

GREAT DECISIONS

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HIGH SCHOOL

MARCH 2024

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THE FUTURE OF KOREA



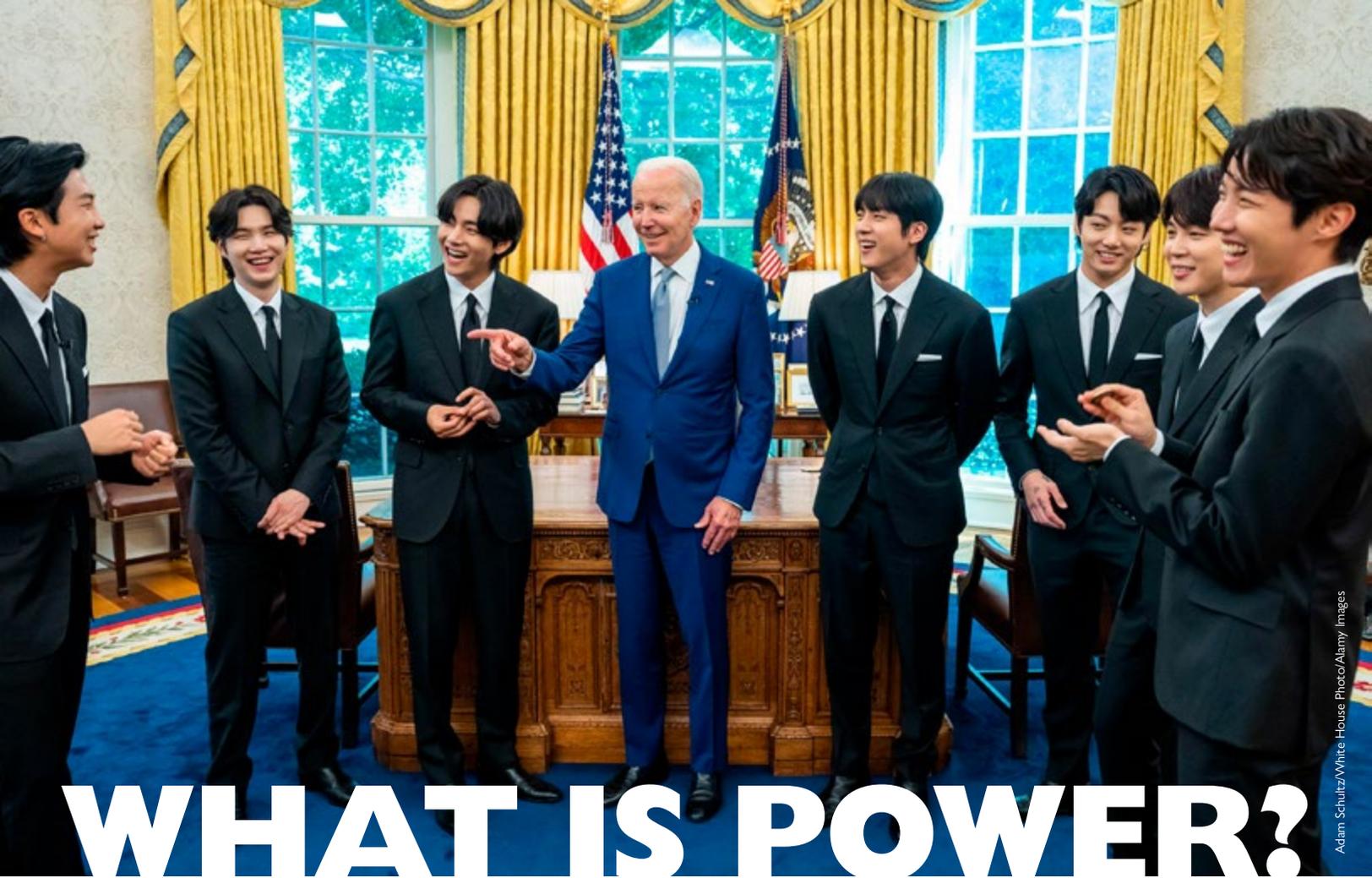
**KOREAN
WAVE**

**THE TWO
KOREAS**

**AN
INTERNATIONAL
THREAT**

**A UNIFIED
FUTURE?**

BY ALLISON GUSTAVSON



Adam Schutzi/White House Photo/Alamy Images

WHAT IS POWER?

K-pop superstars BTS meet with US president Joe Biden in the Oval Office in 2022. The group was invited to the White House to discuss anti-Asian hate crimes in America and how they could use their fame to help.

Humans generally seek to establish and retain a sense of power. Some become bullies, using intimidation and physical strength to dominate. Others develop skills, such as excelling at sports or learning to play instruments, to earn the respect and admiration of their peers.

Geopolitics is no different. Though vastly more complex, countries must assess their strengths and vulnerabilities as they pursue power.

Many countries use **hard power**—“money, soldiers, and bullets”—to achieve their aims, much like bullies. Wars are the most extreme manifestation

of the pursuit of hard power. **Soft power**, on the other hand, points to a country’s attempts to attract the eyes of the world and gain respect through culture. Most countries try to use both hard and soft power to increase their global impact. But few countries in history have wielded soft power as effectively as modern-day South Korea.

THE KOREAN WAVE

Chances are, you either are or know someone among the estimated 178 million fans of **hallyu**, or the “Korean Wave” of K-pop music, movies, and TV that has taken the globe by storm.

This cultural phenomenon

did not come from nowhere. It emerged as part of a government-led effort to promote Korean culture and diplomacy after many decades of pain, struggle, and uncertainty on the Korean Peninsula. Among the millions of screaming fans at Blackpink or BTS concerts, the 4.9 billion viewers of the rapper Psy’s catchy “Gangnam Style” music video, and those who spent a collective 1.65 billion hours watching *Squid Game* in its first twenty-eight days on Netflix, most are probably unaware of just how hard-won such triumphs truly are. These fans are simply reveling in hallyu’s colorful, joyful sense of “cool.”

Considering the bright lights

and general hubbub of downtown Seoul today, it is almost impossible to fathom how drastically the conditions are just 35 miles away in North Korea, across the **demilitarized zone** that separates Korea into two countries. As one of the most repressive countries in the world, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)—commonly known as North Korea—has been ruled for decades by a tyrannical family of leaders. They have used violence, **propaganda**, surveillance, public executions, and **gulags** to isolate their citizens from the rest of the world, including their own families in the south.

How a once-unified Korea was split into two countries—and how each population continues to struggle for freedom, dignity, and self-determination—is a story worth knowing. There is much to learn from Korea's resilience in the face of exploitation and manipulation by world superpowers.



SOUTH AND NORTH

Korea is a peninsula that borders China and Russia and points towards Japan. Because of this geography, its history is intimately connected to these three global powers. For China, Korea represented a buffer against aggression; Japan saw a valuable access point to mainland Asia; Russia wanted unfettered access to the Pacific Ocean. Korea's own preferences were beside the point.

After centuries of being controlled by China, Korea gained independence in 1895. Koreans had a dilemma: remain “closed and traditional,” like China, or move towards the system of

THE DEBATE

DOES HALLYU SEEM LIKE AN ACCURATE REPRESENTATION OF KOREAN CULTURE?

YES

- ✓ South Korean artists are expressing themselves in their own unique way.
- ✓ There is a huge amount of Korean music, movies, and TV shows, all showing different aspects of Korean culture.
- ✓ Before hallyu, it was rare for people in the US to get a glimpse of life in Korea.

NO

- ✗ It leaves out North Korean viewpoints.
- ✗ It focuses more on fun and excitement than serious issues.
- ✗ It is carefully created to show certain views of Korean life.





Driedprawns at en.wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org)

North Korean, South Korean, and United Nations forces all stand guard at the border between North and South Korea. Both nations fear that the other could launch an attack at any time.

industrial capitalism increasingly taking root in Asia. Just ten years later, however, a battle between Russia and Japan led to Japanese control of Korea, which found itself being used as a pawn in a bigger geopolitical game.

The period between 1910 and 1945 was largely experienced by Koreans as a dark and painful time of oppression, cultural erasure (the Korean language was banned and citizens were forced to take Japanese names), and deep discrimination that fractured and terrorized the population. The tragic reality of their lives under Japanese occupation did not, however, lessen Koreans' desire for freedom.

JAPAN'S DEFEAT

With Japan's unconditional surrender at the end of World War II, its horrific occupation of Korea

came to an abrupt end. Japanese rule over Korea left behind many legacies of trauma, but had also brought a number of important changes that would impact Korean development for decades to come. From education and infrastructure to agricultural and industrial development, Japan had helped lay the groundwork for Korea's transformation into a modern economy.

Korea's new chapter began, though, with the social and economic devastation that can accompany an abrupt withdrawal of an occupying power. While Koreans at home and abroad assumed the country would finally gain its long-sought independence, the US and its allies had their own vision of how to control the region. Policymakers in these countries decided first that Korea should be placed in a "trusteeship" by the

Soviet Union, the US, the UK, and China for up to five years before they'd consider allowing self-governance.

A NATION SPLIT

Worried that the Soviet Union would take over the entire Korean Peninsula as **Cold War** tensions rose, the US suggested that they divide it in half rather than fight over the territory. A US junior colonel was, absurdly, tasked with figuring out where to draw the line. Wanting to keep Seoul for the US and seeing no natural or geographical boundary, he chose the 38th parallel after seeing it on a *National Geographic* map, rather than for any good political reason. The Americans would occupy the south. The Russians would control the north. To this day, the world lives with the consequences of this decision.

THE KOREAN WAR

Syngman Rhee was a political prisoner who spent many years in the US, even becoming the first Korean to receive a doctorate degree from a US university (Princeton). Rhee was elected as the first president of South Korea in 1948.

Kim Il-sung, the first leader of the Kim **dynasty**, had served both the Chinese **Communist** Party and the Russian military. Trusted by Soviet leader Joseph Stalin as a devoted communist, he was installed as leader of the DPRK in 1948. With Rhee in place, the US was glad to withdraw from South Korea to focus on fighting communism in Western Europe. The Soviet Union formally withdrew as well, but continued to support the new Kim regime both economically and militarily.

In 1950, [North Koreans invaded an unready South](#), with support from Russia and China, beginning the **Korean War**. This got the attention of the US: Korea was now ground zero of the emerging Cold War. Had an American-led UN force not intervened, Kim would have likely succeeded. The bloody war continued for three years, until a ceasefire was reached in 1953. With three million Koreans, one million Chinese, and thirty-four thousand Americans killed and the peninsula in ruins, nobody won. Both South and North Korea deepened alliances with their respective international supporters.

While both countries were decimated by the war, the next several decades would unfold very differently for North and South Korea. Encouraged to move towards

THE DEBATE

IS KOREAN REUNIFICATION NEEDED?

YES

- ✓ It is the only way life will improve for North Koreans.
- ✓ Koreans have a shared history and culture.
- ✓ Korea should return to the way it was before other countries intervened.

NO

- ✗ North and South Korea have existed as separate nations for decades.
- ✗ The two Koreas are too different to be a single country again.
- ✗ Reunification could cause major issues in Korea's economy.



progress and development, South Koreans ultimately built a thriving economy, high standard of living, and a democratic government. By 2022, South Korea had even become the world's sixth-largest exporter, with companies selling

everything from cars and electronics to beauty products. Wealth inequality, however, remains a pervasive problem, as was illustrated in the film *Parasite*, which won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 2020.



South Korean filmmaker Bong Joon-ho (left) poses with actor Song Kang-ho (right), star of Bong's 2019 film Parasite. Parasite is the highest-grossing Korean film of all time and was the first non-English-language film to win the Oscar for Best Picture.



KCNA/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

North Korean leader Kim Jong-un poses with children in traditional Korean clothing. North Korean citizens are required to celebrate the Kim family and harshly punished for any public disrespect of their leader.

NORTH KOREA AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Though his invasion of South Korea failed, Kim Il-sung developed a cult of personality that would lay the groundwork for his successors and shape North Korea to this day. Children are taught to revere the Kims as godlike figures (every home must even display their dust-free

portraits, subject to unannounced inspections). *Songbun*, a form of social control or **caste system**, categorizes every citizen according to status and allegiance to the government. Most resources are directed toward strengthening the military to consolidate power, even at the expense of meeting citizens' basic needs.

Surveillance, repression, propaganda, and torture are central to the Kim family's maintenance of control. North Koreans are cut off from the outside world: there's only one state-controlled TV channel, and the country is not connected to the global internet. North Koreans remain largely unaware of how dire their situation is; they're taught to hate the US and other Western countries. In 2013, the UN established a commission to investigate the violation of human rights in the DPRK.

Upon his death, Kim Il-sung's leadership was transferred to his son Kim Jong-il. After that, it went to Kim Jong-il's son, the DPRK's current leader, Kim Jong-un. The later Kims have retained or even amplified the brutal tactics of Kim Il-sung, the original "Great Leader." Many had originally hoped that Kim Jong-un—who'd attended boarding school in Switzerland and loved Michael Jordan—would be a more modern leader, but he quickly showcased his ruthlessness by killing his half-brother and uncle to avoid any challenges to his leadership.

The Kims have retained an iron grip on North Korea, increasing its isolation from the outside world. Of particular and ongoing concern to the global community is the DPRK's development of nuclear weapons since the 1980s. Many attempts have been made to limit or halt North Korea's nuclear program, but they have been largely unsuccessful. To this day, North Korea continues to advance its nuclear program with the recent cooperation of Russia.

THE DEBATE

IS NORTH KOREA A THREAT TO THE US?

YES

- ✓ It is building nuclear bombs and other powerful weapons.
- ✓ Its leaders have openly expressed hatred of the US.
- ✓ North Korea has powerful allies, such as China and Russia, who are antagonistic to the US.

NO

- ✗ North Korea is too small and impoverished to put up a fight against the US military.
- ✗ The US has anti-missile systems in South Korea.
- ✗ North Korean missile tests are likely meant more as a way to look strong than an actual threat.



Zscout370 / Wikipedia

UNIFICATION

Most experts believe that the question of Korean unification is a matter of when, not if. North Koreans will need tremendous assistance in assimilating to the modern world, and South Koreans will likely bear an enormous cost (both financial and social) to uplifting their cousins in the north.

Whether unification takes place through a “hard landing” (the collapse of the Kim regime) or a “soft landing” (gradual change), that next chapter in the ever-shifting landscape of Korean governance will undoubtedly be a major event for Asia, with far-reaching and generational consequences for the entire world.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- **Read** [reliable news sources](#) to stay updated on developments in North and South Korea.
- **Tutor** North Korean students through [an organization such as Aurora NK](#) when you start college.
- **Watch** films about the [plight](#) of ordinary people in [North Korea](#) and spread the word.
- **Write or call** your elected [officials](#) to let them know what you think about the relationship between the US and Korea.
- **Vote, when you are old enough.** With few exceptions, you can't vote until you're 18. But in many states, you can register at 16 or 17, which means you'll be all set when 18 rolls around.

TEEN TRAILBLAZERS



Courtesy of Woori Lee

▲ Woori Lee

Woori Lee's grandfather was from North Korea; she knew the challenges. She and Jay Lee formed a [tutoring program](#) for North Korean refugees, pairing them with fellow college students for twice-weekly Zoom sessions. Their effort has since expanded to include support in navigating legal and healthcare issues in their new home countries.

Kim Yoon-song

[Kim Yoon-song](#) was one of three teenagers who had their heads shaved outside of the National Assembly building in Seoul, demanding that the legislature lower the voting age from nineteen to eighteen. As she told the *Korea Herald*, “I've been slapped on my face or got my hair pulled so many times at home for simply talking back to elders and expressing my opinions, only because I was a ‘teenager.’ Having the right to vote is to have the right to speak. It means to have the right to live as a human being.”



Chaire Lee/The Korea Herald



SONG AND DANCE

1. What is the cartoon trying to say about Kim Jong-un? Why do or don't you agree?
2. What is this cartoon trying to say about the difference between soft power and hard power? Which is shown to be stronger, and why?
3. What do you think this cartoonist thinks of North Korea's nuclear threats to the US, and why?

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN TO MAKE GREAT DECISIONS

1. Imagine Americans were required to treat the US president the way North Koreans are required to treat Kim Jong-un. How would you feel?
2. What role should the US play, if any, if North Korea and South Korea go to war with each other?
3. **YOUR STORY:** What are some of your favorite examples of Korean pop culture, and what do you like about them? How have they changed the way you think about Korea, if at all?

KEY WORDS & TERMS

caste system	dynasty	hard power
Cold War	geopolitics	Korean War
communist	gulags	propaganda
demilitarized zone	hallyu	soft power



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GREAT DECISIONS KOREA

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Special thanks to: Matt Barbari, Rodney Clark, MacDara King, Noel V. Lateef, Tonya Leigh, Elliott Rebhun, Diana Talantbekova