became Russian President in 2000. During that period of time Russia was able to join the Six Party Talks and increase cooperation with its neighboring nation. In addition to this, as the PRC did, the Russian Federation played a key role in the UN Security Council by trying to mitigate the sanctions other states wanted to impose after the North Korean nuclear tests. (Lee & Roehring, 2023). The Russian-North Korean relations ameliorated further when Kim Jong Un succeeded his father in 2011. In particular, Russian President Putin was able to leverage the negative situation that his Korean counterpart had with China to expand opportunities for cooperation. The outbreak of the Ukrainian war in 2022 has led the Moscow government, currently completely isolated from the international community, to strengthen its ties with the DPRK and other allies. Among other things, in 2023 the two leaders discussed mutual aid, with evidence showing that the DPRK provided weapons to the Russian Federation. Also, the following year the latter used its veto power in the Security Council to stop sanctions against North Korea. More recently, the Russian president's visit in the DPRK resulted in a new strategic partnership that includes mutual assistance in case of aggression. With Pyongyang ameliorating its ties with both the PRC and the Russian Federation in recent years, the international community now more than ever fears nuclear proliferation. More in depth, there are concerns that Moscow may enhance the DPRK's capabilities by sharing knowledge and technology. As a consequence, both regional and international tensions are on the rise. (McCarthy, 2024).

3. The international community and the North Korean nuclear issue

3.1 The United States

This paragraph seeks to make an overview of the United States' position towards the DPRK's nuclear issue. More in depth, the first part of this section studies the role that the former has played in shaping the East Asian order, highlighting its interests in the region. Furthermore, the paragraph highlights that the rise of the PRC in recent decades together with the decrease of power of one of the US' closest allies in the area, Japan, led to increased concerns within the Washington government. Adding to this already fragile situation, the North Korean nuclear issue contributes to increasing tensions in East Asia and the rest of the world. For the United States the main worry relies on its inability to tackle the issue, as well as the consequent fear that were Beijing able to solve the issue this would entail an increase in power both from a regional and international perspective for the latter. In addition to this, the paragraph makes an analysis of the past policies adopted by the American administrations towards the North Korean nuclear issue since the 1980s. In particular, it studies how both domestic and international factors greatly contributed to the US' decision making on the matter. As the section will explain, some administrations, such as those led by President Clinton and President Trump, were able to take some steps forward on the problem. However, as of today, no one was able to definitively resolve the issue of nuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. This is mainly because the DPRK is unwilling to cooperate, but also because the right approach towards the former is yet to be found.

3.1.1 The US' presence in East Asia and its relations with main actors

To maintain its hegemony in the international environment, the United States has always tried to control the balance of power in two main other regions of the world, namely Europe and East Asia. In particular, this was mainly due to the fact that these latter two are located across the two oceans that separate the US from the other continents, namely the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans. This means that from a security point of view, maintaining good ties and control of the situation in Europe and East Asia has always been essential for the Washington government. In addition to this, while before World

War II the main focus was on counting on the balance of power among main actors in the two regions, afterwards this changed. More in depth, in East Asia in particular, to secure its position globally, the United States had to be greatly present in the region. (Ross, 2013). For decades, the United States has been able to highly contribute to shaping the East Asian region's order. It is possible to say that it played a leading role in the area. In fact, this latter has been evolving under the hegemony of the western nation, that with the ties strengthened with many key players in the region was able to reach its objectives. In particular, it is fundamental to mention that after the end of WWII and the outbreak of the Cold War, the US enhanced its alliances with countries such as Japan, South Korea, and others. By fostering these alliances, Washington was able to secure a regional order based on its own economic and political views. More in depth, as mentioned, these nations were provided with security and military tools, as well as economic incentives. (Ikenberry, 2016). For example, some Chinese scholars underlined how the American-Japanese relations have strengthened in the last years. This is mostly because the Tokyo government is greatly focused on its own security. Different issues have undermined the latter. In particular, the DPRK's nuclear program but also other precarious situations such as the Taiwan question have put security at the top of the Japanese agenda. In addition to this, as the US, Japan is worried about the PRC's advancement in the region, as this increases uncertainty and distress in East Asia. (Christensen, 2006).

The main concern for Washington is the rise of multiple states in the area, the PRC in particular. In fact, it was very clear since the beginning of the XXI Century that this could cause harm to the US' interests. Preventing China's rise is nowadays the US' main objective. In fact, it is possible to state that the latter nation's actions in the region are deeply influenced by the PRC's role in the situation concerned. In addition to this, the slow decline of Japanese influence in East Asia during the same period of time contributed to raise worries. From the American's point of view, it is fundamental to keep the region divided in order to avoid the establishment of another hegemonic power in Asia. For this reason, the Washington government adopted several initiatives in the last decades to enhance its presence and influence in the area. In particular, it is worth citing a policy adopted by the Obama administration during his first mandate that started in 2009. This aimed at strengthening the US' stance in several states. For example, the western nation began to be more present and play a greater role on several issues directly concerning the PRC such as the South China Sea dispute or Taiwan. Among other areas, as also mentioned in the previous chapters, the western power has been very present in the Korean Peninsula. Since the Korean War that broke out in 1950, the US has played a great role in the area, by taking the side of the Republic of Korea in securing its integrity. (Ross, 2013).

However, the rise of China changed the situation. While before this the United States was both an economic and security hegemon, the PRC started to get past its western counterpart from an economic point of view. More in depth, nations that previously mainly relied on the US for what concerns trade and economic matters, they started to slowly switch their partnership, as they now have

the PRC as the main point of reference. (Ikenberry, 2016). In addition to this, it is possible to state that sometimes actions adopted by the United States led to unwanted consequences. More in depth, certain stances adopted against Washington's allies in East Asia contributed to growing the engagement of the PRC with actors such as South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan. Especially in the 1990s, it is possible to state that the US has contributed to allowing the economic and political growth of China. (Christensen, 2006). On this matter, it is fundamental to mention that even though South Korea remained a great ally, for a brief period of time, the Washington government decided to disengage from the Peninsula. More in depth, the American president Bush in the first decade of the 2000s decided to back up. As a consequence, the ROK began to rely more on the PRC from both an economic and political point of view. This was mostly because after the first two North Korean nuclear tests, South Korea's main objective was to counter the DPRK's military and nuclear threat. In spite of this, Seoul and Washington still remained very close and, in 2010 during the Obama administration, the latter once again enhanced its strategic presence in the area. In particular, the US and the ROK increased the number of their joint military exercises and closed different agreements on military cooperation. At the same time, after Kim Jong Un took power in 2011 and after the US elections in 2012, the US government proposed to strengthen its relations with the DPRK. The main objective was to increase the security balance in the Korean Peninsula, as well as trying to decrease the influence of China in North Korea. More in depth, Washington had the perception that the Sino-North Korean ties were undermining the effects of the economic sanctions imposed by the UNSC and that they were greatly adopted thanks to the US. Moreover, American observers noted that the level of aid given to the DPRK by the PRC had increased since the second North Korean nuclear test in 2009. This raised concerns within the US administration. Furthermore, as analyzed in the previous chapter, it is possible to say that Beijing showed little if not a willingness to cooperate with other actors on the North Korean nuclear issue. In particular, for what concerns the return of the Six Party Talks, China did not pressure the DPRK to resume the discussion. (Ross, 2013). In fact, even though, as analyzed in previous chapters, the DPRK's nuclear issue remains a concern for both the US and China, observers noted that the PRC had been promoting the idea that the denuclearization of North Korea would undermine the US' interests. This is mostly because, as some scholars observe, if China were able to address a problem that Washington is unable to resolve, it would become more powerful both from a regional but also an international point of view. (Christensen, 2006).

For these reasons, the United States had to engage bilaterally with Pyongyang to secure its interests but, as the latter does not view the former as a trustworthy partner, these engagements did not succeed as much as Washington was hoping for. As the next paragraph will analyze, the DPRK nuclear issue remains at the top of the United States' agenda, as in the last decades it adopted different measures to tackle the issue. (Ross, 2013)

3.1.2 The US' approach to the North Korean nuclear issue and past policies

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, it is possible to say that the DPRK's nuclear issue was one of the main items in the US' foreign policy agenda after the end of the Cold War. More in depth, the solving of this problem is essential for Washington as it has been undermining its interests in East Asia. Furthermore, it is important to underline that the US' focus on North Korea is due to the latter's nuclear program, but also to other concerns such as the missile program, the established authoritarian regime, and the persisting human rights violations that are taking place in the Asian state. Moreover, the threat posed by the latter in the region provoked different implications for the western nation. In fact, this entailed an increase of joint military exercises with the Republic of Korea. In addition to this, as a consequence of some bilateral agreements, in case of military attack on Japan, the United States is obliged to defend the latter. Moreover, the US has different military bases in the Asia Pacific region that are easily reachable by the DPRK's nuclear weapons and missiles. (Chanlett-Avery & Taylor, 2010, November). But most importantly, since the end of WWII, the American administrations have shown a propensity to promote nonproliferation as they fear the instability that a nuclear nation can generate within the international community. (Lee & Roehrig, 2023). For all these reasons, since the 1990s during the Clinton administration, the Washington government has been putting a lot of efforts into stopping the advancement of the above listed concerns. Even though the US has had an interest on the Korean Peninsula since the Korean war that started in 1950 due to its alliance with South Korea, when the DPRK began to advance a nuclear program tension arose. Scholars note that one of the main obstacles to the reach of a positive outcome for the United States has been the fact that, as an authoritarian regime, the Pyongyang government has shown little interest in collaborating. In particular, it is fundamental to highlight that the US and the DPRK were never able to establish formal diplomatic relations. (Chanlett-Avery & Taylor, 2010, November).

It is important to note that the approach adopted by Washington on a particular foreign matter greatly depends on the President in charge during that period. (Lee & Roehrig, 2023). Since the end of the Cold War, but especially since the first North Korean nuclear crisis, the United States adopted a series of policies towards the Pyongyang government. These have changed greatly in each different administration; however, one common point is the lack of willingness to militarily intervene in the DPRK. The fluctuation of the approaches adopted is due to different reasons. One of the main causes is the difficulty of identifying patterns in North Korea's behavior. (Chanlett-Avery & Taylor, 2010, November). In addition to this, there are some domestic factors that usually influence the United States' foreign policy and decision making. These concern, for example, the personal beliefs of the leader in charge on nuclearization, as well as their past experiences and behavior. In addition to this, partners' funding and interests are another big factor that greatly impacts policy making. Moreover, international

factors such as alliances, current disputes, as well as national and international interests play a big part too. In fact, external pressure coming from both bilateral and multilateral fora or agreements are key to reach a positive outcome in decision making, also for what concerns the North Korean nuclear issue.

The 1980s and early 1990s saw presidents of the United States Carter, Reagan, and Bush. President Carter's mandate was when the Cold War was still ongoing. While dealing with the Soviet Union, the former's main focus and approach towards the DPRK was to lessen the tensions in the Peninsula and bring together the North and the South. However, it is important to know that during this period of time Pyongyang's government nuclear program's existence was still unknown. This latter situation changed during the Reagan administration, as the Americans began to suspect the development of such a program. In fact, at this point, the Washington government began to push the DPRK to sign the NPT. President Reagan's main preoccupation on the North Korean nuclear program was on the spread of communism and of the Soviet Union's ideologies, as the Cold War was still ongoing. After the end of the latter, the US' approach towards Pyongyang changed. As the DPRK lost one of its allies and another one, the PRC, decided to open up to the ROK, the North Korean leader Kim Il Sung decided to cooperate more with the US and the rest of the international community. In fact, it is possible to state that the two developed some ties during this period of time. In addition to this, the DPRK officially ratified the NPT, while Washington withdrew some of its troops from the Korean Peninsula.

Everything changed during the Clinton administration as a consequence of different factors, first but not least being the first nuclear crisis. First of all, it is important to underline that President Clinton was against nuclear proliferation. This was a consequence of his personal beliefs but also to the nuclear weapons' issue within the former Soviet nations. Concerns within the Washington administration arose also following the DPRK's decision to withdraw from the NPT. During the first nuclear crisis, President Clinton was determined to seek a final solution to the problem. Observers indicate that the former was even considering a military intervention in the Asian state. However, through diplomatic efforts he was able to reach an agreement with his North Korean counterpart and in 1994 the Agreed Framework was signed. The following years of his second mandate, Clinton adopted different measures and policies towards the DPRK. For example, a task force was formed. Furthermore, the former tried unsuccessfully to convince the PRC to cooperate and tackle the North Korean nuclear issue.

President Bush's approach was different. First and foremost, it is important to understand some domestic factors that greatly influenced. In fact, the new administration adopted an approach that sought to distance themselves from decisions taken by the previous one. Also, within the Bush administration main exponents had different views on how to deal with the issue. However, the DPRK was inserted into the list of enemies of the United States, destabilizing Pyongyang. Feeling targeted, the latter listed a series of countries that would be targeted with nuclear weapons. To sum up, even

though President Bush's objective was to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula, he reached the opposite outcome. In fact, this led to the official withdrawal of North Korea from the NTP. (Lee & Roehrig, 2023). However, there was a slight shift during President Bush's second term as this period was characterized by the Six Party Talks. In light of this, scholars underline that, while the previous administration was more focused on developing bilateral ties, Bush was aiming to deal with the nuclear issue within multilateral fora. (Chanlett-Avery & Taylor, 2010, November). Moreover, after the first DPRK nuclear test, Bush tried to focus more on North Korea. In spite of this, as the former was at the end of his mandate, he was unable to reach a successful outcome. (Lee & Roehrig, 2023).

As soon as he was elected, President Obama made some remarks on his willingness to cooperate with countries that were considered to be hard countries. His main approach was to collaborate, as the new US President tried to form new alliances with key actors such as the PRC and the Russian Federation but also to strengthen relations with Washington's allies such as the ROK and Japan. However, the DPRK's continuous deployable actions prevented any type of advancement. (Chanlett-Avery & Taylor, 2010, November). In addition to this, Obama's mandates were characterized by different crises he had to deal with all at once. As he had to prioritize his foreign policies, President Obama focused less on North Korea compared to other nations.

Drastic changes and advancements towards the DPRK characterized the Trump administration. Since 2016, the latter has focused on reaching good ties with the Asian state and preventing nuclear proliferation. It is possible to say that President Trump's approach towards Kim Jong Un's government was not linear, as sometimes he showed hostility towards the latter while other times, he was friendly. However, he was able to reach incredible milestones as in 2018 a US-DPRK summit took place, and the two parties signed a declaration. This latter did not lead to major steps for what concerns denuclearization, but this meeting was considered to be successful anyways. In spite of this, following actions adopted by the DPRK once again cooled off the precarious good ties developed by the Asian nation and the Western one. As of today, no significant step forwards by the United States on the DPRK nuclear issue were made (Lee & Roehrig, 2023).

3.2 Japan

This paragraph seeks to analyze the policies adopted by Japan on the North Korean nuclear issue. In particular, in the first paragraph there is an outline of the way Japanese policy-making as well as its internal political stances developed after the end of WWII. In particular, the section describes Tokyo's choice to renounce its military assets and agree to completely rely on the United States on the military field. In fact, Japan decided to focus solely on increasing its economy, while putting aside the latter. However, as new threats arose in the region, some things changed. This paragraph continues by

explaining the Japanese-North Korean relations and how they developed since the Cold War until today. The section highlights that the development of the DPRK's nuclear and missile programs were central in changing Japan's security policies since the 1990s. In addition to this, the abduction by Pyongyang of some Japanese nationals played a central role in Tokyo's policy making too. As a matter of fact, the paragraph makes an analysis of the way, due to society's pressure on the matter, the Tokyo government started to consider the nuclear issue and the abduction issue as one single problem that needs to be solved altogether. To better explain this, without solving the latter, the former cannot be untangled. This strict position led to some issues for what concerns Japan's role on the DPRK nuclear issue. Actually, the nation often found itself to be isolated in multilateral talks. This particularly occurred during the Six Party Talks period. This paragraph also studies how Japanese policies drastically changed since Kim Jong Un and Shinzo Abe came into power. More in depth, as the former further developed its nuclear program and continued to attack Japanese territory, the latter made significant changes in policy-making. As a matter of fact, in the last decade Japan began discussing rearmament, officially giving up its pacifist stance adopted after the end of WWII. It is clear that the former is seeking to play a more central role in the security of the East Asian region by acquiring more military autonomy.

3.2.1 Japanese policies in East Asia and historical overview of Japan-North Korean relations after the Korean War

Japan has a long history that dates back thousands of years. As mentioned in previous chapters, the former was one of the protagonists of the colonial period in the first half of the XX Century. However, having lost World War II, Japan found itself constrained to give up its colonies and cooperate with the Allies to build a new political order. More in depth, the United States was central in this process. During the course of the Cold War, Tokyo adopted a strategy named *Yoshida Doctrine*. This latter consisted in a complete reliance on the US for what concerns the country's security. In fact, while Tokyo was allowed to keep a small amount of military assets, it mainly had to depend on the Western nation. On the other hand, the main focus of the Asian country was to invest into the economic recovery. It is possible to say that this strategy was successful. (Samuels, 2010). In fact, according to the World Bank, Japan's GDP grew exponentially in the second half of the XX Century, reaching 12.9% in 1968. However, in recent decades the situation began to worsen. In fact, the Asian power began to slowly lose its economic power in the East Asia region. According to the World Bank, in 2023 Japan's GDP was 1.9%, 11% less than in 1968. (World Bank Group, 2023). In addition to this, other threats arose. In particular it is important to mention other three different situations that brought concerns within the Tokyo government. First of all, the rise of the PRC both from a military and an economic point of view

is a fact that still nowadays worries the Japanese. Moreover, the threat posed by the DPRK is another issue for the latter. More in depth, Japan fears for its own security and safety. In addition to this, it is fundamental to underline the possibility that the United States will decide to give up its military role in the Asian nation. All together, these concerns pose a big threat for the country's security both from a domestic and from an international point of view. (Samuels, 2010). However, it is possible to say that Japan's main focus is on the growing worries that North Korea's missile and nuclear weapons programs keep developing. (Lee & Roehrig, 2023).

Japan and the Korean Peninsula have been engaging in bilateral relations for thousands of years. As also analyzed in previous chapters, the beginning of the XX Century was characterized by the Japanese domination over Korea. (Blomquist & Wertz, 2015). More in depth, it was demonstrated how this factor highly influenced the choices of the first North Korean leader Kim Il Sung as well as the DPRK's domestic system as a whole. (Buzo, 2017). After the Korean War, the negative historical experiences that the two nations concerned shared prevented the development of close ties. First of all, it is important to note that in Japan there is a big community of North Koreans. This forced the two states to maintain some degree of ties. In fact, over the course of decades, the Tokyo government provided Pyongyang with some economic investments. In spite of this, different factors led to an increase of tensions between the two. More in depth, from Japan's point of view, two main persisting issues impacted its view on the DPRK. First and foremost, during the XX Century North Korea abducted some Japanese nationals, refusing to acknowledge this and release them back: this enhanced hostilities. (Blomquist & Wertz, 2015). This matter still today represents a big aspect that prevents the normalization of North Korean-Japanese relations. In particular, these abductions were severely denounced by the Japanese society as a whole. (Lee & Roehrig, 2023). Moreover, the DPRK targeted Japan at different times in recent years, sending its missiles into Japanese territory. For this reason, the North Korean nuclear and missile programs constitute a big worry for Tokyo. On the other hand, the Pyongyang government increased its hostilities towards the latter mainly due to the imposition of sanctions. Furthermore, it is fundamental to note that Japan established diplomatic relations with South Korea, which is considered by the North as one of its main enemies. In fact, the former two signed an agreement on normalization of relations in 1965. On this occasion Japan addressed Seoul as the only legal government in Korea. (Blomquist & Wertz, 2015). In sum, subsequently to four decades of colonialism, hostilities and resentments persisted for over sixty years, and, even if there were some periods of times of peace, it is still ongoing today. (McCormack, 2022).

In fact, this whole situation of instability remained the same until the 1990s, when the first North Korean nuclear crisis took place, and the Agreed Framework was signed in 1994. (Blomquist & Wertz, 2015). It is important to underline that throughout these years, the development of the DPRK's nuclear and missile programs led to an increase of security concerns in Japanese society. In particular, families of those that were abducted by Japanese authorities started to pressure the government to

concretely act to hold the DPRK accountable for its actions. (Lee & Roehrig, 2023). As a matter of fact, following this, the Tokyo government decided to finance the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) as well as delivering aid to the DPRK as it was experiencing a famine. In spite of some disputes in the late 1990s, this period of time marked a great step forward for the Japanese-North Korean relations. The highest point was reached in 2002, when the Japan-DPRK Pyongyang Declaration was stipulated. However, soon after there was an increase of tensions within the international community as North Korea officially withdrew from the NPT. Japan decided to take part in the Six Party Talks. One of the former's main objectives was to secure its own interests, namely discussing the abduction of Japanese nationals from Pyongyang and its colonization's reparations fees. The North Korean-Japanese relations remained pretty much stable throughout this period of time until 2009, when a severe deterioration took place. This followed the DPRK's decision to test several missiles towards Japanese territory. As a response, Tokyo strengthened sanctions against the former. (Blomquist & Wertz, 2015). At this point, Japan was holding diplomatic relations with each nation in the world except for the DPRK. (McCormack, 2022).

3.2.2 Japan's approach to the North Korean nuclear issue and past policies

As mentioned, since the 1990s Japan began to put a lot of effort into normalizing relations with the DPRK. (McCormack, 2022). Since the Cold War, the former has adopted different policies towards North Korea. More in depth, there has always been a great focus on the latter as Japan has always had the desire to maintain good ties with both states of the Korean Peninsula. However, concrete policies were adopted after the first North Korean nuclear crisis in the 1990s. This is because during the same period of time, in 1998 the DPRK for the first time launched a missile towards the Japanese territory, raising worries. During this decade, Japan acknowledged the development of North Korean nuclear and missile programs that could seriously and directly undermine the safety and security of the country. In spite of this, it is important to highlight that the Tokyo government did not want to normalize relations without any restriction. In fact, Japanese policy towards the DPRK needed to take into account different factors. First of all, from an international point of view different situations ought to be considered. During the Cold War, different factors prevented the normalization of ties. In fact, while Japan was part of the Western bloc, the DPRK belonged to the Eastern one. In addition to this, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, during this period of time Japanese foreign policy was highly influenced by the United States' decision-making. For this reason, throughout the Cold War Japanese-North Korean relations were impacted by the US' policies towards Pyongyang. Furthermore, as on the other hand the DPRK was dependent on the PRC, the fact that the Tokyo government did not develop good ties with Beijing played a fundamental role on the matter as well. However, in the 1990s, for the

reasons above mentioned, the Japanese government decided to develop different policies to try to ease the tensions with North Korea. In this sense, it is important to mention that in 1990 vice President Kanemaru visited the latter to try to normalize relations. This was mostly possible as the Cold War had come to an end, and the international constraints above described had failed. In addition to this, during the same period of time, South Korea was trying to ease the ties with its Northern counterpart as well. In this context, Japan found another boost to seek the pursuit of diplomatic relations with the DPRK, as another reason for the reach of this outcome was to increase stability and security in East Asia. In spite of all the efforts, as Japan and North Korea met three times between 1990 and 1992, not seeing the expected results, the latter decided to unilaterally stop the talks. Nevertheless, the following years the former kept trying to develop policies to establish a dialogue with Pyongyang. For example, in 1994 a domestic policy was adopted to deliver aid to the DPRK that was facing a severe famine. (Hiraiwa, 2020). In addition to this, the 1990s marked an essential decade for what concerns Japan's security policies. As a matter of fact, it is possible to state that North Korean nuclear and missile programs greatly influenced the Tokyo government, as changes did not concern only policy towards the DPRK. More in depth, the so-called US-Japanese guidelines for defense cooperation underwent some changes in response to the first North Korean nuclear crisis. These outlined a clearer role Japan needs to play in assistance to the US in case of a regional emergency. Moreover, the Tokyo government started to discuss the need to detain more military assets to be able to respond in case of a direct attack on Japanese territory by North Korea.

As a matter of fact, it is possible to state that since the early years of the 2000s, the primary domestic aspect influencing the government's policy towards Pyongyang is the political pressure exercised by the Japanese society on the abduction issue. (Lee & Roehrig, 2023). Once again Japan tried to resume the talks and in 2002 a joint declaration was stipulated. On this occasion, the question of the Japanese nationals abducted remained central and the pressure from the families concerned as well as the society as a whole highly impacted the Tokyo government's subsequent policy-making. (Blomquist & Wertz, 2015). Eventually, five Japanese nationals that were abducted were reunited with their families in Japan. (Lee & Roehrig, 2023). In spite of the achievements on the abduction issue, the second North Korean nuclear crisis that led to the DPRK's decision to withdraw from the NPT affected the resumption of negotiation between Tokyo and Pyongyang. It is important to underline how domestic factors were crucial to impact the Japanese government's decisions during this period of time. As a matter of fact, the latter adopted the decision not to treat the issue of the abductions and the nuclear problem as two separate matters. While the international community was focusing just on the nuclear issue, pressured by the society, Japan sought to find a solution to all problems all at once. More in depth, as the Tokyo government decided to play an active role on the denuclearization issue, it joined the Six Party Talks by trying to put the resolution of the abduction issue as one of the main items in the agenda to be discussed. It is possible to say that the outcome was positive, as in the fourth meeting of

the Six Party Talks the joint statement included the abduction issue. (Hiraiwa, 2020). However, it is fundamental to note that due to its attitude and requests to include the abduction issue, Japan often found itself to be excluded by multilateral discussions concerning the denuclearization of North Korea. More in depth, while the former was successful in convincing the other parties to the talks to keep the discussion on the abduction issue in the agenda, it later struggled into keeping it at the top of the agenda. To sum up, this period of time and the decision adopted by the Tokyo government demonstrated how the policies on the DPRK nuclear issue were strictly linked to the abduction issue. In fact, without solving the latter it was impossible for Japan to solve the former.

As analyzed, throughout the course of the 2000s, Japan kept emphasizing its position of linking the abduction issue with the nuclear issue. (Lee & Roehrig, 2023). In addition to this, as mentioned, it was very influenced by the international community's decisions on the latter matter, especially looking at the stances adopted by its closest allies the United States and the Republic of Korea. However, some changes in policy-making occurred when Kim Jong Un and Shinzo Abe came to power in the DPRK and Japan respectively. In fact, the early 2010s were marked by a strengthening of the nuclear and missile program by the former, which during his tests decided to target the Japanese territory numerous times. The new Japanese administration decided to resume the talks with North Korea, but this time both parties demonstrated their intention to normalize relations in the event that the DPRK modified its stance. Resulting from this meeting, the so-called Stockholm Agreement was stipulated. The latter allowed the Japanese to take steps forward on the abduction issue, as they were able to investigate the matter. At the same time, from its side, Japan lifted some sanctions imposed on Pyongyang after the first nuclear tests. However, continuous attacks on Japanese territory by the DPRK led to the decision to strengthen sanctions against Pyongyang. Among these, the Tokyo government-imposed restrictions on North Korean ships to enter Japanese ports. As a reaction, North Korea suspended cooperation on the abduction issue. At this point, President Shinzo Abe's policy towards the DPRK was to exert as much pressure as possible. However, it is important to note that, as already mentioned, after WWII Japan renounced its military force. For this reason, in order to reach its objectives with North Korea it is essential for the Tokyo government to have complete support from external actors, particularly the United States. (Hiraiwa, 2020). As this latter factor puts constraints on Tokyo's decision-making, during this period of time, Japan's approach towards Pyongyang changed. While initially the former only wanted to normalize relations diplomatically, as the latter's nuclear and missile programs evolved, Tokyo has increasingly decided to balance competing policy objectives. (Lee & Roehrig, 2023). More in depth, the nation began to take into account some security options. In fact, some scholars discuss the fact that the Japanese decided to consider the possibility of increasing their military force. In particular, some analyze that there are possibilities the Tokyo government might consider developing a nuclear program itself. The increased threat in the region, the DPRK nuclear issue among them, led the Japanese government to change its trajectory towards military assets. (Nakato, 2013). In recent

years, Japan officially abandoned its pacifist stance to spend more on its defense capabilities. It is clear that the Tokyo government is seeking to play a more decisive role in maintaining security in the region. (Chellaney, 2023, January 13).

3.3 The Republic of Korea

This paragraph seeks to analyze the position of the Republic of Korea with respect to the North Korean nuclear issue. More in depth, the section firstly analyzes the trajectory adopted by the ROK from both a political and economic point of view since the Japanese occupation of the Korean Peninsula until today. The paragraph explains that South Korea in just a few decades was able to reach the global position of middle power, playing a critical role in the international field and regionally. Furthermore, the following studies the way inter-Korean relations developed since 1953. While the two never had any type of interaction during the Cold War period, in the 1990s the situation changed. In fact, since the first North Korean nuclear crisis, the Seoul government started to develop some policies in this sense, trying to open dialogue with the neighboring nation to tackle this concerning issue. However, in spite of the different attempts in the last three decades, definitive results were never achieved. Afterwards, the paragraph proceeds in explaining the ROK's approach towards the DPRK's nuclear issue and the past policies that were adopted by the different South Korea's administrations since the first nuclear crisis. More in depth, the section studies the different approach each leader decided to follow also due to North Korea's actions during that specific period of time. From the Joint Declaration on Denuclearization until nowadays, different strategies were implemented. However, even though for short periods of time the ROK seemed to have advanced on the matter, the DPRK's lack of trust and willingness to cooperate led to the inability to have effective long-term outcomes. In fact, the paragraph explains that overall, the ROK's contribution to the resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue has not been impactful. As of today, tensions are still very high in the Korean Peninsula and as South Korea is discussing developing a nuclear arsenal itself, security of the East Asia region is undermined.

3.3.1 South Korean policies in East Asia and historical overview of inter-Korean relations after the Korean War

The Korean peninsula has always been a unified area. As already mentioned, during the colonial period it was subject to Japanese domination. During this period of time, the northern part of the peninsula and the southern one experienced a different reality. More in depth, the Japanese decided to invest greatly in the North, establishing different industrial facilities that led to an increase of economic output. On the other hand, the southern part was exploited more for agricultural matters. For these

reasons, when the Peninsula was divided into two different zones in 1945, the North managed by the Russian Federation and the South by the United States, the former area had higher levels of economic income as well as human capital. However, in 1950 the Korean War started as an attempt from the North to reunify the Peninsula. During the military attacks between the two factions, most of the capital stock was destroyed, while the human capital was lost. On the latter point, it is important to mention that there were major movements of Koreans, especially north to south. Since 1953, two different countries have been created in the Korean Peninsula, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in the North, and the Republic of Korea in the South. In the course of the last seventy years, the latter two adopted different approaches, strategies, and policies. For this reason, the two nations grew very differently from an economic, social, political, and international point of views.

For what concerns the Republic of Korea, it experienced a notable growth in the last decades. As mentioned, after the Korean War the country was in a state of poverty, having to deal with the consequences of the war. However, since the 1960s, the Seoul government adopted a series of reforms that allowed the country to grow. By doing so, in the 1990s South Korea had an income level higher than some European nations such as Portugal or Greece. In addition to this economic development, the ROK experienced some political changes as well in the last Century. In fact, between 1987 and 1997, the state experienced several political developments, going from an authoritarian regime to an elected representative in just 10 years. All these impressive and fast developments led the ROK to become one of the most important countries in the East Asian region but also from an international point of view. (Noland, 2007). More in depth, in just a few years the Republic of Korea gained international visibility, for example by becoming a G20 member and strengthening its ties with rich countries and organizations such as the European Union. As analyzed, South Korea was able to achieve this position through a process of economic development and modernization. In spite of this, it is important to note that the country has not yet reached the position of power of other actors in the region, the PRC and Japan in particular. However, its position as a global middle power remains crucial in the East Asian region but also in the global environment. (Hwang, 2012).

The Republic of Korea is one of the countries most affected by the North Korean nuclear issue and the security problems in the region. It is important to highlight that since the end of the Korean War in 1953, the two states of the Korean Peninsula did not develop good relations, and this led to the impossibility of the Seoul government to be able to greatly contribute to the nuclear matter. More in depth, as mentioned, the two Koreas had little contact in the last decades. In fact, until the 1990s the latter two never had one single exchange or any other type of interaction. On the other hand, the two sides developed sentiments of hostilities for one another. An example of this is the adoption from the Seoul government of the National Security Act. This policy aimed at forbidding the support and commendation of North Korea. The violation of this act could lead to imprisonment but also execution in case of grave violations. In the course of the first decades since 1953 there have been different

unsuccessful attempts to establish contacts between Pyongyang and Seoul. However, some results were only achieved after Kim Dae Jung became the South Korean president in 1997. The new president completely changed the administration's approach to the DPRK. In fact, while before the main idea was to destroy the latter that was seen as an enemy, the new leadership adopted the approach of pro-engagement and non-threatening policies. Kim embraced this stance taking into account the German experience of reunification. However, it is important to highlight that the situation between the ROK and the DPRK was far worse than the one between East and West Germany for a variety of reasons. In particular, the complete isolation experienced by North Koreans from the rest of the world prevented the citizens from developing any type of appreciation for South Korean culture and lifestyle. In addition to this, West Germany was far more advanced than the ROK in the 1990s, making the costs of a possible reunification bearable. The first public interaction between the North and the South happened in 2000, when Kim Dae Jung and Kim Jong Il met during a summit. This meeting contributed to changing the perception that North Koreans had on South Koreans. More in depth, the outcome of the summit was very positive as a joint declaration was issued. The two parties acknowledged some degree of common ground in the approach to unification. In addition to this, the declaration led to some effective outcomes. Among some achievements, in the first four years there had been different meetings on reunification, several ministerial talks, numerous economic dialogues, as well as an agreement that led Olympic athletes from the two nations to participate jointly during the opening ceremony in Australia. Following this period of time, President Kim Dae Jung's successor was even more radical in the inter-Korean dialogue. More in depth, he tried to pursue more radical policies, pressing for an even closer relation with Pyongyang. In fact, the former even decided to apply some pressure on the US and Japan, which are two of the ROK's closest allies.

In spite of security concerns provoked by the North Korean nuclear program and the crises that resulted from it, the Republic of Korea and the DPRK were able to increase their exchanges and degree of cooperation. However, in the course of the last two decades and especially since Kim Jong Un took power in North Korea, the increasing security threat made it difficult for the two Koreas to reach an agreement on reunification. In fact, it is possible to say that since the first nuclear test in 2006 until 2017, the DPRK-South Korean ties slowly worsened. As a consequence of the nuclear issue, the US and the ROK conducted additional and innovative joint military drills in the Korean Peninsula. In response to this, the Pyongyang government started to target its southern counterpart with missiles. At this point, every type of contact between the two Koreas had ceased. However, in 2017 the situation once again changed when Moon Jae In became president of South Korea. The former was able to reestablish channels of communications with the North through different meetings, exchanges, and a summit. (Ford, 2018). In spite of this, in recent years the situation once again worsened. As the DPRK strengthened its partnership with the PRC and the Russian Federation and the ROK with the US and Japan, tensions arose. In particular, between October and November 2022 the former launched a series

of missiles to the South and resumed a series of other military and non-military provocations. Observers state that the tensions in the Korean Peninsula are possibly becoming comparable to what had been seen in 2016, increasing insecurity. (Kim, 2024).

3.3.2 South Korea's approach to the North Korean nuclear issue and past policies

The North Korean nuclear program has always represented a big concern for the Seoul government. In fact, since the first nuclear crisis in the 1990s, the ROK together with other nations has greatly contributed to the efforts of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Through the course of the last three decades, South Korea has adopted different policies, as different administrations adopted several approaches to tackle the issue. First and foremost, it is important to underline that initially, the former did not believe that the DPRK would have been able to build a nuclear arsenal such the one it has today. More in depth, when American scholars first acknowledged the existence of a nuclear facility in the northern state of the Korean Peninsula, the ROK did not take this seriously. As a consequence, in 1991, it decided to remove all the US' nuclear weapons present in South Korean territory. The following year, the two Koreas signed a Joint Declaration on Denuclearization in which they committed to not build nuclear weapons. (Lee & Roehrig, 2023). In particular, this declaration for the first time acknowledged the idea of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. For the first time, the term denuclearization was used. (Kim, 2024). Since then, the South declared to be officially free from any nuclear device's presence in the nation. However, the subsequent violations of the agreement, followed by the impossibility of IAEA inspectors to visit the North Korean facilities and the DPRK's willingness to withdraw from the NPT made the Seoul government understand that this nuclear program was ongoing and that it could cause insecurity. The South Korean president at the time, Kim Young Sam, decided to adopt a diplomatic strategy, as he did not want to raise tensions in the Korean Peninsula. In addition to this, President Kim tried to persuade the American President Clinton to align with his approach. Furthermore, the Seoul administration had the willingness to take the lead on diplomatic negotiations, as they would have been the first country affected by a potential nuclearized DPRK. In spite of the efforts, due to the lack of communications the two Koreas had until that moment, the latter preferred to engage with the United States and leave the ROK aside during the talks. At this point, even though the Seoul government remained open to any kinds of communication with Pyongyang, the former firmly condemned the latter's conduct. As the tensions between the two were on the rise, South Korea did not participate in the negotiations of the Agreed Framework in 1994. It is thus possible to say that the former did not play a significant role in the resolution of the first North Korean nuclear crisis.

In the late 1990s South Korean President Kim Young Sam was succeeded by Kim Dae Jung who changed its approach to the DPRK through what is known as the Sunshine Policy. This latter was based on four different points: the reach of a peaceful relation with the DPRK but with zero tolerance on any military dissidence, create a peaceful tie with North Korea, separation of politics and economics in the inter-Korea exchanges, reciprocal implementation of this policy. In spite of the efforts from the Seoul government, the Pyongyang government did not completely trust the former and it did not contribute to the implementation of the Sunshine Policy. In addition to this, during this period of time the military first policy was adopted. Soon after, the second North Korean nuclear crisis took place. On this occasion, President Kim Dae Jung and his administration tried to play a dual role. More in depth, the main aim was to engage with the US and Japan to solve the dispute through peaceful tools, while at the same time trying to directly negotiate with the DPRK. Nevertheless, even though the ties between the two Koreas significantly improved during this period of time, the ROK was not able to play a decisive role and resolve the dispute. On the other hand, North Korea declared the reopening of its nuclear facilities. In 2003, South Korea took part in the Six Party Talks. At this point, the Seoul administration now led by Roh Moo Hyun understood that the primary reason why the DPRK decided to invest in the nuclear program was to guarantee the regime's survival. To tackle the issue, the former decided to follow the ideas of the precedent administration and change the methodology, by also cooperating with the government's opposition. Following these exchanges, the Peace and Prosperity policy was adopted with the aim of expanding inter-Korean economic and trade relations. The main objective of the former was to increase the trust of Pyongyang towards Seoul. The leaders of the two countries met at different times during this period of time, however, the DPRK's nuclear program was never discussed. In addition to this, soon after the adoption of this policy, North Korea conducted its first nuclear test. The subsequent imposition of sanctions further exacerbated the relations between the two Koreas as well as the insecurity in the Peninsula.

The Lee Myung Bak administration since 2008 tried to change the nation's approach to the nuclear problem. More in depth, the former was convinced that the previous strategy was a failure, so a switch was needed. In this sense, what was perceived as the best tool to use was to restore and strengthen the ties with the United States. In addition to this, the Vision 3000 through Denuclearization and Openness policy was adopted. This latter aimed at leading Pyongyang to cease the development of its nuclear program in exchange for economic aid. In addition to this, the new policy envisaged the need of discussing all the issues concerning the DPRK together and not separately how it was done until that moment. However, this new strategy was perceived by the Pyongyang government as a lack of interest to ameliorate the ties in the Korean Peninsula. In fact, the former declared that it was willing to renounce economic aid from Seoul. Furthermore, soon after the second nuclear test was conducted.

Between 2013 and 2017 the Park Geun Hye administration took power and decided to take distance from the previous policies adopted. As there was no mutual trust, the former acknowledged

that Pyongyang would never decide to give up its nuclear program in exchange for economic aid. For this reason, The Korean Peninsula Trust Process was adopted. This latter delineated that mutual trust was the key to reach the ROK's objectives on the nuclear matter, as without this confidence it is not possible to have an agreement. In addition to this, President Park asserted that the ROK's security could be assured only through dialogue and cooperation with the neighboring nation. (Lee & Roehrig, 2023). In spite of all the efforts, the North Korean leader Kim Jong Un was very focused on developing his predecessor's policies, among which were the nuclear and missile programs. As a reaction to the following nuclear and missile tests conducted by the DPRK, South Korea enhanced its military exercises and strengthened its alliance with the United States at a military and also political level. These years were considered to be the most difficult for the Korean Peninsula, as tensions were at the highest levels since the Korean War. (Kim, 2024). In fact, during this period of time, the Seoul government even began to discuss the possibility of adopting nuclear weapons. More in depth, for the first time in history politicians started to develop the idea that in order to secure a good response to the DPRK's nuclear threat, going nuclear would have been the right answer. However, within the country this led to several debates and showed that there is not a univocal strategy on the matter. Nevertheless, this possibility showed that insecurity in the Korean Peninsula during that period of time was at levels never reached before. (Ahn & Cho, 2014).

These tensions slowly began to lower when Moon Jae In came into power. During his mandate, the former adopted a step-by-step strategy on denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. This policy worked at the beginning, as the new President played as a facilitator in the American-DPRK dialogue. Among the achievements reached, the two Koreas had several high-level encounters, summit meetings, as well as cultural exchanges. In addition to this, the Seoul government even reassured the leader Kim Jong Un that it did not want to undermine the North Korean regime's survival. However, as once again the tensions between Washington and Pyongyang began to rise, Seoul found itself to be in a difficult situation. In fact, as the US was a close ally, South Korea had to take its side and implement the new UN sanctions. To sum up, as the US and the DPRK engaged in summit talks to negotiate the nuclear issue, the approach adopted by the Moon administration was successful. Nevertheless, it became evident after they ended the process that in reality it had limitations concerning the latter's involvement in the negotiations for the denuclearization of the Peninsula. (Lee & Roehrig, 2023). As of 2024, the situation has not changed much. On the other hand, tensions between the Republic of Korea and the DPRK further exacerbated in recent years. In fact, South Korean observers asserted that their neighboring nation never stopped developing its nuclear arsenal. In addition to this, South Korean public opinion increasingly adopted the idea that the ROK's nuclear armament could be positive. Nuclear proliferation and subsequent security concerns could rise in East Asia. (Kim, 2024).

3.4 Non-State actors

This paragraph seeks to explain the way international institutions from outside the East Asian region could play a fundamental role in concluding a peace agreement on the North Korean nuclear problem. First and foremost, the section analyzes the way the United Nations engaged in the issue in the past and which aspects could be ameliorated. More in depth, it explains that the international organization acted as a mediator during the first North Korean nuclear crisis. Afterwards, the paragraph continues by studying the primary role the UN Security Council played and the effects that the sanctions adopted had. It concludes by asserting that it is fundamental for the UN to change its strategy to have a positive outcome. In addition to this, the section makes an analysis of the role the European Union could have on the dispute. In fact, it explains that, even though many scholars and the actors involved in the issue are skeptical about this cooperation, others assert that the organization could be a good mediator. More specifically, it could act as a bridge between Pyongyang and Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo. Finally, the paragraph explains ASEAN's stance on the matter. As the latter has been able to build good ties with the DPRK, the section concludes that it is important to further investigate the outcome a potential strategy with the international institution would lead to.

3.4.1 The United Nations

The United Nations played a fundamental role in the DPRK's nuclear issue since the first nuclear crisis. Previous to the nuclear tests, the former had already been very active on the issue. For example, many scholars believe the UN played a fundamental role in convincing Pyongyang to sign the NPT. In addition to this, on several occasions it acted as the mediator between the DPRK and other nations. In fact, during the first North Korean nuclear crisis in the 1990s, the UN worked very closely with the United States to try to tackle the issue. (ORHERO & ANAUKWU, 2023). Moreover, the UN Security Council has been one of the main fora in which Member States discussed how to deal with the issue. In fact, as already mentioned in previous chapters, in the last decades the permanent members of the UNSC decided to impose sanctions and condemned North Korea's decision to develop a nuclear program. More in depth, the United Nations believe that the imposition of sanctions is the best way to deal with the issue and find a solution. (Smith, 2020). The decision was adopted by unanimity, showing how concerned members were about the ongoing crisis. (Beal, 2007). Since 2006, the sanctions adopted were progressively expanded on occasion of each nuclear test conducted by the Pyongyang government. However, the United Nations' approach towards the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula sparked some debates within the international community. More specifically, it has been

condemned how current sanctions do not differentiate between military and civilian targets. The former UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon in 2016 acknowledged that the sanctions imposed by the UNSC to the DPRK are the harsher one ever imposed on a country. (Smith, 2020). In addition to this debate, as previously mentioned, it is possible to say that the sanctions imposed were ineffective. This shows the United Nations' inability to stop Pyongyang's nuclear activities. There are different reasons that led to this situation. In particular, it is important to underline that the DPRK does not have to hold the UN accountable for its actions. As the effects of the sanctions did not undermine the development of the nuclear program, Pyongyang continued to carry out its activities. Furthermore, many observers have accused the UN to have relied on the United States for what concerns the North Korean nuclear problem. Because of Washington's strategic presence in the region, the former often heavily relied on the latter's actions towards the DPRK. (ORHERO & ANAUKWU, 2023). The latter's recent renewed partnership with the Russian Federation and the PRC complicated things. (Kim, 2024). More in depth, in April 2024 Russia vetoed a UNSC proposal to establish a panel of experts to monitor the implementation of sanctions against the DPRK. This situation shows that the UN needs to change its approach to the DPRK's nuclear issue, as increasing insecurity demonstrates how essential an effective strategy is. (Lopez, 2024, July 30).

3.4.2 The European Union

The European Union (EU) has often played a critical role in the resolution of international disputes. This is the case for example of the attempt to change Iran's nuclear ambitions. In spite of this, the former never actively engaged in the North Korean nuclear issue. Some scholars analyze that the EU could play a greater role. This is also because the institution seems to be perceived as being neutral by the DPRK. In spite of not having military presence in the region nor strong trade ties with the Pyongyang government, observers refer to the European institution as a civilian power that is able to contribute to the development of peace. (Bae & alt, 2020). However, others argue that as the EU often aligns with the decisions adopted by the United States this is not the case. More in depth, the Pyongyang government believes that EU countries do not recognize the magnitude of the provocation their allies, and the US in particular, make. It is fundamental to underline that the EU and North Korea had little dialogue over time. In fact, until 1998, the two had no diplomatic relations at all. The first exchange dates back to 1998 when a political dialogue was initiated. However, the first diplomatic encounter between the two actors happened only in 2001. Since 1998, the European Union and the DPRK gradually began to establish some ties. More in depth, the former provided the latter with humanitarian assistance as the latter was going through a famine. This aid was given in a direct way, by European NGOs, and through investment to other international organizations such as the WFP that distributed

food. The EU and the DPRK established a strong humanitarian dialogue. Also, the two went into talks about human rights in 2001, but it was suspended two years later after the EU in Geneva criticized North Korea's human rights record. (Ford, 2018). However, for what concerns the nuclear issue, the situation is different. This is mostly due for two reasons: firstly, the European Union does not have strong geopolitical interests in the region, and secondly, the actors actively engaging in the issue do not consider the former to be an essential element. In general, there is high skepticism on get the European Union involved on the matter. However, on the first point it is key to highlight that the latter's involvement in Asia has grown in recent decades. In fact, the institutions of the EU have often expressed their desire to build a strategic and constructive engagement with actors in the region. In addition to this, another aspect that is fundamental to underline is that since the first North Korean nuclear crisis in the 1990s, the EU actually showed some interest in the issue. In fact, the latter has attempted both directly and indirectly to incorporate the North Korean nuclear crisis into frameworks to address the problem. For example, the EU has invested in the KEDO to regulate the use of nuclear energy in the Korean Peninsula. In addition to this, it got involved in the KADO project. In spite of the efforts during this period of time, the former was subsequently excluded by the Six Party Talks as, as already mentioned, it was not seen as a key actor on the issue. Since then, it has not been involved in the matter. (Lee, 2016). Furthermore, the European Union supported the imposition of sanctions against the DPRK by the UNSC, and in 2006 and in 2018 the former also implemented its own sanctions against the Asian nation. This demonstrates that in recent years, the EU decided to adopt a more punitive strategy against the latter. However, this could entail that the former would be willing to engage with Pyongyang on a matter not related to humanitarian aid nor human rights. (Bae & alt, 2020). In fact, as mentioned, some scholars argue that greater contribution from the EU could serve as a basis for finding long-term solutions. First of all, it could play a unique role; it is important to highlight that the DPRK has several embassies in the EU countries and that maintains diplomatic relations with most of the nations. (Lee, 2016). In fact, generally speaking, in spite of the close relation of the institution with Washington, the former considers the European Union and its member states to be more trustworthy than other actors, especially the US and Japan with which it has not established diplomatic ties. (Bae & alt, 2020). This demonstrates that opening a dialogue on the matter could be possible. In addition to this, due to its alliances, the European Union could act as a bridge between the DPRK and the United States, South Korea, and Japan. For these reasons, a more active engagement could be further studied. (Lee, 2016).

3.4.3 ASEAN

The Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) is another international organization that could play a significant role in the North Korean nuclear issue. In spite of the lack of binding power compared to other international institutions such as the European Union, its contribution in the global environment has been fundamental. (Bae & alt, 2020). More in depth, since the foundation in 1967, the former has played a key role in maintaining security in the region. In addition to this, the organization has always taken into account that possibility that the issues of the Korean Peninsula could expand and involve several more actors in the area. For this reason, since the first nuclear crisis, ASEAN has been engaging in trying to find a long-term solution to the dispute. (Akhli, 2018). Compared to other international institutions, the former has bigger assets from its side on the DPRK's nuclear problem. In fact, ASEAN over the time has built a relatively strong relationship with the latter. (Bae & alt, 2020). In addition to this, contrary to the previous institution analyzed, the organization has developed a specific strategy to deal with the matter and maintain security and peace in the Korean Peninsula. More specifically, it depended on established norms such as the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ), and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). The latter has been described by scholars as an ASEAN-led mechanism. It consists in boosting regional security through strengthening relations with external actors. The main objective of ARF is to establish dialogues and consultations on security issues of common concern in the Asia Pacific Region and to build what is described as preventive diplomacy in order to avoid the outbreak of further disputes in the area. This has led to great expectation as it is the only multilateral security forum in which the DPRK engages on nuclearization. More in depth, the latter's participation in the ARF led to a positive outcome for the issue. In fact, the Pyongyang government asserted its determination to normalize relations with Japan, as well as establishing new diplomatic ties with Canada and New Zealand, all of this in exchange for the imposition of less economic sanctions. (Akhli, 2018). In addition to this, through this forum the DPRK has been able to strengthen its diplomatic connections with many ASEAN member states and ASEAN itself. This boosted the possibility for the latter to actively construct a dialogue on the nuclear issue and act as a mediator. (Bae & alt, 2020). Generally speaking, even though ASEAN is against the further development of the North Korean nuclear program, it does not believe that the imposition of sanctions is the best way to solve the conflict. More in depth, the regional group supports confidence-boost initiative and regularly invites Pyongyang to participate. To sum up, the former is trying to lead the DPRK to be more responsible on the matter using established mechanisms rather than directly denuclearize the country. This is an example of how ASEAN can practically contribute to finding a long-term and lasting answer. (Akhli, 2018). In addition to this, ASEAN could be a fundamental actor also in the long-term. In fact, it could play a role for what concerns the future development of the DPRK. This is mostly because many ASEAN member states such as Vietnam could be a future model for the North Korean economy. In this sense, it is key to remark that the summits between the DPRK

and Washington all took place in ASEAN nations. This shows the level of trust the former places on the institution. Lastly, as Pyongyang and the regional institution were able to develop a good connection over time, the former would be delighted to let the latter be more involved in inter-Korean matters. All these factors are fundamental to underline the greater role ASEAN could play in the DPRK's nuclear issue and how much it is important to investigate it more. (Bae & alt, 2020).

3.5 Chapter III conclusions

This chapter made an analysis of the position different actors adopted towards the North Korean nuclear issue. The United States has always had as a main objective to maintain hegemony in the East Asian region. Controlling the latter, as well as Europe, has been considered as the key for security of the Western nation. For this reason, the US has worked to strengthen alliances with several actors in the region as well as building new alliances by providing military devices, economic assets, as well as security. (Ross, 2013). In spite of the efforts, in the last decades factors such as the rise of China and the decline of one of Washington's closest allies, Japan, raised concerns within the US administration. (Ikenberry, 2016). Among other issues, the North Korean nuclear problem has exacerbated the latter's worries. More in depth, Washington believes that the PRC's support to its neighboring country has nullified the US' sanctions and efforts to tackle the issue. Generally speaking, the DPRK's nuclear program has been a major concern for the United States as it impacts the latter's interests in East Asia. (Christensen, 2006). In the course of history, the American administrations have adopted different strategies to face the challenge posed by Pyongyang. In addition to this, another aspect that incentivized Washington to act on the matter is the Western state's firm stance against nuclear proliferation. The different policies adopted by the American administrations since the Cold War were greatly influenced by both domestic and international factors that shaped the perception leaders had on the DPRK. In spite of the efforts, the United States was not yet able to reach a positive and definite outcome. The Trump and Clinton administrations were the only that managed to get close to peace. In fact, several positive steps were made since 2018, but significant results on denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula were not achieved. (Lee & Roehrig, 2023).

Japan is another country that has an essential role in the attempt to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. The former is a very close ally of the United States that in the XX Century was able to improve its economic welfare becoming one of the main economies in the world. However, in recent years, Japan has been going through a decline and this, together with other factors such as the rise of China and the North Korean nuclear and missile programs, has increased its worries. (Samuels, 2010). As the DPRK has been targeting Japanese territory with its missiles, Tokyo has been focusing on the matter. For historical reasons, the latter has not been able to establish diplomatic ties with the

Pyongyang government. All the efforts on this during the XX Century were nullified by the abduction of Japanese nationals by the DPRK. However, the first nuclear crisis made Japan decide to put a lot of energy into trying to at least normalize relations with North Korea. The end of the 1990s and early 2000s were characterized by small improvements on these ties, as the leaders of the two nations were able to engage in discussions and address the abduction issue. It is fundamental to highlight that the latter is central for the Tokyo government. In fact, as different administrations adopted different strategies towards the DPRK in the course of the last decades, the resolution of the abductees' cases remained central. More in depth, this greatly influenced Tokyo's policy-making. As Japan firmly decided to discuss the matter also in international fora such as the Six Party Talks, the former was sometimes isolated by the rest of the global community. However, since Kim Jong Un took power in the DPRK and decided to strengthen the state's nuclear and missile programs, the Tokyo government changed its strategy too. More in depth, the latter shifted from the pacifist policy adopted after the end of WWII, investing more in the military and its security. Recently, Japan has been discussing developing a nuclear program to be able to respond to the DPRK in case of direct attack. (Lee & Roehrig, 2023).

The DPRK and the Republic of Korea were once a unified country that, however, after the Korean War developed in two separate directions. In spite of the initial hardship, South Korea was able to improve its economy. In addition to this, in just ten years since 1987, the Seoul government transitioned from an authoritarian regime to a democratic system. (Noland, 2007). The ROK then became a global middle power that has a key role in both the regional and the international arenas. (Hwang, 2012). As the former is very different from the DPRK, after the Korean War the two countries had no contact at all. However, the situation changed after the first North Korean nuclear crisis in the 1990s that caused great concerns within South Korea. (Ford, 2018). Since then, different administrations developed numerous stances to find a solution to the nuclear problem. Initially, the Seoul government was convinced that things were going in the right direction as the two Koreas signed the Joint Declaration on Denuclearization in 1992 and both agreed to maintain the region nuclear free. In spite of this, continuous violation by Pyongyang made Seoul understand that it was not the case. All the policies adopted afterwards by the ROK were not effective. The step-by-step strategy implemented by President Moon Jae In was the only one that led to high-level engagements with leader Kim Jong Un. However, the subsequent rise of tensions between the DPRK and the US further exacerbated the ties the former had developed with South Korea. As of today, the inter-Korean relations have not improved and, on the other hand, the Republic of Korea is even discussing developing a nuclear arsenal to counterbalance Pyongyang. (Lee & Roehrig, 2023).

Non-State actors could play a fundamental role in concluding a peace agreement on the North Korean nuclear problem. The United Nations is the main international organization globally. In the course of history, since the first North Korean nuclear crisis in the 1990s, it engaged in the matter in

several ways. (ORHERO & ANAUKWU, 2023). Initially, it played as a mediator and contributed to the achievement of the Agreed Framework. Subsequently, since the first nuclear test in 2006, the UN Security Council has been the main international forum used to address the consequences of the DPRK's nuclear program. (Smith, 2020). However, in spite of the efforts, the international organization was not able to reach a positive outcome, as the sanctions imposed as of today are ineffective. For this reason, the UN should rethink its approach and find another way to tackle the matter. (Lopez, 2024, July 30). In addition to this, the European Union is another non-state actor that could have a greater role on the North Korean nuclear issue. There is skepticism about the former being involved, especially by the actors affected by the DPRK's nuclear program. (Ford, 2018). In fact, as an example of this it is worth mentioning that the EU was not invited to take part in the Six Party Talks. (Lee, 2016). However, some scholars made an analysis of the matter and concluded that the European Union could be a good mediator. (Bae & alt, 2020). More particularly, the latter could act as a bridge between the parties involved, connecting Pyongyang with other nations that are close EU's allies such as the US, Japan, and the ROK. (Lee, 2016). Finally, it is worth considering ASEAN's potentiality on the resolution of the DPRK's nuclear problem. More specifically, the ARF is the only international forum in which the Pyongyang government engages in. Through this, the latter was able to create good ties with the international institutions as well as with many of its members. (Akhli, 2018). As ASEAN is considered to be a trustworthy ally by North Korea, it would be possible to conclude a peace agreement with the mediation of the former. For this reason, observers stress the importance to further consider this aspect. (Bae & alt, 2020).

4. Implications

4.1 Impacts on the international community

This paragraph seeks to make an analysis of the implications the DPRK's nuclear program development has had and continues to have on both states and non-state actors. For instance, the section begins with a study of the negative impacts the nuclear issue has had on North Korea itself. More specifically, it takes into account the increased domestic needs and the impossibility to effectively respond due to the increased sanctions imposed. Moreover, the sub-paragraph considers the diminishing of aid received by the PRC as well as the rise of cooperation with the Russian Federation as two important factors. In addition to this, the work explains the implications the DPRK nuclear program has on China. For instance, it takes into account its rising position as a global leader and the

international community's expectations on Beijing due to this. The sub-paragraph explains that the latter is gradually losing influence on Pyongyang. In addition to this, the nuclear problem is undermining the PRC's position at the international level as the former's insecurity dilemma is concerning foreign actors. Furthermore, the section continues by making an analysis of the increased Russian-North Korean ties subsequently the outbreak of the Ukraine war. It explains that the two nations have been increasing their military cooperation in the last two years, and other actors are worried about the possibility Moscow could imply nuclear weapons use with the help of the DPRK. Moreover, the paragraph explains the implications from the North Korean nuclear issue on the US' position in the East Asian region. More in depth, the section explains that the increased insecurity given by North Korea is leading the ROK and Japan to consider developing a nuclear program themselves, leaving the US' nuclear umbrella. Furthermore, it studies how the rise of China and its increased cooperation with Washington's closest allies in the area is also a great worry. For what concerns South Korea, the paragraph asserts that this is the country most affected by the North Korean nuclear issue. As the latter is gradually changing its domestic policies as well as its foreign alliances, insecurity in the Korean Peninsula is on the rise. Lastly, the paragraph studies the implications non-state actors have to face. In particular, the last section makes an analysis of the consequences international institutions such as the IAEA as well as ASEAN have to face. Also, the international humanitarian system has been undermined by the development of the North Korean nuclear program as well.

4.1.1 Implications for the DPRK

As studied in previous chapters, the development of a nuclear program has been perceived by the North Korean leaders as a key solution to numerous issues. More in depth, the regime asserts that possessing nuclear weapons is a great advantage as it enhances the capabilities to respond to foreign attacks. In addition to this, it is extremely important to counterbalance the economic and political superiority at the international level of the Republic of Korea. (Lee & Roehrig, 2023). Moreover, the North Korean nuclear program guarantees the regime's survival, and according to observers this remains the government's top priority. (Ford, 2018). However, it is important to note that the DPRK's nuclear program had and continues to have different implications for the Asian state. In fact, not always North Korean intentions met with the concrete outcome, especially for what concerns its willingness to develop an advantage over other actors, the US and the ROK in particular. More in depth, the Pyongyang government's continuous lies and decision not to disclose too much information led to a loss of credibility from the international community. For instance, while at the beginning of the program's implementation during the first nuclear crisis other nations were relying on the DPRK's reassurances, this changed over time. More particularly, in recent years countries began to consider

each development made by North Korea on its nuclear program as a serious threat that could seriously harm the international community. This factor has two main implications. More specifically, these concern the DPRK's position at a global level and the discussion on the ability of nuclear weapons to be able to coerce other actors. On this matter, it is important to underline the importance that reputation plays in the global environment. In fact, this latter is essential for a state or international institution to be able to secure its own interests. This is mainly done through coercion. Many scholars argue that nuclear weapons are a key to coerce states and other international players to act as the nuclear nation wants to. For instance, the idea is that through such weapons it is possible to extract political influence. As analyzed previously, this was one of the reasons why the Pyongyang government had decided to invest in the development of a nuclear program. However, despite the efforts, the loss of credibility experienced at the international level overturned the desired effects. More in depth, the DPRK was able to prove that possessing nuclear weapons sometimes is not enough to provoke credible threats. The DPRK's behavior has thus raised numerous questions on the behavior of small nuclear powers and the outcome at the regional and international levels.

It is fundamental to study the limits of the North Korean nuclear program that brought several disadvantages to the DPRK. With its actions since the first nuclear test in 2006, the Pyongyang government has shown that it does not take into account the concerns raised by the global community. The incessant threats and missile and nuclear developments contributed to create a logic of stability-instability. This latter paradox results in a low probability that a conflict between two nuclear powers could effectively develop into a nuclear war. For what concerns the DPRK, in recent years the former has conducted several attacks against South Korea. Many scholars observe that the main aim of these was to undermine Washington's commitment to increase deterrence. In addition to this, the Pyongyang government has tried to enhance the credibility of the nuclear threats. More in depth, the former has done so by reiterating its commitment to further develop its nuclear program, as well as by conducting missile and nuclear testing that were against international agreements. In response to these, the US and the ROK have concluded what is known as the Tailored Deterrence Strategy that, although details are not public, implied the enhancement of joint exercises. As a consequence, the DPRK decided to avoid direct attack on South Korean territory. It is then possible to say that continuous provocations by Pyongyang resulted in the opposite desired effect. Moreover, as previously studied, South Korean politicians and civil society have begun discussing the possibility of developing a nuclear program to counterbalance the DPRK's threat. This is a consequence of Seoul's diminishing reliance on the American nuclear umbrella. However, this option goes against North Korea's willingness as it would erase its advantage over South Korea. (Kim & Cohen, 2017).

It is important to study the implications that the nuclear program has on the Sino-North Korean relations. More in depth, as analyzed in previous chapters, the PRC has been the DPRK's most important ally since the regime's establishment after the Korean War. In fact, the former has been the

latter's main source of aid and supplier, especially when North Korea was going through crises such as the famine that broke out in the country in 1994. The two neighboring states have been linking through common history and political backgrounds. As already seen, the first North Korean leader Kim Il Sung was shaped by the Chinese civil war and the implementation of the communist ideology carried out by the Beijing government. These two factors were fundamental to make the Pyongyang government trust its neighboring nation. Furthermore, the fact that the two are both socialist states greatly impacted the PRC's decision to give the DPRK a preferential treatment. More in depth, early on in the 1990s, the former decided to use the latter as an advantageous instrument for its foreign policy towards the Korean Peninsula as well as to counterbalance the American-South Korean cooperation that has been undermining Chinese interests. In spite of this, the Pyongyang government's decision to carry out its nuclear and missile programs and threatening other actors has had implications for the former. As analyzed, the Sino-North Korean ties have been subject to great instability, especially since Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un took power in the PRC and the DPRK respectively. (Lee & Cho, 2018). It is key to note that this situation of insecurity has been undermining the North Korean domestic situation. As the country is in great need of economic aid, also consequently to the restrictions imposed by the UNSC, losing its main ally is not optimal for Pyongyang. More in depth, within Chinese society debates on the possibility of diminishing assistance to the DPRK have been on the rise since the third nuclear test carried out by the North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. Even though observers argue that it is unlikely the PRC will decide to completely cut aid to Pyongyang, a decrease of the current given support would seriously harm the North Korean domestic situation. (Kim, 2014). In particular, this was proved by the fact that after the COVID-19 pandemic with the worsening of the Sino-American relations and the outbreak of the Ukraine war the PRC has once again gotten close to Pyongyang. For example, in 2022 97% of the DPRK's traded products came from China. (The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2023). In spite of this, past experiences proved the precariousness of the Sino-North Korean linkage, demonstrating the way the development of the nuclear program has undermined this alliance, severely impacting the North Korean domestic situation (Kim, 2014).

A positive implication for the DPRK relates to the Russian-North Korean relations. In fact, it is worth analyzing the implications deriving from the Russian Federation's stance towards the DPRK's nuclear program. As analyzed in previous chapters, the former has been greatly involved in the North Korean nuclear issue since Vladimir Putin took power in 2000. For instance, the Moscow government was able to leverage its experiences to grow close ties with Pyongyang, even though it was never able to reach the PRC's level of engagement with the latter. Moreover, the outbreak of the Ukrainian war in 2022 further boosted these ties on a military level. For instance, as Russia was isolated from the rest of the international community and subjected to several economic sanctions, it needed more military tools. As evidence showed that Russia used weapons and missiles fabricated in the DPRK, this proved how the latter was able to come to the aid of the former. Showcasing its military developments, North

Korea is starting to be considered as one military advanced country at the international level. Even though it is unsure whether there will be an exchange on nuclear materials between the DPRK and the Russian Federation, recent talks between the leaders of the two states have proven the intention of further cooperating on the military level. This will boost the DPRK's priorities at the global level. (The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2023).

4.1.2 Implications for China

The hegemonic transition in East Asia from the United States to the PRC implies different consequences for Beijing in different areas. Among these, the North Korean nuclear issue is central. (Ross, 2023). As analyzed in previous chapters, China has played a central role in the matter since the first North Korean nuclear crisis in the 1990s. The former has often been considered by the international community as a key player due to its apparent close alliance with Pyongyang. However, in recent years, especially since Kim Jong Un and Xi Jinping took power in the DPRK and in the PRC respectively, things have changed. More in depth, Beijing's decision to condemn its neighboring state's actions have had an impact on the Sino-North Korean ties. (Neves, 2020). In addition to this, the outbreak of the Ukraine War and the consequent change of dynamics between Pyongyang and Moscow contributed as well. In fact, this has only exacerbated a situation that began after the end of the Cold War, when the newly formed Russian Federation chose to support the DPRK in a more active way. (Kim, 2024). More in depth, it is important to highlight that Russia decided to enhance economic exchanges with the latter, but also military ones. More specifically, the former has contributed to providing military tools to build ballistic missiles with far-reach, as well as providing other technologies key to developing the North Korean military capabilities. Some observers note that, even though it was probably unintentional, Moscow was able to slowly take advantage of the PRC's gradual loss of influence in the DPRK to take over and build a strong bilateral military alliance. In spite of this dynamic that contributed to making Pyongyang distant from Beijing, the latter and Moscow kept having strong cooperation in relation to the DPRK's nuclear issue. For example, in September 2018 the two teamed up to lift sanctions imposed to North Korea in order to offset the US' strategy.

The North Korean nuclear issue has also had different implications for the PRC at the global level. First and foremost, it is possible to say that the latter has been through a lot of pressure from the international community to stop the development of the DPRK's nuclear and missile programs. More in depth, several nations and international organizations, the United States and the United Nations in particular, pushed Beijing to apply the sanctions imposed, as well as playing a more assertive position at the international level. In particular, the US increased demands on Beijing to enhance its stances on denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and on nuclearization prevention. This set up the conditions

for the PRC to be held accountable for its inability to manage the development of the DPRK's nuclear program and for damaging its international authority. In fact, the consequent PRC's dilemma and indecision on the strategy to adopt made the latter be alienated from the rest of the global community. In fact, China was often accused of violation of international obligations as it would not comply with the decisions taken in international fora such as the UNSC. This undermined the Chinese position of power in these fora. (Neves, 2020).

In addition to the above, it is worth studying the implication from the North Korean nuclear program on the PRC due to the dual power transition taking place in East Asia. In fact, this power transition is leading to a greater role that China needs to play in the Korean Peninsula at a diplomatic level. This is also enhanced by the closer ties that the former has started to establish with the Republic of Korea in recent decades. In addition to this, it is important to highlight that South Korea's decision to engage with Beijing led the latter to fear less the possibility of a greater American-South Korean alliance on the DPRK nuclear issue. Another factor that contributed to the latter thought is Beijing's belief that the PRC was able to reach the US from a military point of view. To sum up, China is aware of its position as a regional leader and that it has been able to counter the US' hegemony in East Asia. However, this does not also mean that the former is aware of its obligation to promote non-proliferation and contribute to the regional and international order. In fact, several Chinese scholars argue that these do not need to be the nation's priorities. More in depth, the Beijing government is focusing on stopping the US' advancement, strengthening ties with the latter's closest allies in East Asia and increasing China's position as a global leader. For this reason, pursuing denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula does not appear to be at the top of the Chinese agenda. However, remaining involved in the Peninsula is a priority for the PRC. In fact, the latter can play a major role in easing inter-Korean diplomatic ties, as well as keeping proposals for the Korean Peninsula in regional negotiations. Moreover, many believe that the PRC's growing leadership combined with the ROK's growing independence from the United States in the military field would allow the two to cooperate and act as mediators between the Pyongyang government and Washington. In particular, they could connect the latter two on the disagreements concerning nuclear diplomacy. This would be possible especially because Seoul prefers four party talks rather than three as the US; South Korea is convinced that the role of China is essential on this topic. Furthermore, there are possibilities the two could present joint ideas on the resolution of the issue. (Ross, 2023). In addition to the above, the possible changes of alliances in the region are threatening the PRC's interests. More in depth, Japan and South Korea's decisions to reinforce their military assets and the possibility they could decide to strengthen ties with Taiwan is a major worry for Beijing. These assumptions started to develop after the former two governments' talks to become nuclear powers in recent years to face the DPRK nuclear threat. (Moore, 2008)

In spite of this, it is important to underscore that the recent worsening of Sino-American relations is a factor that could seriously undermine the above perspective. In fact, this has had severe

implications on the resolution of the DPRK's nuclear problem. More in depth, as previous chapters analyzed, for a certain period of time the PRC was supportive of the strategy outlined by Washington, and it also supported the sanctions that were imposed by the latter and the UNSC. However, the increased regional power together with the incomprehension with the United States has led Beijing to change its stance. More in depth, the latter decided to prioritize direct engagement with the DPRK and work on the neighboring country's economy, reforming it based on the Chinese model. (Ross, 2023). In fact, even though it is not in the PRC's interests to have a nuclearized Korean Peninsula, current disputes with foreign actors made observers believe that China would currently not be willing to cooperate on the issue. For instance, there are some scholars that analyzed that in case of a conflict between the DPRK and foreign entities, the PRC would not dismantle North Korean nuclear weapons. On the other hand, the Beijing government would probably take possession of the latter. (Neves, 2020). However, as analyzed previously, as this situation is negatively affecting Chinese interests both at a regional and international level, the PRC would be willing to find a solution that does not undermine the country's interests. More in depth, China is aware that cooperation is key to raise security in the Peninsula and avoid further disputes. However, the former has different priorities on the DPRK's nuclear matter than other key actors such as the US, Japan, and the ROK. For example, the PRC is more interested in reinforcing regional stability rather than promoting the development of the Korean Peninsula. In addition to this, Beijing is seeking to maintain its dominance on the North Korean regime, promoting nuclearization in a systematic way could seriously undermine the Sino-North Korean ties. (Bandow, 2016). However, as mentioned, Japan and the ROK's decision to possibly adopt a nuclear program is a concern for the PRC. In particular, two of Washington's main allies arming themselves with nuclear weapons would decrease Chinese security and lower its power in the region. For this reason, China would be more willing to cooperate to find a solution. It is essential for governments to take into account all the above mentioned aspects and develop a joint strategy that considers each party's view and most important considerations. (Kim & Cohen, 2017).

4.1.3 Increased Russian-North Korea cooperation

As analyzed in previous chapters, the Russian Federation has been able to develop good relations with the DPRK especially since Vladimir Putin took power in 2000. In fact, the former has been very active in the nation, providing humanitarian aid and economic investments. For what concerns the nuclear issue, it has been proven that it is not in Moscow's interests to allow the DPRK to continue developing its nuclear and missile capabilities. For instance, in 2017 Russia along with the PRC did not vote against the UNSC's imposition of sanctions to North Korea. However, the relations between the two nations never stopped. On the other hand, the two have sought to enhance their ties to

face their common challenges together. In this sense, it is important to underline how the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022 has contributed to strengthening the North Korean-Russian ties in the last couple of years. The North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and Russian president Putin met numerous times to talk about different matters, among which there was military cooperation between the two. (Fraiola, 2023, November).

It is important to underline the key highlights of a summit held between Pyongyang and Moscow in September 2023. This summit took place four times since 2019. However, there have been some evolutions over time. More in depth, during the first meeting right after leader Kim's encounters with American president Trump and before the Ukrainian war, President Putin only remarked on Russia's stance towards the necessity of easing sanctions imposed towards the DPRK. For instance, Putin did not unveil any proposition of cooperation between the two nations. Nevertheless, the increased challenges the two states have to face nowadays have changed the trajectory of these talks. More in depth, it is fundamental to underline how military cooperation is now at the basis of the latter. What is of most concern for the international community is Russia's announcement that the country is ready to cooperate with the DPRK in sensitive areas that cannot be disclosed to the public. On top of this, there are some factors that are influencing North Korean-Russian relations. Among these, it is worth mentioning the rivalry between the US and the PRC, the outcome of the Ukraine war but most and foremost the sustainability of the North Korean regime. At the same time, what is strengthening these ties is Russia's decision to break relations with the West. According to observers, this contributed to make Pyongyang decide to focus on this cooperation with Moscow. This is especially true for what concerns the latter's stance towards the US and its hegemony in the region that, as analyzed, is one of Pyongyang's main focuses.

To better understand the importance the development of North Korean-Russian relations has on the global community, it is key to study the factors that led to this situation. As observers noted that some weapons used by the Russian army in Ukraine were fabricated in the DPRK, the international community started to question this military alliance. Many underscored how the Russian Federation has been isolated by the West and other states in the wake of the invasion in Ukraine in February 2022, lacking external support. For this reason, the former nation needs to rely on other sources to improve its military capabilities. More in depth, scholars highlighted Moscow's lack of weapons and troops that are currently necessary to reach the country's goals. Observers studied how Russia decided to rely more on the DPRK as it was one of the few states willing to cooperate but also because the latter proved to have military capabilities in the last years through the development of its missile and nuclear programs. At the same time, Russia finds in North Korea a trustworthy partner that is fundamental in case of need in the front line. On the other hand, the DPRK realized that it can obtain different advantages from this alliance as well. For instance, the former can secure energy, food supplies, as well as military supplies from Moscow to support the regime and the attacks posed to foreign actors. In

addition to this, Russia's position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council is key for Pyongyang. On this latter point, it is essential to underline how military cooperation between the latter and Moscow would entail a violation of the UNSC sanctions imposed towards the DPRK. For this reason, the Russian Federation has openly discussed the need to make other countries such as the PRC and Iran join this cooperation. (Hyun, 2023).

For what concerns the North Korean nuclear issue more in depth, recently different situations made scholars believe that Russia's stance might have changed. This decision might have followed Moscow's increased need of military support, especially for what concerns missiles. In fact, at the beginning of 2022 the former expressed its support to the DPRK's decision to intensify missiles launches. On the same occasion, the Moscow government stressed its negative view on restarting talks on denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. In addition to this, the former blamed Washington for continuing to impose unilateral sanctions without taking into account North Korea's compliance with nuclear and missile tests in recent years. This shows that the new North Korean-Russian ties have a great impact on the denuclearization discourse. Scholars highlight how this apparent support from Russia's side will most likely influence the DPRK in carrying out its nuclear activities. More in depth, the latter seems determined to reinforce its nuclear program. From an international point of view, many governments stressed their concern that this would entail increased nuclear proliferation in the area. Furthermore, there is an increased fear that the Russian Federation will soon start to rely on the DPRK for exchanges of nuclear materials and tools. For instance, recent developments between Moscow and Pyongyang showed that the prospects of the use of nuclear weapons in the context of the Ukraine War does not seem so far from reality. An example confirming this theory can be found in the early stages of the Ukraine war when President Putin had stressed the importance of possessing what he called tactical nuclear weapons to counterbalance NATO. In addition to this, this situation of insecurity could lead non-nuclear countries to consider the decision of developing a nuclear program themselves. As mentioned previously, nations such as Japan and the Republic of Korea are indeed considering this to enhance their national security and counterbalance the North Korean nuclear threat. According to observers, as of today, the Russian Federation's main concern relies on the collapse of the DPRK regime and not the nuclear issue. In fact, as analyzed, the prospect of losing a core military ally in the context of the Ukraine war is far more an issue for Moscow than a nuclearized North Korea. This poses great problems for the international community and the prospect of a long-term resolution to this nuclear dilemma. However, it is essential to note that as of today Russia's position on denuclearization has not officially changed. As one of the first signatories of the NPT the former has always advocated for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula through peaceful means. In spite of this, the recent unfolding of Russia-North Korea relations is leaving space for new perspectives that are far from the long-term denuclearization objective that the international community had been working on. (Ha & Shin, 2022).

4.1.4 Role of the US in the region

The nuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and the inability of foreign actors to tackle the situation have led to multiple consequences for the United States, which, as already analyzed, has always been very present in East Asia. First and foremost, it is key to analyze the nuclear implications that the North Korean program led to. In particular, in recent years two of Washington's closest allies in the region, namely the Republic of Korea and Japan, have adopted a series of policies that have destabilized the US' ones. In fact, Tokyo and Seoul have adopted a strategy of rearmament. More in depth, the DPRK has been targeting the former two with its nuclear and missile programs, increasing insecurity in the region. Fearing for their safety and reaction capabilities, South Korea and Japan have tried to acquire additional response capacities by increasing their military tools. In spite of the two states having the same fears, it is fundamental to note that the threat posed by North Korea towards the two and the consequent reaction is different.

For what concerns the Republic of Korea, keeping peace in the Korean Peninsula has been the government's top priority since democratization in the late 1980s. In spite of this, there are high divergences on how to tackle the nuclear issue. More in depth, many scholars believe that strengthening cooperation with the United States would be the best option. However, it is fundamental to note that in recent years, the Seoul administration has been trying to leverage South Korea's ties with neighboring states, and the PRC among them, to attempt to reduce the restrictions imposed by the western country. More specifically, it is important to underline that Seoul adopted a view that believes that going against China is not the best option to secure peace in the Peninsula. As a matter of fact, it is essential to remember that the ROK is much closer to the DPRK and to the threat posed than any other nation. At the same time, the former has less strategic capacity. More specifically, aside from the territory's closeness to North Korea, South Korea's main military bases are closest to Chinese territory than Japanese bases. This means that Seoul is more vulnerable than Japan to Chinese military might. For this reason, the former would be extremely vulnerable to a potential Chinese attack and even with the support of Washington, the situation would be tough. To tackle this dilemma, the ROK has adopted a strategy that brings the country to increasingly align itself with the PRC. Furthermore, another factor that contributed to this situation is the United States' policy shift. As a matter of fact, since 2019 the US administration has shifted its pressure in the Peninsula from Pyongyang to Seoul. More in depth, the former has been attempting to pressure the latter to increase its funding to American troops in South Korea. In addition to this, some observers underscored how the former US president Trump was considering reducing the number of military contingencies present in the ROK. As the latter started to develop a strategy consisting in self-reliance, more autonomous defense was adopted. This led to

several consequences for the United States, which is gradually losing its print in East Asia. More in depth, the balance of power in the region is gradually shifting, with Beijing gaining more centrality. The US administration in recent years had to take into account the fact that its closest allies have been questioning their global engagement. More in depth, they have been wondering about the United States' commitment and capability to come in aid of its allies in the event of a conflict in East Asia.

However, contrary to the Republic of Korea, Japan has been cooperating with Washington to try to stop the rise of the PRC. More in depth, in the last decade the Tokyo government has adopted a series of policies aiming at strengthening its presence in the region and reversing its decline. Among other things, it is important to note that Japan has decided to reinforce its military capabilities to face the DPRK and in the last years it has given military assistance to sixteen nations in different areas. Nevertheless, some of the strategies incorporated by the Tokyo administration pose a threat to the United States. First and foremost, Japan adopted the decision to enhance its national defense, replacing all the US' current positions. Some observers note that this operation would entail a loss of 15 billion US dollars per year. Moreover, the Japanese government is discussing modifying its regional security partnership and strategy. Most importantly, as already mentioned, what contributed to making Japan question its previous security strategy is the lack of reliance on current US' capabilities. More in depth, some Japanese observers are questioning the credibility of US' extended deterrence. This has brought the Tokyo government to discuss the possibility of leaving the NPT and becoming a nuclear nation. This latter point would entail a big crack in Washington's security umbrella system as well as a big loss in the Western state's hegemony in East Asia.

Generally speaking, the development of the DPRK's nuclear and missile programs as well as the rise of the PRC and consequent changes in regional dynamics is making the ROK and Japan questioning the alliance. In addition to the factor above analyzed, domestic events could exacerbate the already precarious situation. More specifically, in recent years the American administration adopted policies aiming at drastically reducing the defense budget. In addition to this, the election of a populist President which has "America first" as the primary strategy could greatly contribute to making the Asian allies question their ties with Washington and the latter's willingness to cooperate on maintaining security and peace in East Asia. Furthermore, it is essential to highlight that even if the alliance remains unchanged, but Seoul and Tokyo decide to adopt a definitive strategy and become nuclear powers to tackle the North Korean nuclear program, this could have great consequences for the western state. More specifically, the Republic of Korea is currently relying on the US for nuclear energy, which is extremely essential to the nation's electricity. However, in the case the Seoul government decides to acquire nuclear power itself, this could undermine Washington's interests. Similarly, as the Japanese government is discussing withdrawing from the NPT and becoming a nuclear power, this would entail a diminishing of relations with the US. In fact, Japan is less reliant on other actors on nuclear power but becoming a nuclear power would lead to an imposition of sanctions and condemnation from foreign

actors. At this point, the US would be forced to lessen its ties with Tokyo and lose one of the key players in the DPRK nuclear matter. (Heginbotham, & Samuels, 2021).

In addition to this, it is worth analyzing the implications that the collapse of the North Korean regime and the role of the PRC on the matter would have on the regional dynamics. More in depth, in this case scenario, the United States would have different priorities for what concerns the DPRK's nuclear weapons. For instance, Washington's main priority would be avoiding the further proliferation of nuclear devices, as well as avoiding the use of these latter against the American territory and other nations such as Japan and South Korea. However, many American scholars argue that China would intervene and possibly undermine the US' attempts to secure its security and interests. As a matter of fact, observers noted that the PRC would intervene to protect the North Korean regime, and this would entail permitting the Pyongyang government to secure nuclear weapons. This would go against Washington's attempt to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula. (Neves, 2020).

To face the upcoming insecurity, the United States should consider different options. First and foremost, it would be important for the American government to consider multilateral agreements on defense. Cooperating more with Quad, an alliance concerning the US, Japan, Australia and India, could greatly contribute to maintaining security in the area concerned. In addition to this, Washington should work to maintain and also enhance its alliances in the region. It is important to consider that, due to the current insecure situation in East Asia, diplomatic dialogue is not sufficient. In fact, the US should strengthen its military aid to the actors concerned in order to maintain strong ties and a hegemonic presence in the region. American policy-makers should consider this aspect to avoid limiting the tools needed for operations in Asia. In addition to this, the former should reconsider burden-sharing. Continuous requests for funding on American military presence in the ROK and Japan has contributed to increasing this latter distrust of the alliance with Washington. For this reason, increasing defense spending is essential to raise Asian actors' confidence in the western nation. Moreover, it is essential for all the parties concerned to re-debate each one's role in the region and the expectations they have on each member. This is particularly important as the United States needs to address South Korea and Japan's nuclear insecurity consequently to the North Korean nuclear threat. More in depth, the former should consider some options to prevent allies believing that developing a national nuclear program is the best option. Among the options that could be further investigated, the United States could consider returning nuclear weapons to South Korea that have been removed in the 1990s before the first North Korean nuclear crisis. Another solution would be creating an international institution similar to NATO to enhance the collaboration of different states in the region and counterbalance the security threat posed by the DPRK. In addition to this, knowledge sharing is essential. For this reason, the US should enhance its level of knowledge sharing with Seoul and Tokyo and make it more strategic. (Heginbotham, & Samuels, 2021). For what concerns the PRC, as said, this is a key player to find a long-term solution. The US should negotiate with Beijing to find a joint strategy and avoid imposing

its own ideas. Discussing with Beijing is fundamental to convince Pyongyang that denuclearization is essential. To reach a positive outcome, Washington should try to point out the DPRK's current decisions that undermine Chinese interests rather than threatening Beijing. Finding the best solution is key at this moment in time. As the DPRK's nuclear issue is on the rise, cooperation to solve the problem is fundamental. (Bandow, 2016).

4.1.5 Situation in the Korean Peninsula

As the Republic of Korea is the DPRK's neighbor in the Korean Peninsula and one of the countries mostly affected by its nuclear program, other actors in the region have been focusing on developing ties with the former. More in depth, as South Korea continues to play a vital role in the North Korean nuclear issue, nations such as the PRC, the US, and the Russian Federation have been developing different strategies towards the Korean Peninsula. This aspect created different implications for the Seoul government over time, and it is worth studying them. For what concerns China, in the last few years the latter has been changing its stance towards the international community. In fact, the Beijing government decided to take into account the rising position acquired by the country at the regional and international level and adopt a few initiatives to become closer to other nations and institutions. The South-South cooperation initiative is just one example of these. For what concerns the East Asian region, the PRC is really engaged in the Korean Peninsula, mainly as it wants to avoid losing its influence on the DPRK. Observers note how China feels threatened by the US' presence in the area and the strengthening of the American-South Korean ties subsequent to the development of the North Korean nuclear and missile programs. It is fundamental to note the policies adopted by the Beijing government on the Peninsula following the geopolitical consequences derived from the DPRK's decision to invest in a nuclear program have greatly impacted Seoul. More in depth, as analyzed in previous chapters, the latter grew closer relations with the PRC in recent decades due to the loss of trust on its main ally the US. However, more recently, the Sino-South Korean ties were subjected to deterioration. This was mainly due to Beijing's attempt to put a hold on Washington's presence in the Peninsula. As a matter of fact, the main trigger of this situation was the ROK and the US' joint decision to develop the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) in South Korean territory in 2016. This was perceived by the Beijing government as a threat to the security in the Peninsula. It is key to underline that following this event the former has imposed some sanctions that have undermined the economy of the ROK. Statistics report that the latter has lost 0.5% of GDP due to Chinese policies. In addition to this, it is important to note that observers agree that the PRC will not be willing to enhance its ties with South Korea as long as this latter continues to strengthen its relations with Washington.

Another country whose actions have had implications for the Republic of Korea is the Russian Federation. More in depth, as for other neighboring states in the East Asian region, maintaining security in the Korean Peninsula is essential. For Russia this is extremely true most importantly as the inter-Korean situation greatly affects the security within its eastern territories bordering with the DPRK. As a consequence of Moscow's focus on the integrity of its territories it has been opposing the development of the North Korean nuclear program. As previously analyzed Russia has been trying to cooperate with other actors to find a solution to the latter problem. In addition to this, it is important to note that the former has been opposed to the development of South Korea's military programs as well. An example of this is that the Russian Federation firmly opposed to the establishment of the THAAD in the ROK in 2016. This was justified by the Moscow government as it would have posed a threat to the security of the region. Moreover, it is important to highlight how inter-Korean tensions raised by the nuclear issue have prevented South Korea from establishing deep economic relations with Russia. More in depth, this latter is a country rich in energy. The two states have tried in the past to cooperate on this matter. However, the impossibility for the ROK to travel within the North Korean territory has prevented this outcome. In addition to the above, the Russian Federation had tried to engage in the Korean Peninsula through other initiatives in the past. An example that is worth mentioning is the Trans-Korean Railroad (TKR). In spite of the efforts, due to the increased tensions in the area provoked by the nuclear problem, Russian intentions have been undermined. However, it is key to underline that the Russian Federation has not been considered by the Republic of Korea as a strategic player for the DPRK's nuclear issue. For this reason, unlike the PRC, Seoul has not put emphasis in trying to increase engagement with the former. At the same time, the Russian Federation has been focusing more on the security threat perceived by NATO countries in the western part of the state. As a consequence, the Moscow government has put more emphasis in carrying out policies aiming to solve the situation in that area more than in the eastern region. (Lee & Cho, 2018). Nevertheless, the recent outbreak of the war in Ukraine and the subsequent strengthening of ties between Moscow and Pyongyang may change the ROK's perspective on the role Moscow can play on the Korean Peninsula in the future. (Kim, 2024).

For what concerns the implications towards South Korean domestic policies, the DPRK's nuclear program is pushing the Republic of Korea to consider the idea of becoming a nuclear state. As already analyzed in the previous chapter, South Korea had already thought about going nuclear during the Cold War, but it was convinced by the United States to change its mind. Consensus was reached as the US agreed to deploy some nuclear weapons in South Korean territory. However, Seoul adopted the decision to remove them before the first North Korean nuclear crisis. As a consequence, during the last thirty years the former dealt with the DPRK's continuous threats without having nuclear weapons. In spite of this, in more recent times with the further development of the neighboring country's nuclear program things have changed. More in depth, within South Korea talks have started about the idea of

developing a nuclear program to counterbalance the worries caused by the DPRK. (Moore, 2008). It is fundamental to underline that the South Korean civil society played and continues to play a major role in influencing policy-making on this matter. More in depth, as mentioned in recent years criticism towards the US' defense system arose. For instance, South Koreans developed a mistrust towards Washington and its nuclear security guarantees. Moreover, many began to consider that possessing nuclear weapons would be the only effective way to counterbalance the threat posed by the DPRK. This last factor was influenced by the growing belief that North Korea could invade the ROK in a conventional way. In fact, the two states had several disputes in the last decades that did not imply the use of nuclear or missiles. However, few military threats posed by the North more recently led to a change. Even those who always showed a stance against nuclear weapons began to support proliferation under certain conditions. For instance, the former are now convinced that nuclear proliferation can act as a powerful tool to control whether the use of nuclear weapons can occur. In relation to the DPRK, this is considered to be extremely essential. As of today, the Seoul government is yet to take steps forward in this sense. However, the increased debates on the matter demonstrate how impactful the North Korean nuclear threat has been in its neighboring nation's domestic policy-making as well as social and political beliefs. (Sukin, 2020).

4.1.6 Japan's future reactions

For what concerns Japan, the main implication derived from the North Korean nuclear issue concerns its worries on its territorial integrity. Due to this aspect, the former has adopted different strategies. For instance, as analyzed in the previous chapter, Japan is seeking to normalize relations with the DPRK. Different factors strictly linked to the latter policies are influencing Japanese policy-making and will continue to do so in the future. (Hiraiwa, 2020). It is fundamental to analyze Japan's stance towards nuclear weapons and the way the North Korean nuclear threat has influenced the policies. For instance, after World War II the Tokyo government developed a strategy based on four different aspects. First of all, the former adopted the decision that the country would have not developed nuclear weapons on its own. Secondly, due to the threats posed by foreign actors, Japan decided to rely on foreign deterrence. More in depth, the latter joined the so-called nuclear umbrella of the United States. This decision was followed by the concerns raised due to the PRC's decision to become a nuclear power as well as the threat posed by the Soviet Union during the Cold War. As the Tokyo government wanted to ensure the security of its citizens it decided to secure some nuclear weapons in case of need. Thirdly, Tokyo sought to promote long-term nuclear proliferation in the East Asian region but also globally. Lastly, the fourth aspect of the Japanese policy on nuclear weapons concerns the commitment to promote the peaceful use of nuclear power. According to scholars, these latter two

stances were introduced as being the only nation that suffered nuclear war, Japan felt the responsibility of actively engaging to limit the use of nuclear power for harmful goals. (Nishida, 2023). On this matter, it is essential to note that Japan has developed an advanced nuclear energy program in the last decades used for peaceful purposes. (Moore, 2008). It is essential to underline that all these strategies were adopted after Japan suffered the nuclear disasters of Hiroshima and Nagasaki during WWII, so before the NPT was stipulated at the end of the last century.

However, it is important to note that in the course of the decades the Tokyo government showed its hesitation or even complete contrariety to policies that could completely undermine nuclear deterrence. This was mainly due to the fear for the nation's security that started to increase as issues in East Asia arose. To make an example, it is fundamental to consider that Japan does not support the no first use (NFU) policy. This latter could seriously stop nuclear deterrence. More in depth, policies like the one just mentioned have the main aim of diminishing the use of nuclear weapons and subsequently lead to total nuclear disarmament. Japan's main idea is that nuclear deterrence should not be erased as long as there are threats against the Japanese territory. As a consequence to this idea, in the course of history the Tokyo government adopted some decisions aiming at enhancing the country's security following acts that were considered as concerning. (Nishida, 2023). For instance, it has been proven that Pyongyang's missile launches over Japanese territory in 1998 greatly contributed to make the Tokyo government adopt the decision to join the United States in building a missile shield in the region. (Moore, 2008). In particular, it is key to underline that especially since the first North Korean nuclear crisis in the 1990s, one of the main concerns for Japan is bordering with three nuclear powers that have shown hostilities towards Tokyo and that are seeking to change their status quo in the region, namely the PRC, the Russian Federation, and the DPRK. (Nishida, 2023). More in depth, in recent years the development of the DPRK's nuclear program in particular has caused great worry within Japan. In fact, there is a greater crisis within the latter state due to the perceived likelihood that the Japanese territory would definitely be attacked in case of conflict in the area. (Moore, 2008). As previously analyzed, the DPRK is developing missiles that can reach the US' mainland. In recent years, the former has launched several missiles towards the Japanese territory, falling into the Japanese sea. More recently in 2022, the Pyongyang government has been testing missile launches aimed at training for a nuclear force. According to Japanese scholars, these tests are aiming at enhancing North Korea's military capacities, nevertheless this is not the only reason why they are conducted. For instance, nuclear weapons are being developed to project a nuclear shadow and deter Japanese logistical support to the US. (Nishida, 2023).

Due to this situation, Japan has been gradually enhancing its military capabilities, abandoning its peaceful policy and investing more in the military field. (Moore, 2008). Since the Cold War the former's national security strategy has not changed as the main objective continues to be stopping menaces before they arise and using diplomacy to establish a stable global environment. However, in

addition to this, the Tokyo government has developed the idea of instituting appropriate defense tools to counterbalance threats and guarantee the safety of the nation's citizens. Furthermore, as already mentioned, it is important to note that the former has begun to make attempts to rely less on the United States' nuclear umbrella. In fact, Japan's main objective at the moment is trying to develop military capabilities that would allow the country to defend itself in case of direct attack without having to depend on foreign actors. In 2022 the National Security Strategy underscored how Japan is currently facing the most challenging situation since WWII. This is mainly due to the aggressive behavior of the DPRK. On this matter, the US' inability to back the nuclear issue has led the Tokyo government to adopt some decisions to increase the country's military stances. In spite of the policy changes, it is fundamental to highlight that so far there has not been a concrete change in the state's nuclear policy. In fact, the four factors of Japan's nuclear strategy above analyzed have not changed. For example, the Tokyo government has refused to adopt the nuclear sharing proposed after the outbreak of the Ukraine war. In addition to this, the Japanese prime minister Kishida has been the first one to attend the NPT Review Conference in 2022. Nevertheless, some consequences to these increased threats have been detected. For instance, contrary to the debates that started to rise within Japan since 2012, the Tokyo government is increasingly relying on the extended nuclear deterrence proposed by Washington. As a consequence, the adoption of policies limiting nuclear deterrence are even more unlikely to happen than before. On the other hand, observers note that a long-term implication of regional and global insecurity could be the fact that the Tokyo government will increasingly depend on nuclear weapons. It is fundamental to note that more recently, debates on developing a nuclear program restarted in Japan. What triggered the discussions is the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. More in depth, the Moscow government in the last two years has threatened the use of nuclear weapons, worrying the international community. Even though it is unclear as to which path the Tokyo government will undoubtedly take in this regard as of 2024, the former's willingness to rearrange Japan's military stance is demonstrated by increased funding for the military, discussions on nuclear weapons in the wake of the DPRK's nuclear threat as well as the recent strengthening of ties between North Korea and Russia. (Nishida, 2023).

4.1.7 Implications for non-state actors

The DPRK's nuclear program has had impactful consequences on International Organizations and NGOs. More in depth, there are different aspects that are worth analyzing in this field. Generally speaking, it is essential to underline the implications from the North Korean nuclear issue on international humanitarian assistance and aid. IOs and NGOs such as the World Food Programme and other UN agencies began to work within the DPRK when a devastating famine broke out in the Country

in 1994. Before this event, North Korea was relying solely on its closest allies, the PRC, the Soviet Union, and countries from Eastern Europe. However, in the event of this famine, these latter ties proved not to be sufficient to tackle the struggle and, as a consequence, the Pyongyang government reached out for international assistance. This latter has been present in the nation since then, as more than 230 foreign groups were cooperating to provide humanitarian aid in different areas. However, it is important to highlight that following the first nuclear test in 2006, the sanctions that have been imposed by the global community greatly undermined the work international organizations and NGOs were doing in the DPRK. In spite of what stated by the UNSC, for example in UNSCR 2094 from 2013 that stressed the willingness not to undermine humanitarian rights of the North Korean population, facts proved otherwise. More in depth, several of the sanctions related to aspects that could be conducted to humanitarian matters. First of all, it is worth studying the fact that in order to operate in the DPRK, international organizations and NGOs have to conclude an agreement with the government of the nation. This process began extremely hard following sanctions, as finding common ground of interest became increasingly difficult. In addition to this, the initial administrative process was undermined also by other aspects. More in depth, UNSC and bilateral sanctions both prevented IOs and NGOs from using certain materials or implementing certain tools as they were banned. This provoked a series of delays and confusion among the foreign groups that were not sure of how to proceed. In fact, this also affected low-tech and basic solutions such as the supply of plastics materials essential for farming. At the beginning of 2019, the UN Panel of Experts received more than 20 examples of delays from the UN country team operating in the DPRK. In addition to this, lack of clarity on these issues contributed as well. In particular, as the untangling of delays takes several months, IOs and NGOs are subject to lack of flexibility to provide quick problem solving. Most importantly, the implications of sanctions imposed have led to the reduction of capacity by international groups. The numerous challenges they had to face have in fact led to an increase of difficulty of access, gathering of necessary tools, as well as rise of costs among others. On the latter point, it is essential to underline that the development of the nuclear program by the Pyongyang government has also prevented donors from donating to organizations to operate in North Korea, increasing the costs of operations. To sum up, the capacity of humanitarian organizations to carry out their operations in the DPRK have been severely impacted by sanctions. (Zadeh-Cummings & Harris, 2020).

Another aspect that is worth mentioning is the way the development of the North Korean nuclear program has undermined the NPT regime and the International Atomic Energy Agency. For instance, the NPT's perception of being a dependable and efficient treaty on nuclear weapons' proliferation was drastically changed by the Pyongyang government's decision to exit the obligations in 2003. The withdrawal made the international community believe that the treaty is not able to enforce its obligations over states which have not ratified it. In fact, the DPRK was able to exploit the NPT's inability to prevent the movement of tools and technology essential for nuclear weapons between states.

In this sense, it is worth mentioning the exchange of materials that took place between North Korea and Pakistan in the 1990s. As the latter had not ratified the treaty, the NPT nor the IAEA were able to monitor this fact. In addition to this, as of today the latter two were unable to put a hold on the continuous nuclear testing and threats to neighboring nations by the Pyongyang government. However, in spite of this, it is worth recalling the importance that the NPT continues to have in addressing non-proliferation goals. In fact, the work carried out by the IAEA and the treaty is essential to restrict transfer of technology but also to contribute to conclude agreements between sellers and beneficiaries. Nevertheless, as the DPRK's nuclear program is threatening the IAEA's work and the international response to nuclear proliferation, addressing the issue and finding a long-term solution is one of the primary objectives of the international agency. (Kim & Cohen, 2017).

As analyzed in the previous chapter ASEAN is an international institution that has been impacted by the North Korean nuclear issue as well. For instance, it is possible to say that although this latter situation is negatively affecting the security of Southeast Asia and enhancing concerns within states in the area, it is also increasing visibility of the international institution. More precisely, the former is considered to be by the Pyongyang government a trustworthy ally. In addition to this, it is the only international fora in which the DPRK is actively engaging. For these reasons, many scholars remarked the way ASEAN could potentially play an essential role in the matter. For instance, it could act as a mediator and facilitate the negotiations. As a matter of fact, countries greatly affected by the North Korean nuclear program such as South Korea have been cooperating with the international institution to find a way to tackle the issue. For instance, South Korean former President Moon Jae In in 2020 emphasized the necessity for the nation to enhance its ties with ASEAN and its Member States. The Seoul government envisaged the New Southern Policy (NSP) that aims at improving inter-Korean relations as well as connection with ASEAN members. It is key to underline that the NSP is compatible with ASEAN Community Vision for 2025. More in depth, the two strategies both share three main objectives of establishing security and peace, economic prosperity, and a community of people. Furthermore, both policies seek to tackle the North Korean nuclear issue and find a long-term solution to avoid further intensification of insecurity in the Asian region. Furthermore, ASEAN member states have been increasing their engagement in inter-Korean matters. It is possible to say that the DPRK's trust in ASEAN has enhanced the latter's position in the efforts to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. In addition to supporting international initiatives aiming at increasing the peaceful use of nuclear energy and non-proliferation, as a consequence to the increased nuclear insecurity in the region ASEAN member states have also committed to maintain the region nuclear weapons free. In addition to this, different member states of the organization have reaffirmed their willingness to contribute to the development of peace and stability in the Peninsula. For example, ASEAN member states have been fostering collaboration and exchanging transformation encounters with the DPRK. In 2019, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un met with different political leaders of Southeast Asian countries. It is

fundamental to highlight that many foreign actors expressed their appreciation for ASEAN's effort to tackle the nuclear problem, showing their support for the international organization's increasing role on the matter. For instance, the Republic of Korea acknowledged the former's attempts to maintain peace in the Korean Peninsula, making remarks of the imperative need of cooperation between actors in the region. (Ngoc, N. T. B.).

4.2 Forecast of the near future

The international community still remains very concerned for the North Korean nuclear program. Among other things, this can be seen by the high number of sanctions that are still in place. It is fundamental to highlight that, as analyzed, deterrence of the Korean Peninsula is affected by complex regional dynamics. In particular, the rise of the PRC and the consequent enhancement of rivalry with the United States as well as Japan and South Korea's decision to increase their military capabilities are some of the factors concerned. (Kim & Cohen, 2017). As a consequence of these factors greatly affecting the situation in the Korean Peninsula, scholars have different opinions on what can possibly happen in the near future. It is worth making an analysis of all the different perspectives. First of all, some American observers argue that there are high possibilities that the DPRK will continue to resist a denuclearization process. It is important to underline that this represents a political choice more than a military one. In fact, as mentioned and analyzed previously, the regime's survival is the top priority for the current North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. Even though the latter apparently agrees on a Korean Peninsula's denuclearization process, in reality this would imply different factors that could undermine the independence and isolation of the nation from the outside world. More in depth, denuclearization would mean that foreign inspectors would have to access North Korea's nuclear facilities. This would lead parties to be obliged to find a compromise on the deepness of inspection the government allows and what is needed for technical purposes. Observers underline how the DPRK's willingness to give up a major part of its confidential information is very unlikely to happen. Moreover, one of the North Korean government's main concerns rests upon the possibility that nuclear engineers would seek asylum abroad and share internal information on the nuclear program and advancements made. In particular, Kim Jong Un fears the possibility that the United States could have access to this classified information and use it for its own nuclear program. (Ross, 2023).

It is key to understand that the possibility that a war could break out is very high. (Ford, 2018). Especially following the renewed North Korean-Russian relations in the light of the Ukraine War and the military exchanges the two countries had, risks are increasing. (Kim, 2024). For example, in June 2024 the Seoul government adopted a reform to suspend a military agreement signed with Pyongyang in 2018 to resume military activities in the front-line. This came as a consequence of the DPRK's

decision to launch trash through balloons on the South Korean territory a couple of days before. This commitment was adopted together with a declaration from the South Korean deputy defense minister for policy stating that the government was ready to take the necessary precautions to safeguard South Koreans from the threats posed by Pyongyang. (CBS News, June 2024). The key player on this matter is the PRC. In particular, the latter and Pyongyang signed the Sino-North Korean Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty that forces China to intervene in help of the DPRK in case of war. However, the treaty does not imply the obligation for Beijing to aid in case Pyongyang is the first attacking. In spite of this, scholars highlight that the former has several doubts on Washington's willingness not to invade the DPRK. For this reason, there are high possibilities that in any case, the PRC would get involved in a potential conflict. To avoid this situation of uncertainty a settlement is strongly needed. On this matter, it is important to underscore that the Agreed Framework signed in 1994 was the only one that really worked on the resolution of the North Korean nuclear crisis. For this reason, any new treaty signed on the latter issue should resemble it. (Ford, 2018).

For what concerns the actions that need to be adopted, it is important for the actors involved to drastically change their stances towards the DPRK. First and foremost, it is essential to understand that to the latter, the denuclearization issue needs to be discussed with the United States. For this reason, the latter should aim at normalizing ties with North Korea. More in depth, Washington's main strategy that prevented the reach of a positive outcome on the nuclear issue concerned the fact that it did not take into account the requests advanced by Pyongyang. In fact, to get to an agreement, it is fundamental to understand what the other party needs. In this sense, observers note that North Korea aims at normalizing ties with the US. To do so, the latter would need to provide security and lessen the economic restrictions to allow Kim Jong Un to develop his economic view. (Ford, 2018). In addition to this, as mentioned previously, it is key for states and non-state actors to work together to tackle the problem. More in depth, cooperation between nations directly involved in the issue, namely the DPRK, the PRC, the ROK and the US is essential. Observers underscore that the four party talks are essential to find a long-term solution to the problem. Even though establishing bilateral relations with Pyongyang is important, there are highest chances that collective response could work. To do so, it is essential for all the parties involved in the negotiation talks to consider the DPRK as a nuclear nation, especially the United States that has been very reluctant to acknowledge this. (Ross, 2023). In addition to this, cooperation between actors and non-state actors is also essential to be taken into account. More precisely, the United Nations has been the main international forum used by the parties in conflict to attempt to find a resolution to the North Korean nuclear issue. (Zadeh-Cummings & Harris, 2020). However, as analyzed previously, other non-state actors would play a key role on the matter. ASEAN's position in particular due to its relations with the DPRK as well as the adoption of policies aiming at improving the security situation of the Korean Peninsula is crucial. Moreover, the international organization's recently improved ties with the Republic of Korea is another factor that contributes to

the idea that it could potentially lead to a positive outcome on the Korean issue. It is essential to note that the American-Chinese rivalry will remain in the upcoming decade and probably further exacerbate. In these circumstances, it is in ASEAN's interests to avoid increasing insecurity outbreaks in the Korean Peninsula and the region as a whole. To avoid this, the former and the ROK have already been engaging. But to find a common ground of cooperation with the DPRK, South Korea and the international institution should engage in discussions intended to advance mutual understanding and peace, both of which are advantageous for North Korean growth. (Ngoc, N. T. B.). As a regional organization ASEAN allows the establishment and progression of peacebuilding and it is a driver of change in the global system. The former has a policy of non-interference in its members' internal affairs unless it is necessary. The use of soft diplomatic capabilities and its advantageous position as a good partner for most of the parties involved in the nuclear issue make ASEAN an essential player to conclude a long-term agreement. For this reason, all the parties concerned should take into account the possibility of increasing cooperation with the latter to enhance security in East Asia and avoid further nuclear proliferation in the Korean Peninsula and in the region as a whole. (Badruzaman & Irsadanar, 2020).

4.3 Chapter IV conclusions

As analyzed in previous chapters, the development of the North Korean nuclear program has been central for what concerns the rising insecurity in East Asia. For instance, the program led to different consequences for different actors directly and indirectly impacted. For what concerns the DPRK itself, the nuclear program has been the main policy developed by the regime to secure its survival and its security. In spite of this, some negative outcomes derived from the strategy and seriously mined North Korea. First and foremost, the Asian state lost all of its credibility at the international level. In fact, as foreign actors perceived the nuclear program's development as a direct threat to their security, they stopped believing the reassurance made by Pyongyang on their peaceful intentions. As a consequence to this increased worries, different countries such as the Republic of Korea and the United States have enhanced their military contingencies. An example of this is the Seoul government's consideration of developing a nuclear program. This contributes to undermining the DPRK's objectives. (Kim & Cohen, 2017). Moreover, another consequence to the development of the nuclear program is the progressive worsening of the Sino-North Korean ties. As China constitutes the main source of aid to the DPRK, the exacerbation of tensions in the last decades due to Beijing's inability to stop Pyongyang's ideas greatly impacts the domestic situation of North Korea. (Lee & Cho, 2018). However, one positive outcome derived from the North Korean strategy is found in the nation's ties with the Russian Federation. The growing partnership in light of the outbreak of the Ukraine war

offers the DPRK some leverage. As observers fear that the two states may rely on some future nuclear exchanges to face the West, it is worth continuing monitoring the situation. (The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2023).

The PRC is one of the main countries that has been impacted by the North Korean nuclear program's development. Even though the former's recent condemnation of the DPRK's nuclear activities has undermined their relationship, this alliance still remains one of Beijing's top priorities. More recently, this has been affected also by North Korea's decision to strengthen ties with Russia and increase its military and economic exchanges with the latter. This has undermined Chinese interests. Furthermore, as the PRC is a rising regional and global power it has been subjected to a lot of pressure from foreign entities. Washington in particular has been pressuring the former country to be more proactive towards the DPRK to prevent further nuclear proliferation. However, Beijing's lack of firm position on the matter has challenged the former's position at the international level. (Neves, 2020). On the other hand, the Russian Federation is a nation that has been benefiting from the North Korean military developments. As analyzed, the latter state in the last twenty years was able to strengthen its ties with the DPRK by providing humanitarian and economic aid. More recently, with the outbreak of the Ukrainian war, Pyongyang proved to be an essential partner for Moscow. More in depth, since the Russian-North Korean summit held in September 2023, the two states developed their linkages by deciding to cooperate in the military field as well. The DPRK has been providing military tools as well as missiles to Russia. During this period of time, the Russian President Putin expressed his support for North Korean missile tests and criticized the unilateral sanctions imposed. This showed the international community that a new alignment in Russia's policies is being adopted. Many fear that this could increase the Asian state's nuclear proliferation and in addition to this, that this cooperation can result in the exchange of nuclear materials in the near future. (Ha & Shin, 2022).

The DPRK's main enemies have also been seriously impacted by the development of the nuclear program. For instance, the United States, South Korea, and Japan have tried to implement different policies to tackle the problem in the last decades which proved to be ineffective for the most part. For what concerns the US, its inability to find a solution to the problem has contributed to undermine its position at the regional level. Both Japan and the ROK constitute Washington's main allies in the area. However, both of them have recently been questioning the latter's ability to counterbalance threats and maintain security. Moreover, Seoul and Tokyo have also been discussing the credibility of the US' extended deterrence. The former two states have been increasing their military stances, trying to leverage less on the Western nation to maintain their territorial integrity. (Heginbotham, & Samuels, 2021). In addition to this, the ROK has been revising its system of alliances. More in depth, in recent years the former has been strengthening its ties with China. These changes have been raising concerns that the US is gradually losing influence in East Asia as countries are relying less on the former. In addition to this, all the East Asian regional order's changes in the last decades

following the development of the North Korean nuclear program have also had an impact on South Korea. As different countries have implemented different policies towards the Korean Peninsula following the development of the nuclear problem, the latter state has been directly impacted by those. More in depth, the enhancement of American-South Korean ties led to the worsening of relations with China. For instance, some strategies adopted by the latter nation towards the ROK resulted in great economic and financial losses. (Lee & Cho, 2018). The North Korean nuclear program has also impacted international organizations and other international frameworks such as the NPT. First and foremost, the former policy had consequences on the international humanitarian system as a whole. The sanctions imposed created delays in administrative processes, restriction of materials, as well as increased operational costs. This led to a significant reduction of capacity delivery from IOs. (Zadeh-Cummings & Harris, 2020). In addition to this, the nuclear issue has impacted the IAEA and the NPT. In fact, the latter's inability to find a long-term solution to the problem resulted in the global community questioning the system in place. (Kim & Cohen, 2017).

However, some solutions can be found. First of all, scholars underscore how cooperation is essential. In fact, the nations concerned should find a common ground to face the problem. It is important for all countries to take into account each other's needs as well as to compromise. (Ford, 2018). In addition to this, cooperating with non-state actors is also very important. In this sense, regional and international institutions such as ASEAN could play a key role on the matter. The latter organization is one of the few international platforms in which the DPRK engages in; it is thus considered to be a trustworthy ally. In addition to this, ASEAN member states have committed to maintaining a denuclearized region and have supported non-proliferation efforts. As countries such as the Republic of Korea have already begun to partner with the regional institution, it is essential to further investigate this path. (Badruzaman & Irsadanar, 2020). With the outbreak of the Ukraine war and the subsequent strengthened North-Korean-Russian ties as well as the exacerbation of the US-China rivalry, insecurity in East Asia is on the rise. For this reason, high-level discussions on the North Korean nuclear issue are fundamental. (Ford, 2018).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the decision adopted by the DPRK to develop a nuclear program proved to have greatly impacted the East Asian regional order. Since the first North Korean crisis in the 1990s, the North Korean nuclear issue has been at the center of Asian matters. This has severely impacted different countries in the region but also states and non-state actors outside of the area concerned. The DPRK itself has been subjected to negative backlash due to its actions that have undermined its position at the international level, as well as its domestic situation. The former nation decided to implement this

nuclear policy early in the XX Century to secure the regime's survival. In addition to this, Pyongyang was convinced that this could be an effective tool to achieve economic growth. However, since the outbreak of the first nuclear crisis in the 1990s it was proven that this was not the case. In fact, the international community implemented different measures to try to persuade North Korea to abandon its nuclear objectives. However, the Pyongyang government has always decided to carry out its initial intentions and continue to develop its nuclear strategy. This did come with high consequences for the Asian country. For instance, the unilateral sanctions imposed by the international community are preventing the DPRK from developing from an economic point of view. Even though these are being neutralized by the support Pyongyang is receiving from allies such as China and Russia, the total isolation North Korea is subjected to is undermining its growth. In addition to this, while the DPRK was able to strengthen its cooperation with the Russian Federation in the last years, this is not the same for the other close ally it has in the region, the PRC. As a matter of fact, the growing Russian-North Korean ties are a consequence to a similar situation the two states are facing. In fact, they are both heavily sanctioned by the international community. In addition to this, the two nations have been completely isolated by the latter as their actions are considered to be a threat to global security. This resulted in Pyongyang and Moscow's decision to rely more on each other for security and military matters.

On the other hand, the situation is very different for what concerns the PRC. In fact, the latter state in the last decades has been able to establish itself as an important regional and global power. In particular, China is overthrowing the US' complete hegemony in East Asia, gaining more ground in countries that are historic American allies. However, the development of the North Korean nuclear issue has been undermining Beijing's government attempts to gain other nations' trust. More in depth, in the course of history since the first North Korean nuclear crisis, the PRC adopted a neutral stance towards the problem. For instance, the country was facing a dilemma: it did not want the DPRK to become a nuclear threat, but it did not want to undermine the North Korean regime's credibility and survival either. This insecurity was negatively viewed by the international community that is convinced that as a great regional power, China should put more pressure on Beijing to stop its nuclear advancements. The backlash received by the international community and the Pyongyang government's decision to ignore Chinese requests made the current Chinese leader Xi Jinping change the country's policy towards the DPRK. For instance, for some time the Asian power decided to publicly condemn North Korea's action in regard to its nuclear and missile programs. While the PRC once again changed its position due to the worsening of the Sino-American rivalry, this period of insecurity showed the fragility and precariousness of the Sino-North Korean ties.

The Sino-American rivalry just mentioned represented an obstacle for the United States as well. For instance, the strong Chinese presence in the Korean Peninsula has always been a problem for Washington. But this is not the only worry for this latter. Evidence demonstrates that due to several

reasons, the North Korean nuclear issue is greatly undermining the US' hegemony in East Asia. As a matter of fact, Washington's lack of capacity to find a long-term solution to the problem led its allies in the region to question the former's capabilities. For instance, one of the Americans' closest allies in the region, namely the Republic of Korea, in the latest years began to strengthen its ties with Beijing to explore new ways of counterbalancing the nuclear threat posed by the DPRK. In addition to this, Seoul and Tokyo have also been questioning the US' response capacity, as well as the effectiveness of its nuclear deterrence system. As a matter of fact, within South Korea and Japan dialogues on the possibility of developing a nuclear program themselves to counterbalance the DPRK's threat is on the rise. Japan in particular in recent years decided to abandon its pacifist approach adopted after the end of WWII to invest more in its military apparatus. The former seeks to be able to respond firsthand to a North Korean direct attack, without any external aid. Even though Tokyo has not taken any concrete step forward on the nuclearization of the country, this would represent a negative factor for Washington. More in depth, this would entail the obligation from the latter to impose sanctions against what are now its closest allies in East Asia. American scholars recognize the extreme need for the US to quickly find a solution to secure its interests in the region and avoid a lowering of the Western nation's influence.

The Republic of Korea has been greatly affected by the DPRK's decision to develop a nuclear program as well. For instance, the former country has been impacted both from a domestic and a regional point of view. As mentioned previously, South Korea was forced to change its domestic policies in order to face the threat posed by its neighboring state. In fact, debates and positive opinions on the development of a South Korean nuclear arsenal are on the rise within the nation. The former country also questioned its historical alliances in the region, as during a certain period of time it sought the support of China. In addition to this, the ROK was also greatly impacted by foreign countries' policies towards the Korean Peninsula. In particular, the PRC's decision to impose sanctions due to Seoul and Washington's joint decision to develop the THAAD mined the South Korean economy. Although the Sino-South Korean ties have improved in the last decade, the Sino-American rivalry is on the rise, and Beijing refuses to cooperate with Seoul as long as it continues to strengthen its military relations with the US. In addition to this, in spite of the attempts, the ROK was prevented from creating a strong connection with Russia. In fact, Moscow strongly opposed the development of South Korean military programs.

International organizations, NGOs, and the international humanitarian system were severely impacted by the North Korean nuclear program as well. For instance, the global community began to question the efficiency of the NPT system and the work carried out by the IAEA. As a matter of fact, the NPT's inability to face the DPRK and find an effective solution to the nuclear problem made foreign entities criticize its usefulness. North Korea is currently threatening the international response to nuclear proliferation. In addition to this, the development of the nuclear program and the consequent

imposition of sanctions is undermining the international humanitarian response within the DPRK. As a matter of fact, organizations such as the WFP are prevented from working at their best within the state. In spite of this, observers agree that an increased inclusion of international organizations in negotiation talks is the key to finding a long-term solution. For instance, the rising insecurity in the region but also globally with the increasing Sino-American rivalry and the outbreak of the Ukraine war as primary causes is decreasing the possibilities the DPRK will soon decide to stop its nuclear advancements. In addition to this, tensions between Beijing and Washington are unlikely to lessen in the near future. However, there is an expanded global recognition of the need to cooperate to tackle the North Korean nuclear problem. As a matter of fact, it is essential for states to negotiate their needs to conclude an agreement. In this sense, signing an accord such as the Agreed Framework is essential. On this matter, international organizations could play a major role. For instance, those considered to be neutral international institutions such as ASEAN or the EU could act as mediators between all the parties in conflict. In particular, the first one mentioned is the only international forum in which the DPRK engages in for what concerns nuclearization. As nations such as South Korea have already strengthened their cooperation with ASEAN, further exploring this path could be beneficial to find a final and long-term solution to the DPRK's nuclear issue dilemma.

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