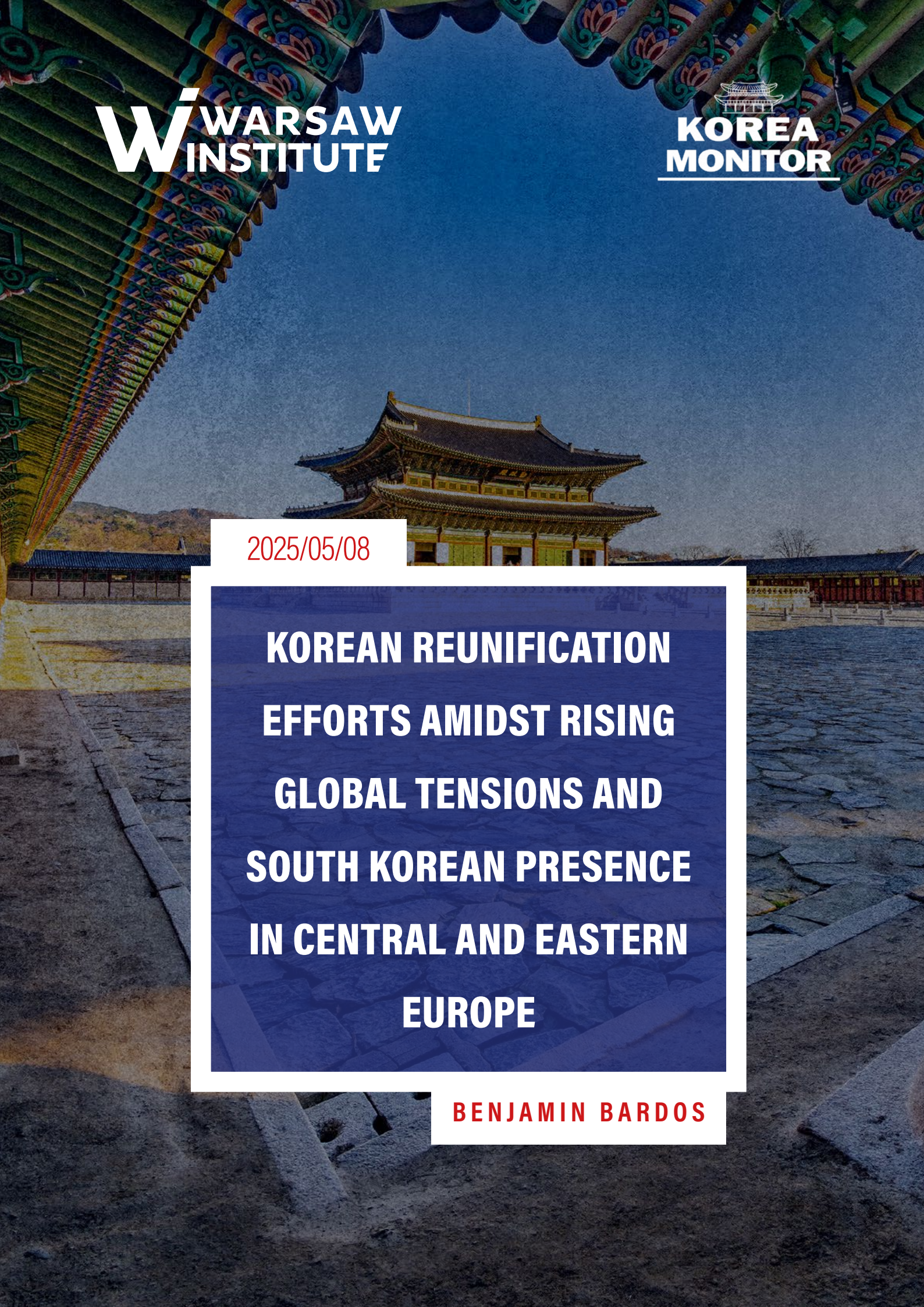

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KOREAN REUNIFICATION EFFORTS AMIDST RISING GLOBAL TENSIONS AND SOUTH KOREAN PRESENCE IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

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Tense and timid cooperation on reunification amidst global tensions between North and South Korea

The idea of reunification between North and South Korea seems to be stalled amidst recent global tensions, with North Korea ("N.K.") doubling down on their cooperation with Russia while South Korea ("S.K.") deepens ties with Central Eastern Europe ("CEE")[1].

N.K. has since the onset of global turbulence, brought about by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, chosen to cement its's ties with Russia all the while distancing itself from the collective west, inclusive of S.K. This represents a clear policy decision on the part of the N.K. leadership to abandon efforts aimed at mending the reunification efforts.

Meanwhile, S.K. has for reasons of both economic incentives and mutual interests expanded its presence significantly in the CEE region. This presence is importantly not just a market share in general commerce, but also in terms of security cooperation in military sales as well as strategic infrastructure construction.

Nevertheless, the notion of rejuvenated efforts at reunification have faded at an exceeding pace. In late 2023 N.K. launched their first spy satellite, with that being a flagrant escalation of tensions between the two states, S.K. suspended parts of the comprehensive military agreement ("CMA"). In response to which N.K. renounced its obligations[2] under the CMA fully reversing years of timid cooperation.

It is clearly visible, as Pyongyang in recent years makes no attempt to hide it, that they do not wish to pursue reunification. Kim Jong Un said as much, labelling South Korea as the "primary foe"[3], as well as tearing down a symbolic reunification monument in Pyongyang.[4]

However, the escalating hostility of Pyongyang far extends beyond renounced obligations and harsh statements, primarily with them sending troops and equipment to Ukraine to aid Russia's war effort. This action is possibly the most significant as its clearly and unequivocally demonstrates where and how N.K. envisions its future.

Its decision to support Russia's war is not some kind of blank cheque, but rather transactional in its nature[5]. N.K. via this partnership is set to significantly bolster its military capabilities as well as better sidestep sanctions limiting its military industry.

This deepening cooperation between Pyongyang and Moscow, and Beijing to a degree, were

1. The CEE region for all purposes means the Visegrad 4 ("V4") countries, that being, Poland, Hungary, Czechia, Slovakia.
2. US Naval Institute, 'North Korea Terminates Military Agreement with South Korea' (USNI News, 23 November 2023) https://news.usni.org/2023/11/23/north-korea-terminates-military-agreement-with-south-korea
3. Hyunsu Yim and Josh Smith, 'North Korea's Kim Calls to Change Status of South, Warns of War' (Reuters, 15 January 2024) https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/north-koreas-kim-calls-change-status-south-warns-war-2024-01-15/
4. Hyunsu Yim and Josh Smith, 'North Korea Tears Down Monument Symbolizing Union with South—Report' (Reuters, 23 January 2024) https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/north-korea-tears-down-monument-symbolizing-union-with-south-report-2024-01-23/
5. Stavros Atlamazoglou, 'Here Is What US Military Leaders in the Pacific Suspect North Korea Is Getting for Sending Troops and Weapons into Russia's War' (Business Insider, April 25,2025) https://www.businessinsider.com/what-north-korea-receiving-sending-troops-weapons-russia-war-2025-4

SOURCE: INTEGRATED SUNDAY SERVICE FOR INTER-KOREAN REUNIFICATION, FFWPU MISSION SUPPORT:
HTTPS://FAMILYFEDIHQ.ORG/2023/08/INTEGRATED-SUNDAY-SERVICE-FOR-INTER-KOREAN-REUNIFICATION/

remarked by the Armed Services committee as a "great concern to all of the west"[6]. Furthermore, this cooperation can result in N.K. gaining access to better military technology in the fields of nuclear and conventional capabilities.

All this goes to show how currently the idea of reunification or work towards it at least could not be more distant as tensions continue to rise again across the DMZ[7]. With this eerily reminiscent situation akin to the cold war Seoul's national security interests of thwarting Pyongyang's aggression have expanded in scope. In the sense that N.K. threat as now inexorably linked with Russia, meaning it is now in S.K. interest to engage, cooperate, and work together with countries that oppose Russian aggression, as it is via proxy countering N.K. as well. Despite recent tensions, the South Korean government remains committed to Korean reunification, actively developing new policy tailored to current challenges.

6. US Senate Armed Services Committee, 'Hearing on Global Security Challenges' (Full Transcript, 10 April 2025) https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/4102025fulltranscript.pdf
7. Demilitarized Zone at the 38th parallel

Partnership between Korea and CEE

One such set of partners which S.K. has recently seen prosperous cooperation with is the CEE region. This region faces the resurging threat of the Russian Federation ("R.F.") expansionism in Ukraine. Which when put into the context of R.F.'s cooperation with N.K. has poised this region to have common geopolitical goals with S.K.

Specifically, it is within the V4 countries that cooperation has blossomed with its member states having all elevated their individual political relationships with S.K. to a strategic partner[8]. As well as in 2021 the V4 summit in Budapest hosted S.K. too, in which further cooperation was agreed upon and industrial investment was prioritized.[9] This highlighted the receptiveness of the V4 region towards deeper cooperation and laid the steppingstones for further strategic cooperation.

Moreover, the cooperation is rather broad and has come to encompass both strategic infrastructure as well as defense procurements. Examples of such was Czechia's decision to choose the S.K. company KHNP to build the expansion of the Dukovany nuclear power station, a deal worth and estimated 17 billion USD. With Poland also being amidst consideration plans to build a nuclear power plant in cooperation with S.K.[10] While Slovakia still in being in the initial discussion phase about the Bohunice nuclear power plants expansion has expressed interest towards working together with S.K.[11]

Additionally, Hungary has seen a boom in S.K. foreign direct investment ("FDI") with investment projects such as and LG EV component factory[12] in Miskolc, a first for the company in Europe, as well as an even larger investment[13] in a tire factory by Hankook tire worth an estimated 540 mln EUR.

Albeit in a different fashion investment wise, but nevertheless very indicative and important, was the move of the S.K. Oppenheim law firm[14] opening its office in Budapest. This decision strongly indicates intent of S.K.'s to develop means to facilitate further expansion in Hungary as well as the CEE region.

However, the most striking and emphasized area of cooperation is in the defense sector, where Poland stands out with a landmark magnitude order of cooperation procurement wise. This agreement[15] includes high profile items such as MBT's, SPG's, and MLRS[16] systems.

8. Matej Šimalčík, 'Has South Korea Found Its Firm Foothold in Central Europe?' (CEIAS, 2023) https://ceias.eu/has-south-korea-found-its-firm-foothold-in-central-europe/
9. Martin Hála, 'Czech Republic External Relations Briefing: East–West Cooperation—Developing Ties with South Korea and ASEAN' (China-CEE Institute, 5 January 2022) https://china-cee.eu/2022/01/05/czech-republic-external-relations-briefing-east-west-cooperation-developing-ties-with-south-korea-and-asean/
10. Chosun Ilbo, 'LG Builds First EV Components Factory in Europe' (Chosun Ilbo, 5 March 2024) https://www.chosun.com/english/industry-en/2024/03/05/C6F4HGDSHNC65ADSWNAUPXCWXY/
11. World Nuclear News, 'Slovakia and South Korea Discuss Cooperation on Nuclear Energy' (World Nuclear News, 2024) https://www.world-nuclear-news.org/articles/slovakia-and-south-korea-discuss-cooperation-on-ne
12. LG Newsroom, 'LG Magna e-Powertrain Expands Footprint with New Facility in Hungary' (LG, 2024) https://www.lg.com/global/newsroom/news/corporate/lg-magna-e-powertrain-expands-footprint-with-new-facility-in-hungary/
13. Hankook Tire, 'New Production Line for Truck and Bus Tyres: Hankook Commences Expansion of Its European Plant' (Hankook Tire Media Center, 2024) https://www.hankooktire-mediacenter.com/press-release/news/new-production-line-for-truck-and-bus-tyres-hankook-commences-expansion-of-its-european-plant/
14. Jipyong LLC, 'JIPYONG Opens Office in Budapest' (Jipyong, 2024) https://www.jipyong.com/en/board/jipyongNews_post.php?seq=6754
15. Indo-Pacific Defense Forum, 'Poland-South Korea Defense Partnership Grows with Weapons Procurements' (IP Defense Forum, May 2024) https://ipdefenseforum.com/2024/05/poland-south-korea-defense-partnership-grows-with-weapons-procurements/
16. Main battle tanks, self-propelled artillery, and multiple launch rocket systems

SOURCE: JOINT STATEMENT ON THE OCCASION OF THE SECOND SUMMIT OF PRIME MINISTERS OF THE VISEGRAD GROUP AND THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA, THE CHANCELLERY OF THE PRIME MINISTER:

HTTPS://WWW.GOV.PL/WEB/PRIMEMINISTER/JOINT-STATEMENT-ON-THE-OCCASION-OF-THE-SECOND-SUMMIT-OF-PRIME-MINISTERS-OF-THE-VISEGRAD-GROUP-AND-THE-PRESIDENT-OF-THE-REPUBLIC-OF-KOREA

What can be expected of this cooperation between S.K. and CEE in the near long-term?

With current data[17] showing that this view of the CEE region being attractive for investment is a reciprocated position from S.K. as well as not only is the region well situated but also presents itself as an excellent gateway for S.K. into the European single market. These developments purport the idea of and ever closer realm of cooperation between S.K. and the CEE region, both in terms of economic and geopolitical issues. Therefore, engaging this partnership more extensively can serve to cushion the effects for the CEE region amidst the global economic western reorientation in the time of ongoing trade war[18], with the added benefit of relying on a trading partner that is a stalwart ally of the west.

Likewise, as eluded to earlier, deepening cooperation with the CEE region, and by proxy the EU albeit and individual member state basis, can help S.K. counter N.K. and its alliance system which it relies on so dearly. Such as by alleviating the energy pressure that Europe is in, particularly the CEE region, by aiding and cooperating on the development of nuclear energy can serve to lessen dependence on imported energy resources, particularly Russian energy. Such developments lessen Russia ability to finance the war as well as to aid N.K., ultimately to the benefit of S.K.

17. Trends Research and Advisory, 'Korean Investment in Central and Eastern European Countries: Lesson to Learn' (Trends Research, 2024) https://trendsresearch.org/insight/korean-investment-in-central-and-eastern-european-countries-lesson-to-learn/

18. Council on Foreign Relations, 'The Contentious U.S.-China Trade Relationship' (Council on Foreign Relations, 14 April 2025) https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/contentious-us-china-trade-relationship

In summary, the dynamic situation between North and South Korea is tangibly tense, with it showing no signs of easing. This has forced both sides, albeit S.K. doing so in a reactive manner to N.K., to deepen cooperation amongst its alliance networks, pitting N.K. and S.K. against each other not only directly but also on the international arena between allies.

Nevertheless, this recent rift, while to the detriment of reunification efforts, has presented opportunities for cooperation with the CEE region especially on the security front. In the long-term this relationship is on track to become more robust and comprehensive as both sides, the CEE and S.K., interests are aligned in the expansion of cooperation.

Meanwhile, the CEE region can greatly benefit from increased S.K. FDI as well as the transfer and development of industrial capacity in the region, especially in light of its positive effects, can stimulate further growth and closer ties between the region and South Korea.

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