South Korea's leaders' perceptions and the decision of hedging: Assessing China, the US and North Korea's role

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ABSTRACT

The geostrategic competition between the U.S.-led security network in the Indo-Pacific and China is intensifying. Amid this hegemonic rivalry between the US and China, South Korea emerges as an actor grappling with finding its position between Washington and Beijing. Despite its formal strategic partnership with the United States, much of the academic literature argues that Seoul has displayed behavior resembling hedging over the years. This article demonstrates that South Korea's strategic behavior—whether hedging, balancing, or bandwagoning—is shaped by the strategic environment, varying levels of threat perception, and the political orientations of its leaders concerning North Korea. Using a neoclassical realist framework, we assess

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South Korea's actions through an analysis of its leaders' perceptions of North Korea, the U.S., and China. The independent variables include the distribution of power in the international system, the regional context, economic interdependence, and the U.S. network of alliances. The intervening variables are the leaders' perceptions, particularly their risk assessments and the images guiding their decisions to hedge, balance, or bandwagoning with China and the United States. The research is based on a bibliographic analysis and a review of official documents, including White Papers, defense reports, and official speeches. A key finding is that understanding Seoul's security behavior requires careful consideration of North Korea's actions. Furthermore, the decision to hedge or balance is driven not by ideology but by perceptions of which actor better supports Seoul's political goals and relations with Pyongyang.

Keywords: South Korea; hedging; neoclassical realism; leaders' perceptions.

Percepciones de los líderes de Corea del Sur y la decisión de *hedging*: evaluando los roles de China, Estados Unidos y Corea del Norte

RESUMEN

La competencia geoestratégica entre la red de seguridad liderada por Estados Unidos en el Indo-Pacífico y China se está intensificando. En medio de la rivalidad hegemónica entre estos dos países, Corea del Sur surge como un actor que busca encontrar su lugar en esta creciente rivalidad entre Washington y Pekín. A pesar de ser un socio estratégico formal de Estados Unidos, es común en la literatura académica argumentar que Seúl ha mostrado un comportamiento similar al *hedging* a lo largo de los años. En este artículo demostramos que el entorno estratégico, caracterizado por niveles variados de percepción de amenazas, y las orientaciones políticas de los líderes respecto a Corea del Norte son cruciales para dar forma al comportamiento estratégico de Corea del Sur (*hedging, balancing* o *bandwagoning*). Evaluamos el comportamiento de Corea del Sur utilizando un análisis realista neoclásico de las percepciones de sus líderes respecto a Corea del Norte, Estados Unidos y China. Las variables independientes incluyen la distribución de poder en el sistema internacional, el contexto regional, la interdependencia económica y la red de alianzas de Estados Unidos. Nuestras variables intervinientes son las percepciones de los líderes, específicamente sus evaluaciones de riesgo, y las imágenes que guían sus decisiones de *hedging, balancing* o *bandwagoning* con China y Estados Unidos. La investigación se llevó a cabo a través de un análisis bibliográfico y un examen de documentos oficiales, incluidos libros blancos, informes de defensa y discursos oficiales. Un hallazgo clave es que comprender el comportamiento de seguridad de Seúl requiere un examen cuidadoso

de las acciones de Corea del Norte. Además, la decisión de hacer *hedging* o *balancing* no está impulsada por factores ideológicos; más bien, proviene de la percepción de cuál de los dos –China o Estados Unidos– apoya mejor las estrategias políticas de Seúl y sus relaciones esperadas con Pyongyang.

Palabras clave: Corea del Sur; *hedging*; realismo neoclásico; percepciones de líderes.

INTRODUCTION

In South Korea's regional strategic environment, several key actors interact: China, an aspiring superpower; Japan, an economic powerhouse striving to become a "normal state"; North Korea, which frequently demonstrates its power to maintain regime stability; Taiwan, seeking recognition as a sovereign state; and the United States, a unipolar superpower shaping global power dynamics and the regional balance (Oliveira, 2019). In the 21st century, regional tensions have evolved in response to the shifting security and defense policies of these countries, giving rise to security dilemmas manifested in military exercises, defense cooperation, and the formation (and reformulation) of security arrangements in the Indo-Pacific.

The strategic competition between the US and China has become the dominant dynamic in the Indo-Pacific region, with China positioned as the foremost security challenge for the US and its allies. Amid this hegemonic rivalry, South Korea emerges as a pivotal player, grappling with its role in the escalating tensions between Washington and Beijing, particularly as the US refocused its foreign policy on the region in the second decade of the 21st century. This era marks the onset of what is often referred to as "Asia's paradox," where military competition and economic integration occur simultaneously.

Despite being a formal strategic partner of the US, academic literature often suggests that South Korea has exhibited hedging behavior to protect its economic and trade interests while avoiding heightened tensions with China. Altogether, China remains a critical strategic partner and a key supporter of North Korea, one of Seoul's main perceived threats. Moreover, North Korea's intensifying nuclear threat has exacerbated insecurities in Seoul, prompting international calls for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

This article demonstrates that the strategic environment, characterized by varying levels of threat perception, along with the political orientations of South Korean leaders regarding North Korea, significantly shapes Seoul's strategic behavior, including hedging, balancing, or bandwagoning with China and the US. Notably, South Korea's threat perception primarily derives from North Korea, rather than China, influencing its strategic choices. We also explore how leadership images and political spectrum alignments impact South Korea's strategic decisions. Conservative administrations typically align closely with the US, while more progressive governments tend to

hedge, adopting a more ambiguous or evasive stance. Conservative administrations are more likely to perceive North Korea as a significant threat and thus favor bandwagoning with the US. In contrast, progressive administrations tend to adopt a softer approach, perceiving a lower level of threat from North Korea, opting for a hedging strategy that balances security ties with the US and economic cooperation with China.

To analyze this dynamic, we employ a neoclassical realist framework to examine South Korea's security behavior. The independent variables in this study are the distribution of power in the international system and the regional environment. Our focus is on foreign policy executives, particularly the president, assessing their threat perceptions of the regional and international environment and the images guiding their decisions. Additionally, we consider the ideologies of the political parties these leaders represent, as this affiliation shapes their expectations regarding specific security agendas and foreign policy issues. The dependent variable is South Korea's behavior, which we define in terms of hedging, balancing, or bandwagoning vis-à-vis China and the United States. Our research is based on a bibliographic analysis and official documents, including White Papers, other defense documents, and official speeches, to understand leadership perceptions and responses to South Korea's strategic environment.

The article is structured as follows: First, we discuss state behavior in the international arena and present the theoretical framework, combining balance of power theories with the intervening variables of neoclassical realism. Second, we examine the ideologies of political parties in the Republic of Korea (ROK), focusing on their typical approaches to China, the US, and North Korea. The final sections provide an in-depth analysis of the administrations of Lee Myung-bak and Moon Jae-in, focusing on the regional strategic environment, leadership perceptions, ideological affiliations, and South Korea's resulting strategic behavior during their respective tenures.

NEOCLASSICAL REALISM AND THE DECISION TO BALANCE, HEDGE, OR BANDWAGON IN THE REGIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Waltz (1979) argues that in an anarchic international system, state interactions are driven by the imperative of survival, leading states to behave similarly under enduring conditions. States aim to prevent power imbalances and counteract concentrations of power through two primary strategies: balancing, where weaker states align against stronger ones, and bandwagoning, where weaker states align with stronger powers. Walt (1987) expands on this by suggesting that states' decisions between balancing and bandwagoning are influenced by the perceived threat posed by potential allies, considering factors such as aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and aggressive intentions.

Recent literature explores additional behaviors within this spectrum. He (2012)

discusses China's behavior under unipolarity using the negative balancing model, where states avoid alliances and arms races to diplomatically undermine a rival's power. Paul (2005) introduces the concept of soft balancing in the post-Cold War era, involving informal cooperation that falls short of formal alliances. Christensen and Snyder (1990) analyze states' behavior within alliances in multipolar systems, distinguishing between chain-ganging and buck-passing strategies based on offensive and defensive capabilities. Collectively, these theories illuminate how states navigate power dynamics and threats in the international system, offering insights into a range of strategic responses beyond traditional balancing and bandwagoning.

Another key concept in explaining state behavior is hedging. While no consensus exists among scholars on the precise definition of hedging, it is generally understood to occur when a country adopts ambiguous actions to avoid material losses. Instead of firmly aligning to confront threats or opportunistically siding with a rising power, many states seek to reduce risks in uncertain strategic environments. Thus, hedging may describe a state's efforts to maintain strategic ambiguity to mitigate the risks associated with balancing or bandwagoning (Koga, 2018, p. 638). Furthermore, it is essential to recognize that hedging is not mere indecisiveness; it is a deliberate, though undeclared, choice (Kuik, 2021, p. 310).

Several studies describe hedging as a strategy in which a government engages economically and diplomatically with a major or emerging power while simultaneously implementing security measures as insurance (Medeiros, 2005; Tunsjø, 2017). Additionally, other scholars view hedging as a security strategy adopted by small states, middle powers,[1] or major powers navigating triangular relations between China and the U.S. (Tessman, 2012; Koga, 2018).

To effectively categorize hedging and analyze South Korea's behavior, the definition must expand to include economic, military, and diplomatic dimensions, with particular emphasis on the latter two (Koga, 2018). When examining middle powers and developed nations within a context of interdependence, coercive economic instruments for geopolitical purposes tend to have limited effects. For instance, despite Japan's dependence on rare earth imports from China, the ban imposed after the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands incident led Japan to adopt policies aimed at reducing this dependency (Terazawa, 2023).

In the case of South Korea, given its status as a middle power (Mo, 2016; Lee, 2012; Tam-Sang, 2021; Abbondanza, 2022) in a region marked by political tensions and perceived threats, it is often interpreted as a country leaning toward hedging policies

[1] Middle power can be defined as a country that is 'neither great nor small in terms of their power, capacity, and influence, and exhibits the capability to create cohesion and obstruction toward global order and governance' (Jordaan, 2003, p. 165).

(Jin, 2015; Lee, 2017; Lee, 2021; Kim, 2022). While the Republic of Korea (ROK)-U.S. alliance remains central to Seoul's defense and security policies, China now accounts for over 25% of South Korea's total trade, illustrating a high level of economic interdependence, largely reflecting South Korea's reliance on China. The long-standing division of the Korean peninsula and North Korea's nuclear program have also generated perceptions of threats since the 1950s, despite periods of détente and frozen conflicts.

Theoretical frameworks like Waltz's offer insights into a country's behavior within the international system but may not fully account for situations where threats originate from third countries rather than from a unipolar power or an aspiring regional hegemon. Analyzing South Korea's strategic environment requires understanding how evolving perceptions of China, the U.S., and North Korea affect its strategic calculations, be it in balancing, bandwagoning, or hedging. A purely systemic approach does not adequately explain why a country shifts its strategy, as seen in South Korea's adjustments toward these three actors.

Recent studies have highlighted that domestic factors in hedging decisions are more influential than traditionally acknowledged (Murphy, 2017; Marston, 2024) and that changes in political leadership can significantly impact a state's hedging choices (Nummer and Oliveira, 2023). In light of this, the present article adopts a neoclassical realist approach to elucidate the drivers of state behavior, exploring how different leaders associated with various ideologies and political parties shape South Korea's strategic responses.

Neoclassical realists argue that structural conditions enable and constrain state actions, serving as "deep" causes. They incorporate domestic factors such as political institutions, leaders' perceptions, strategic cultures, and bureaucratic processes to explain foreign policy behaviors. Unlike purely systemic theories, neoclassical realism highlights how decision-makers' perceptions and domestic constraints shape strategic choices, complementing rather than replacing systemic pressures in shaping state behavior (Rose, 1998; Marston, 2024).

This research employs the Type II approach of neoclassical realism to explain variations in state behavior within the systemic constraints of a competitive international and regional environment. To avoid the "laundry list" approach when selecting intervening variables, this article focuses on the role of leaders (Ripsman, Lobell, & Taliaferro, 2016), linking them to their political parties, interests, and ideologies, which directly influence decision-making in ROK foreign and security policy, strategic behavior, and threat perception. By focusing on both state and individual levels, neoclassical realism provides a more comprehensive understanding of the factors driving states to hedge, balance, or bandwagon (Marston, 2024). Figure 1 illustrates the proposed theoretical framework's expected causal chain.

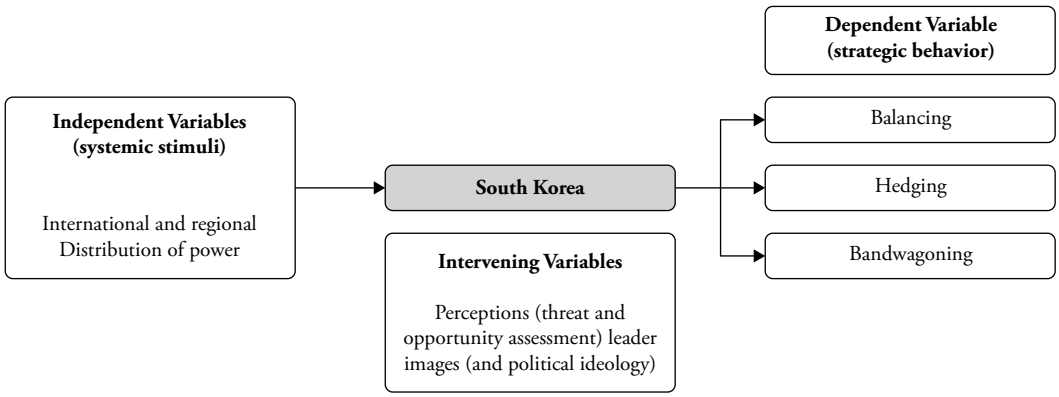
A country's perceptions of threats and opportunities in its environment shape its behavior toward major powers, based on its expectations of a third country—whether seen as a threat or an opportunity for achieving political goals. In South Korea's case, the primary source of threat is North Korea, not China, making a triangular analysis essential.

Lastly, examining the perceptions of regional and international environments and the images guiding decisions also requires considering the political parties to which leaders belong. This link is crucial for understanding leaders' ideological perspectives on security and foreign policy issues, particularly regarding North Korea. In South Korea, despite being a multi-party presidential republic, party affiliation significantly influences presidential candidates' positions. For this article, we focus on the People's Power Party (PPP) and the Democratic Party of Korea (DPK). The PPP, the successor to the Grand National Party (GNP), represents conservative, right-wing ideas such as free trade, neoliberalism, and anti-communism, and advocates for strong ROK-U.S. relations. Conservatives are political heirs of Park Chung-hee's authoritarian and anti-communist regime (1963-1978).

Traditionally, they promote a strong U.S. alliance and favor hardline policies toward North Korea (DPRK). In contrast, the DPK, the successor of the Uri Party, adheres to center-left progressivism, generally favoring rapprochement with North Korea and broader cooperation with China, while being more critical of the U.S.-ROK alliance and Japan (Maduz, 2023).

Taking into account hedging behavior and the neoclassical realist approach, we developed hypotheses to be tested, which correlate with the article's main arguments. The first three hypotheses (H1, H2, H3) address the Republic of Korea's (ROK) security behavior, while the supporting hypotheses (H1a and H2a) are essential for understanding the political leanings

FIGURE 1. ROK'S BEHAVIOR AND THREAT ASSESSMENT



Source: Own elaboration.

of South Korea's ruling party and leaders. In all cases, we begin with an understanding of a regional scenario marked by tensions driven by the growing competition between China and the United States. Temporally, we observe that this scenario has intensified since 2010, although as early as 2008–2009, China began to play a more active role in the region with an increasingly assertive foreign policy (Oliveira, 2019). In this competitive, yet not overtly conflictual regional environment, South Korea navigates between the two powers, though its primary perceived threat remains North Korea. The regional environment is either restrictive or permissive, depending more on countries' perceptions of North Korea and less on the dynamics of competition.

Regarding the first hypothesis (H1), given the increasing competitive pressure resulting from the shifting balance of power in the region—driven by China's rise, Japan's militarism, the U.S. rebalance, North Korea's actions, and growing territorial disputes—we argue that when the regional environment becomes more restrictive and the perceived threat, particularly from North Korea, increases, South Korea will tend to reinforce its alliance with the United States and adopt a more critical stance toward both China and North Korea. This scenario is more likely when a conservative-leaning party and leader are in power (H1a).

As for the second hypothesis (H2), we posit that when the regional environment becomes more restrictive and the perceived threat, particularly from North Korea, increases, South Korea will reinforce its alliance with the United States while either strengthening or remaining ambiguous and/or omission in its relations with China. This ambiguity is driven by the hope that China will influence North Korea's behavior or reduce tensions on the peninsula. Furthermore, this scenario is more likely under a liberal-leaning party and leadership (H2a).

For the third and final hypothesis (H3), we propose that when the regional environment becomes more permissive and the perceived threat from North Korea decreases, South Korea is more likely to adopt hedging behavior and take a more ambiguous stance toward both China and the United States, aiming to mitigate potential threats from North Korea.

BRIEF REVIEW OF SOUTH KOREA'S POLITICAL LANDSCAPE: UNDERSTANDING RELATIONS WITH CHINA, THE U.S., AND NORTH KOREA

An important intervening variable in our analysis is the leaders' image, which encompasses political alignment. This section aims to categorize and reflect on the expected and intended relationships, through political and ideological alignment, with the United States, China, and North Korea, from both conservative and progressive perspectives. In South Korea, the response to North Korea's actions serves as a significant ideological divide between conservative and progressive politicians, extending to their stances on the U.S. and, increasingly, China. This

section provides a historical and contemporary review of the behavior of South Korean political parties from 1950 to 2010, aiming to periodically define these parties' stances toward China, North Korea, and the United States. The objective is to identify the moments and circumstances that may shape the political alignment and positions of South Korean parties.

Historically, South Korea's conservative camp initially supported open dialogue policies toward North Korea following democratization and the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s. This is exemplified by Nordpolitik under Roh Tae-woo's administration, which sought to reconnect with China and the former Soviet Union. However, the nuclear issue in 1994 prompted conservatives to adopt a more hardline stance, reacting strongly to North Korean actions. Conversely, progressive parties, particularly after Kim Dae-jung's presidency in 1997, emphasized reconciliation and cooperation with North Korea, epitomized by the Sunshine Policy. This policy advocated open dialogue not only economically but also socially, culturally, and politically, in contrast to the conservative approach. South Korea's ideological spectrum continues to shape its policies toward North Korea, the U.S., and regional dynamics, reflecting differing attitudes toward engagement versus containment in inter-Korean relations.

The political spectrum in South Korea has also shaped its relationships with China and the U.S., particularly in the context of inter-Korean policies. During Park Chung-hee's dictatorship, the conservative party established relations with China, which became pivotal during Roh Tae-woo's Nordpolitik in the late 1980s. As China's economic influence grew in the 1990s and 2000s, it became a critical economic partner for South Korea, recognized by both conservative and progressive administrations.

In contrast, the conservative faction has historically aligned closely with the U.S., a relationship solidified during Chun Doo-hwan's party. Despite periods of tension, such as during Roh Moo-hyun's presidency and the Bush administration, progressive leaders have also maintained strong ties with the U.S., particularly in military and political cooperation (Milani, 2019; Heo, 2020). For instance, during the 2021 national presidential campaign, Democratic Party leader Lee Jae Myung affirmed South Korea's view of the U.S. as a vital ally, while acknowledging the importance of China's support, especially concerning North Korea (Park, 2021).

Chae and Kim (2008) provide a recent overview of the evolution of South Korean political thinking on security issues involving North Korea and the U.S. Compared to the 1950s and 1960s, progressives have become more pragmatic in their dealings with North Korea due to missile tests and nuclear developments, yet they still advocate for a softer approach, emphasizing national reconciliation and cooperative policies that have improved inter-Korean

relations. Conservatives, on the other hand, have returned to an oppositional stance, even at the expense of reunification dialogues and cooperative initiatives (Milani, 2019). Cha and Pardo (2023) further analyze the predominant approaches of each government regarding North Korea. For this article, we will focus on the "hard" approach of conservative governments and the "soft" approach of progressive ones, such as that of the Moon Jae-in administration.

While the conservative approach lacks a specific name or framework, two characteristics define their behavior: strengthening ROK-U.S. relations and adopting a zero-tolerance policy toward North Korean provocations. Conservatives believe that unification will occur either irregularly and violently or, in the best-case scenario, through the collapse of North Korea's economy and political regime. More pessimistic views suggest that the situation could escalate into war (Cha and Pardo, 2023). Consequently, conservative governments tend to adopt a pro-sanctions and combative stance toward North Korea, which can be characterized as a "hard" policy.

The Sunshine Policy, first introduced by Kim Dae-jung and continued by his progressive successors, epitomizes the "soft" approach toward North Korea in South Korea's foreign policy. It aimed to foster mutual respect and address external divisions as the primary obstacle to reunification. Advocates believed that as North Korea perceived fewer threats, it would become more open to denuclearization and reunification under a two-government system. However, critics, particularly conservatives, argue that the Sunshine Policy lacked concrete solutions, although it undeniably facilitated significant diplomatic milestones, such as the five inter-Korean summits in 2000, 2007, and 2018, driven by progressive efforts to pursue dialogue for North Korea's denuclearization.

It is noteworthy that South Korean political parties often revolve around a single leader, lacking strong grassroots bases or clear ideological platforms (Heo, 2020). These "cadre parties" are elite-driven, focusing more on electoral success than representing specific societal interests or classes (Shin and Moon, 2017). As such, South Korean presidents or party leaders often embody the entire political landscape, blurring distinctions between presidential foreign policy and party ideology.

TABLE 1. SOUTH KOREAN ADMINISTRATIONS AND THEIR STANCES TOWARDS NORTH KOREA, CHINA, AND THE US: HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY ELEMENTS

	Liberal administrations	Conservative administrations
North Korea	Emphasis on inter-Korean relations	Emphasis on international cooperation
	Focus on pragmatism (results)	Focus on ideology (principles)
	Recognition of North Korea	Condemnation of North Korea
	Perception of cooperation and engagement	Perception of hostility and containment

	Liberal administrations	Conservative administrations
China	Emphasis on political and economic cooperation and engagement	Emphasis on economic cooperation and engagement
	More universalist stance	More pragmatic stance
US	Prioritization of alliance maintenance	Prioritization of alliance maintenance
	Moderate alignment	Unrestricted alignment

Source: Mosler (2022); Milani (2019); Choo, (2019); Kang (2019); Snyder (2018); Heo (2020); Minister of National Defense (2008; 2011; 2012; 2018; 2019; 2020; 2021)

ASSESSING PERCEPTIONS ON CHINA, THE US, AND NORTH KOREA DURING LEE MYUNG-BAK'S GOVERNMENT

The election of Lee Myung-bak (2008–2012) marked a shift in South Korea's government priorities in 2008. As the former CEO of Hyundai and the mayor of Seoul in 2002, Lee was regarded as a significant hope for the resurgence of the Grand National Party (GNP), one of the predecessors of the current largest conservative faction, the People Power Party (PPP). Born in Japan in 1941 during World War II, Lee returned to Korea with his family in 1946. While studying at Seoul National University in 1961, he was imprisoned for protesting against the Park Chung-hee regime and the normalization of relations between South Korea and Japan in 1962. After graduating, he was blacklisted by the government, limiting his career opportunities. However, in 1965, he began working at Hyundai, which was still a small company at the time. He built his career there until 1992, when he entered politics, running for a seat in the National Assembly as a conservative party member. Elected in 1996, he later resigned after being found guilty of misappropriating election funds and subsequently moved to the United States in self-imposed exile.

Lee's presidency represented a return to neoliberalism, pro-US policies, and anti-communism, with a strong stance against North Korea. After a decade of progressive leadership under Kim Dae-jung (1998–2003) and Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2008), the conservative Lee government placed South Korea in a new regime of perspectives regarding North Korea, the US partnership, and China's rise. The regional environment during Lee's presidency was characterized by substantial transformations, including shifts in US foreign policy under the Asia Pivot strategy, which created opportunities for stronger US-South Korea relations. Meanwhile, China was rising as the world's second-largest economy, maintaining growth rates of over 7% annually and surpassing Japan's economy in 2010. In the East Asian region, territorial tensions heightened, particularly in the South China Sea and the East China Sea, despite the region's economic dynamism. In North Korea, Kim Jong-il's death led to the ascension of Kim Jong-un in 2011. The Cheonan and Yeonpyeong incidents also created new friction between North and South Korea.

Lee's administration sought to bolster South Korea's global presence through the "Global Korea" policy, positioning the

country as a significant international player that promoted human rights and liberal values (Snyder, 2018). This reflected Lee's background as a businessman, emphasizing "creative pragmatism" in forming international partnerships based on shared values. This policy represented a departure from previous administrations' focus on inter-Korean cooperation and aimed to recover South Korea's diplomacy from what was seen as a "lost decade" (Snyder, 2018). Lee's stance towards North Korea emphasized denuclearization and the 'Opening 3000' initiative, while recalibrating South Korea-US relations, aligning more closely with US policies under the 2009 Joint Vision Statement. Lee's administration's strategic partnership with the US marked a new phase in inter-Korean relations and strengthened South Korea's position as a regional middle power.

Lee's early speeches clearly articulated his perceptions of North Korea. In his 2008 inaugural address, he emphasized that inter-Korean cooperation would be conditional on North Korea's denuclearization. He stated that "if North Korea gives up its nuclear weapons and chooses the path of openness, a new horizon will open in inter-Korean cooperation" (Lee, 2008). Despite South Korea's shift in approach, North Korea persisted with its nuclear ambitions, escalating provocations that increased regional tensions.

Lee's administration, which began with expectations of mutual reciprocity and the cessation of unilateral aid, ultimately shifted toward isolating North Korea by 2012, amid a growing perception of threat. Lee's policies echoed those of previous conservative governments, prioritizing containment over engagement. North Korea once again became South Korea's primary adversary, while ROK-US ties deepened. In his 88th radio address in 2012, Lee emphasized international cooperation and a zero-tolerance approach toward North Korea's provocations, stating that "the way for North Korea to survive is to give up its nuclear weapons and cooperate with the international community" (Lee, 2012).

Official government documents, such as the Diplomatic and Defense White Papers, illustrate South Korea's evolving stance toward North Korea. Initially, North Korea was viewed as an active participant in profit-oriented programs, but by 2012, the focus shifted to international efforts addressing North Korea's nuclear threat as a global issue (Ministry of National Defense, 2008; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2012).

In this context, Lee Myung-bak's administration underscored the importance of cooperation with both the United States and China in addressing the nuclear threat posed by North Korea. From the outset, President Lee emphasized strengthening South Korea's strategic alliance with the U.S., as noted in his 2008 inaugural speech (Lee, 2008). The 2009 *Joint Vision for the Alliance* aimed to address regional and global security challenges through a strategic partnership (Minister of National Defense, 2012). In 2010, the *Guidelines for ROK-US Defense Cooperation* reaffirmed joint defensive postures, while the *Counter-Provocation*

Plan coordinated military responses to North Korean threats (Minister of National Defense, 2012). Lee's historic 2010 visit to the U.S., the first by a South Korean president in 13 years, marked a pivotal moment in U.S.-ROK relations. During the summit, Lee and President Obama agreed to postpone the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) to 2015, emphasizing the U.S.'s commitment to South Korea amid escalating North Korean military pressures (Snyder, 2018; Minister of National Defense, 2012). It is clear that rising tensions with North Korea led to a closer alignment between the U.S. and South Korea, a shift also noted by China.

Regarding China, as an important regional actor, Beijing was considered a crucial partner for South Korea. Following the 2008 South Korean presidential elections, Lee stated during a meeting with Chinese business leaders that he and President Hu Jintao had agreed to upgrade the "comprehensive cooperative partnership" to a "strategic cooperative partnership" and to cooperate in various fields, including politics, economy, society, and culture (Lee, 2008). Furthermore, Lee emphasized that "the two countries share a common emphasis on fact-finding and practicality," highlighting that his "creative pragmatism" and President Hu's "scientific view of development" were aligned in their efforts to create an advanced and harmonious society (Lee, 2008). The primary goal of Lee's administration toward China was to pursue a "practical policy" that would promote coexistence based on substance and practice, while simultaneously maintaining strong relations with both the U.S. and China (Lee, 2008). This pragmatism was reiterated in Lee's instructions to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade when he declared:

> I am neither pro-American nor pro-Chinese. Korea can become an ally either with the US or China as long as the two countries can maximize their national interests. In this age, there is no alliance unless each country's national interests are maximized. The US cannot be an exception. I think the US would not maintain an alliance with Korea if the country considers the bilateral relations go against its interests. (Lee, 2008)

The importance of China for South Korea was primarily economic, as China became South Korea's largest trading partner during the 2010s, while South Korea became China's third-largest trading partner, despite the 2008 global financial crisis (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011). However, the expanding economic and cultural relations were challenged by North Korea's military actions, particularly during the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong Island incidents. At the time, China refused to participate in an international investigation of the Cheonan incident, arguing that the report was inconclusive and preventing the issue from being addressed at the UN Security Council (Snyder, 2018, p. 155; Hwang, 2012).

China also protested against the U.S.-ROK military responses to North Korea, viewing them as evidence of South Korea's tilt toward the U.S. South Korea's 2011 *Diplomatic White Paper* noted Beijing's

opposition to measures against North Korea, despite their shared goal of maintaining peace on the Korean Peninsula (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011). Additionally, incidents involving illegal intrusions by Chinese fishermen into South Korean waters, including a confrontation with a South Korean Coast Guard vessel, further strained China-ROK relations during Lee's government (Snyder, 2018).

Despite these tensions, South Korea sought to avoid direct confrontation with China. The 2012 Defense and Diplomatic White Papers addressed incidents involving North Korea and China's responses but emphasized the importance of the economic partnership with China, suggesting that disagreements between partners are natural. This behavior reflected South Korea's concern about being perceived solely as a U.S. ally, especially as the U.S. increased its presence in the region through the "Pivot to Asia" policy. Consequently, official documents rarely took a critical stance toward China, and Lee seldom discussed China beyond economic ties, adopting a pragmatic approach to ROK-China relations. Military and strategic cooperation with China was framed within trilateral relations involving China, South Korea, and Japan, with few bilateral initiatives. Lee's 2012 visit to China highlighted South Korea's ambiguous stance toward China, aligning with the second hypothesis of this article: while South Korea moved closer to the U.S. due to North Korean threats, it remained cautious or silent regarding China, hoping that China would help contain North Korea.

At the time, the regional strategic landscape was not yet dominated by U.S.-China competition. The period was marked by China's transformation into an economic power and its initial shift toward a more assertive foreign policy. However, increased tensions between the U.S. and China became more pronounced later, particularly with Xi Jinping's more active global strategy. Therefore, it is difficult to argue that South Korea adopted a balancing posture toward China during this period; rather, there was a clear inclination toward the U.S., especially in military matters, as a means of mitigating the North Korean nuclear threat.

Notably, the expectation of balancing the "strategic partnership" with China and the "strategic alliance" with the U.S. persisted throughout Lee's administration, although it was jeopardized by the North Korean issue. The hope of expanding cooperation with China beyond the economic realm, to include strategic and security dimensions, as envisioned early in Lee's term, was never fully realized. Consequently, ROK-China relations stagnated, remaining largely economic in nature.

Interestingly, the initial expectation of establishing a balanced relationship with the U.S. and China during the early days of Lee's administration aligns with the third hypothesis (H3) of this article. This hypothesis posits that when North Korea is perceived as a lesser threat, South Korea exhibits more hedging behavior or greater ambiguity toward China and the U.S. However, as North Korea's threat

perception escalated with nuclear tests and hostile actions, Lee's administration aligned more closely with the U.S. while remaining silent toward China.

Lee's government ended with strained relations with China, despite efforts at reconciliation in 2012 through Lee's visit to China and discussions about a bilateral free trade agreement (FTA), illegal fishing, and resuming the Six-Party Talks (Hwang, 2012). The administration also failed to establish a cooperative relationship with North Korea or achieve denuclearization. However, closer cooperation with the U.S. was a notable success by the end of Lee's administration, with strengthened ROK-U.S. ties aligning with the leadership's political and ideological preferences for Washington. This indicates the administration's inclination to balance with the U.S. to enhance security against the North Korean threat while maintaining economic relations with China.

ASSESSING PERCEPTIONS OF CHINA, THE U.S., AND NORTH KOREA DURING THE MOON JAE-IN ADMINISTRATION

Moon Jae-in was born into a family of North Korean refugees and former civil servants who faced severe poverty following their displacement due to ideological disputes inherited from the Korean War. He graduated from Kyung Hee University with a law degree, earned through a scholarship, and was active in the student movement during the Fourth Korea Republic (1972–1981), which spanned the latter half of Park Chung Hee's regime and the early years of Chun Doo-hwan's presidency. Due to his opposition to the government, Moon was barred from public sector employment, leading him to a career advocating for labor rights. During Roh Moo-hyun's presidency (2003–2008), Moon served as Presidential Secretary and coordinated Roh's defense during the National Assembly's 2004 impeachment attempt.

Profound changes occurred in Northeast Asia in the early 2010s. In 2011, Kim Jong-il's death ushered in Kim Jong-un as North Korea's leader. In 2013, Xi Jinping replaced Hu Jintao as China's president, aiming to maintain China's economic power. In the U.S., Barack Obama commenced his second term, focusing on Asia with the Pivot to Asia policy following troop withdrawals from the Middle East. Park Geunhye was elected in South Korea in 2013 as the country's first female president. Despite her conservative background, she maintained close relations with President Xi and attempted to balance relations between South Korea and Japan. However, North Korea's nuclear threats led her to adopt the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system, which caused controversy and eroded her domestic standing. Following her impeachment, Moon Jae-in won the 2017 presidential election as the Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) candidate, viewed as a response to public discontent with North Korea policy and the corruption scandals under Park.

During Moon's presidency, South Korea's regional environment underwent

significant shifts due to key events in neighboring countries. Moon inherited tensions with China over the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD deployment, initiated by his predecessor. Meanwhile, Donald Trump's 2017 presidency shifted U.S. foreign policy, scaling back the Obama administration's Asia-centered approach in favor of domestic priorities. In October of the same year, China embarked on a new era of "socialism with Chinese characteristics," reinforcing Xi Jinping's leadership.

Moon Jae-in's foreign policy, inaugurated in 2017, aimed to establish a peaceful and prosperous South Korea. Among the "100 Policy Tasks for the Future," key foreign policy objectives included: peacefully resolving the North Korean nuclear issue (Task 95), creating a Northeast Asian Plus Community (Task 98), and building diverse diplomatic cooperation with the four major powers interested in the Korean Peninsula (Task 97) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018). A significant focus was the transfer of Military Operational Control (OPCON) to Korean command, a goal delayed since the Lee Myung-bak administration, reflecting a push for strategic autonomy. This marked a universalist approach toward China and a moderately aligned position with the U.S., characteristic of progressive governance.

Moon's administration also launched the New Southern Policy, aimed at diversifying South Korea's economic and political partnerships by strengthening ties with ASEAN nations. Under the banner of "peace, prosperity, and people," this policy emphasized presidential diplomacy, including Moon's visits to Vietnam, and fostering people-to-people exchanges (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018). In parallel, the New Northern Policy sought to enhance ties with Eurasian nations, promoting peace and cooperation, notably through economic collaboration with Russia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018).

A key priority for Moon was establishing dialogue with North Korea to de-escalate tensions caused by its nuclear tests. In his first New Year's speech, Moon stated:

> I was able to consistently advocate for the principle of peace on the Korean Peninsula to the four surrounding countries and the international community. As a proud middle power, we were able to declare the New Northern Policy and the New Southern Policy. We were able to continuously raise the need for dialogue in inter-Korean relations. (Moon, 2018).

Moon's approach to North Korea, referred to as the "Policy for the Korean Peninsula," was rooted in a long-term, comprehensive strategy aimed at peaceful coexistence and prosperity (Mosler, 2022; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018). This policy emphasized mutual respect, political openness, and a commitment to sovereignty, explicitly rejecting any forced reunification of the North (Mosler, 2022). Notably, Moon's administration viewed North Korea as a cooperative partner in a regional peace project, with efforts supported by neighboring countries and the international community (Mosler, 2022; Minister of Foreign Affairs, 2018).

Moon's government pursued three primary goals for inter-Korean relations: denuclearization, building a sustainable relationship with North Korea, and creating an economic community between the Koreas. The 2018 PyeongChang Olympics, summits with China, the U.S., Japan, and North Korea, and the Panmunjom Declaration exemplified Moon's proactive approach to diplomacy. As Mosler (2022) notes, by opening dialogue and prioritizing peace, Moon's government reconciles denuclearization with discussions on unification (Minister of Foreign Affairs, 2019).

The 2018 South Korean Defense White Paper presents North Korea as an ambiguous actor, noting its role as a security threat while highlighting efforts toward denuclearization and unification through participation in diplomatic events. The April 27, 2018, Inter-Korean Summit—the first meeting between Korean leaders since 2007—marked the first time a North Korean leader visited the Republic of Korea (ROK). The Panmunjom Declaration, signed by Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong-un, aimed to reduce tensions and build confidence, with both countries working toward denuclearization and peace with international support (Ministry of National Defense, 2018).

Moon's administration hosted and participated in multilateral forums, such as the Seoul Defense Dialogue (SDD), Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue (NEACD), and the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus), to support the Panmunjom Declaration. Follow-up summits on May 26 and September 18, 2018, focused on implementing the Declaration, developing action plans, and demilitarizing border areas.

Two other goals of Moon Jae-in's inter-Korean foreign policy were based on mutual respect and openness. The second objective sought to build a sustainable inter-Korean relationship by institutionalizing dialogues and formulating a national consensus on relations with North Korea. In his inaugural speech, President Moon emphasized the importance of ending political division and conflict, stating, "The opposition party is a partner in running state affairs" (Moon, 2017b). Moon's administration aimed to achieve a national consensus on policies toward North Korea and broader discussions on unification (Ministry of Unification, 2017; Moon, 2017b). The third goal was to create a new economic community between the Koreas, promoting economic cooperation as a pillar of peace on the peninsula. This objective advocated for coexistence, co-prosperity, and mutual growth, with the aim of integrating this community into a new regional economic order through the "Three Economic Belts." China and Japan were seen as key collaborators in achieving this goal (Ministry of Unification, 2017; Mosler, 2022).

Another significant player in Moon Jae-in's foreign policy and South Korea's security issues was China. Following the tensions related to the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) dispute, Moon's administration worked diligently to strengthen cooperation and ease tensions between the two countries. In 2018 alone,

there were four bilateral meetings between Moon Jae-in and Xi Jinping, along with 14 other meetings between leaders and ministers from both nations. During one of Moon's visits, he declared that he "would like to calmly solidify the foundation for a new era between the two countries based on trust and friendship between the two leaders" (Moon, 2017a). Highlighting the principles of his administration—people first—Moon also stated,

> I also hope to reaffirm our common position to peacefully resolve the North Korean nuclear issue, which threatens peace and security not only in Northeast Asia but also around the world, and to establish permanent peace on the Korean Peninsula, and to discuss specific cooperation measures. (Moon, 2017a)

During the December 2017 ROK–China Summit, the leaders agreed to expand bilateral cooperation in politics, diplomacy, and security, revitalizing strategic dialogues. By December 2018, defense authorities had agreed to fully normalize defense exchanges (Ministry of National Defense, 2018; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019). Moon Jae-in's approach to China mirrored that of previous conservative administrations, pragmatically engaging China based on national interests. While recognizing China's economic importance and its influence over North Korea, Moon's government sought to reduce its reliance on Chinese support for addressing North Korea and denuclearization (Choo, 2020). Despite the close relationship, the issue of THAAD remained sensitive, with pressure from both China and the U.S. Initially classified as temporary by Moon's government, THAAD's deployment was confirmed in 2018 after meetings with President Trump, placing South Korea in an ambiguous position. Meanwhile, North Korea sought China's diplomatic support for denuclearization, and South Korea pursued expanded economic cooperation, including visits by North Korean economic delegations to China (Ministry of National Defense, 2018).

In an effort to improve relations with China and mitigate backlash, South Korea established the so-called "Three Nos"—no additional THAAD deployment, no participation in the U.S. missile defense network, and no establishment of a trilateral military alliance with the U.S. and Japan (Park, 2017). This policy was intended to ensure security and facilitate progress in restoring bilateral relations. However, the deployment of THAAD toward the end of the Moon administration extended the challenge to his successor, concluding his presidency with a significant deterioration in relations between South Korea and China (Choo, 2020).

The THAAD issue also highlights the role of the U.S. as an important actor in this context. During his inaugural speech, Moon declared, "*We will further strengthen the ROK–U.S. alliance. On the one hand, we will negotiate seriously with the U.S. and China to resolve the THAAD issue. Strong*

security comes from strong national defense capabilities. We will strive to strengthen our independent national defense" (Moon, 2017b).

In this regard, the Moon administration continued with the traditional paradigm of a strategic alliance with the U.S., but unlike previous governments, South Korea viewed the U.S. as a partner rather than the primary actor in the Korean Peninsula peace process. Consequently, South Korea aimed to take the lead in the matter while maintaining cooperation with both the U.S. and China, illustrating Seoul's hedging behavior.

On June 12, 2018, the first-ever U.S.–DPRK Summit resulted in North Korea agreeing to establish new relations with the U.S., fully denuclearize, and repatriate the remains of U.S. soldiers killed in the Korean War (Ministry of National Defense, 2020). The Republic of Korea Armed Forces maintained a robust military readiness posture, closely coordinating with the U.S. to deter provocations from North Korea and respond decisively if provoked (Ministry of National Defense, 2020). Both the ROK and the U.S. bolstered their combined deterrence and response capabilities through a bilateral "tailored deterrence strategy" designed to counter North Korean nuclear and missile threats. This strategy was optimized for the Korean Peninsula's unique dynamics, taking into account the characteristics of North Korean leadership and the specific nuclear and missile threats (Ministry of National Defense, 2020). The U.S. outlined clear objectives for North Korea's denuclearization in the 2018 National Security Strategy and affirmed zero tolerance for any nuclear attacks by North Korea. At the 50th Security Consultative Meeting (SCM), the ROK Minister of National Defense and the U.S. Secretary of Defense agreed to enhance coordination toward achieving complete, verifiable denuclearization and establishing permanent peace on the Korean Peninsula (Ministry of National Defense, 2020). Throughout the Moon administration, diplomatic white papers emphasized the paramount importance of the U.S. alliance for maintaining dialogue with North Korea. Military cooperation, including the return of Operational Control (OPCON) to Korean authority, was highlighted as crucial for sustaining this strategic alliance with the U.S. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018, 2019, 2020).

However, as North Korea reassessed the diplomatic advances of the first two years of agreements for denuclearization and peace on the peninsula, and as the country conducted new nuclear tests, South Korea found itself increasingly cornered into continuing its conciliatory policy. By the end of the Trump administration and into the Biden administration, with the failure of inter-Korean policies and the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, South Korea reverted to the cycle of reaffirming its alliance with the U.S. to resume dialogues with the North.

TABLE 2. COMPARISON OF GOVERNMENTS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR TOWARDS NORTH KOREA, US AND CHINA

	Lee Myung-bak's government	Moon Jae-in's government
North Korea	Condemnation of North Korea's action, sought for international cooperation to isolate Pyongyang after 2009. High perception of threat due to nuclear testing and the military incidents of *Cheonan* and *Yeonpyeong*	Emphasis on inter-Korean relations (from 2017 to 2020, this was one of the priorities of the Moon administration) Recognition with perception of cooperation (highlighted by the occurrence of three inter-Korean summits in 2018);
China	Initially universalist, ended up with a pragmatic stance due to North Korea's nuclear threat	Initially adopts a pragmatic stance just like the previous government, understanding China's economic importance. Ended up with troubled ties as Moon dismissed China's collaboration to the North Korea issue and continued the negotiations to the THAAD
US	Prioritization of alliance maintenance with strong alignment (the increased threat perception made Lee side with the US)	Prioritization of alliance maintenance with moderate alignment (US as a partner to achieve peace and not as the mediator)

Source: Own elaboration.

CONCLUSION

In navigating the strategic complexities of the Indo-Pacific region, South Korea plays a pivotal role amid the intensifying competition between the United States and China. This article has demonstrated that South Korea's strategic behavior is significantly shaped by evolving perceptions of threats and opportunities, as well as by the individual images and ideologies of its leaders. Our findings emphasize the decisive role that North Korea and its regional behavior play in shaping South Korea's choices regarding its alliances with the United States and its relations with China.

Specifically, we found that when the regional environment becomes more restrictive and the perceived threat from North Korea increases, South Korea tends to reinforce its alliance with the U.S., while simultaneously maintaining a degree of ambiguity or hedging in its relationship with China. This strategic balancing reflects a calculated effort to leverage China's influence over North Korea to reduce tensions on the Korean Peninsula (H2). Notably, this pattern persists across both progressive and conservative administrations, demonstrating that political-ideological affiliations do not solely determine South Korea's approach, particularly with respect to China (H1a and H2a). Instead, leaders' perceptions of threats and opportunities, as well as their evaluations of the broader regional environment, directly shape their strategic calculations in pursuit of national interests.

From a theoretical perspective, this analysis supports key assumptions of neoclassical realism, showing that while external pressures influence a country's foreign policy, they do not entirely determine state behavior. Domestic factors, including leaders' perceptions and assessments, play a crucial role in shaping foreign policy decisions,

often surpassing ideological considerations. This underscores the importance of integrating both systemic and state-level analyses within the broader framework of international relations theory, particularly when evaluating the strategic behavior of middle powers like South Korea.

Our analysis focuses primarily on the administrations of Lee Myung-bak and Moon Jae-in, both of which faced relatively similar regional and systemic pressures. Despite these pressures, South Korea consistently maintained an ambiguous stance and exhibited hedging behavior. However, it is noteworthy that the Lee Myung-bak administration leaned more towards a closer relationship with the U.S. Using a neoclassical realist approach, we have shown that these decisions are also influenced by the specific presidents' perceptions, images, and assessments of opportunities. A deeper exploration of Park Geun-hye's administration, with its distinct threat perceptions and political orientation, could reveal additional nuances and potential variations in South Korea's strategic behavior. Moreover, while this study provides a strong foundation for understanding South Korea's hedging strategy, further analysis of China's responses and strategic calculations during this period would offer a more comprehensive picture of broader regional dynamics.

Additionally, our observations suggest that when the perceived threat from North Korea diminishes, South Korea is more inclined to adopt hedging behavior and a more ambiguous stance toward both China and the U.S. (H3). Ultimately, South Korea's strategic decisions are shaped by its unique geopolitical context, where managing relations with the U.S. and China, while addressing the North Korean threat, remains paramount in shaping its foreign and security policies.

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South Korea's leaders' perceptions and the decision of hedging: Assessing China, the US and North Korea's role
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