THE NEXT GENERATION 2025/2026

The Future of Korean Research from a Nordic Perspective

Edited by

Josephine Ørgaard Rasmussen

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Institute for Security & Development Policy

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Introduction

The Nordic countries have been long-standing partners with South Korea, engaging in dialogue and collaborating on regional and global concerns since 1959. Despite a long history of state-level cooperation, the Nordic public's knowledge of Korean affairs remains comparatively low compared with other regional powers in East Asia, particularly China and Japan. However, over the last decade, there has been a noticeable increase in societal interest in South Korea throughout the Nordic region. Nonetheless, the present structures for information and knowledge exchange on Korean issues within the Nordic region are insufficient and appear obsolete in addressing 21st-century challenges, ranging from increasing awareness of regional security interdependence and shared values to promoting common business opportunities and cultural exchanges.

To this end, the ISDP Korea Center conducts the Nordic-Korea Next Generation Policy Expert Program with generous support from the Korea Foundation. The program aims to strengthen cooperative relationships between South Korea and the Nordic region, as well as to serve as an energizing incubator for the next generation of Korean policy experts, by providing young scholars with a forum to discuss their research with senior Nordic and South Korean colleagues, along with practical hands-on experience in policy-related work.

The ISDP Korea Center had, once again in 2025-2026, the pleasure of welcoming four young professionals from different Nordic nations with diverse professional backgrounds as part of the program. During the training program, the participants attended a three-day session in Stockholm, where they received lectures from leading academics, policy analysts, and diplomats from the Nordic countries, Europe, and South Korea. Following the three-day training session, each participant was allocated a senior mentor with relevant experience in their research topic. With the assistance of their respective mentors, the participants submitted policy papers reflecting their

personal perspectives on topics ranging from Korean Peninsula security dynamics to demographic challenges and potential collaboration between South Korea and the Nordic countries to address these.

This booklet is thus a compilation of the participants' research and the culmination of the Nordic-Korea Next Generation Training Program.

ISDP's Korea Center would like to thank the Korea Foundation for their ongoing support over the years, as well as for being the primary sponsor of the Nordic-Korea Next Generation Training Program. We hope that, with their continued support, we can further strengthen the ties between the Nordic countries and the Korean Peninsula in the future.

1 Re-Engaging Russia: South Korea's Necessary Challenge?

Felipe Branner

Introduction

As a result of geopolitical shifts resulting from Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) currently occupies its most advantageous strategic position in decades—a shift largely enabled by Russia's renewed activism in Northeast Asia. Moscow's engagement on the Korean Peninsula is not a temporary wartime convenience in the face of Western sanctions but aligns with Russian efforts to restore its identity as a Eurasian great power.

Recognizing that Russian cooperation with the DPRK will endure beyond the war in Ukraine means acknowledging that any sustainable peace framework on the Korean Peninsula will inevitably have to involve Moscow.

This paper examines the prospects for Russian engagement with the DPRK, and the implications this dynamic has for potential peace frameworks on the Korean Peninsula. Russia-Republic of Korea (ROK) relations and selected past engagements are also examined. Building on this analysis, this paper identifies key lessons from past engagements with Russia that Korean policymakers could take into account when shaping ROK President Lee Jae Myung's 'pragmatic' foreign policy.

Why Russia Won't Leave the DPRK Anytime Soon

The Current Situation

In 2025, Russia and the DPRK traded a record number of delegations, with multiple high-level visits, including by ministers and the two country's heads of state.[1] Moreover, DPRK leader, Kim Jong Un, has stated that Russia is

the DPRK's 'number one' foreign policy priority.[2] This flurry of state-visits and increased cooperation comes in the wake of the signing of the North Korean–Russian Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership on June 18, 2024.[3] Importantly, Article 23 of this treaty stipulates its 'indefinite duration'.[4] As a result of this partnership, the DPRK has gained access to food, fuel resources, deeply needed foreign currency flow, and the transfer of military technology needed to reform and upgrade its armed forces to match its technologically superior neighbor to the south.[5] Importantly, Russia is also a member of the 'Permanent Five' of the UN Security Council, which could shield the DPRK from sanctions in the future.[6] This was evidenced by the March 2024 Russian veto on the UN Panel of Experts responsible for monitoring the DPRK's sanctions violations.[7] This development effectively rules out the UN's role in a Korean peace framework and only serves to underline Russian centrality further.

Prospects for Long-Term Russian Engagement with the DPRK

Moscow will not roll back its engagement with the DPRK anytime soon. This comes down to two reasons: First, The DPRK plays a key role in Russia's self-perception as a Eurasian great power and for its power-projection abilities in Northeast Asia. In the words of a prominent scholar on the DPRK, Gilbert Rozman, "North Korea symbolizes the extension of Moscow's power into East Asia".[8] Second, the new partnership is built on a shared resistance against Western 'hegemonic aspirations', a shared experience of Western sanctions,[9] and ideals of 'sovereignty' and 'non-interference'[10]—and not on a common ideology such as during the Cold War.

With that said, two variables are likely to decide the long-term prospects of Russian cooperation with the DPRK: 1) Russia's desire for strategic ambiguity in its engagement. To understand this, we must turn to Article 4 of the comprehensive strategic partnership, which mandates that the two states come to each other's aid in case of an act of aggression by a foreign power. In DPRK media this was widely heralded as an 'alliance'.[11] Russian media were, however, more apprehensive, referring to the agreement as a 'partnership'.[12] This could be evidence of Russia's desire to conserve leeway, in order, for instance, not to be drawn into an armed conflict in East Asia against its

wishes. 2) The DPRK's notorious propensity for hedging its bets is also a variable to consider. *Juche* and its apprehension towards overdependence on a single state remain prevalent ideas in the DPRK. This policy of self-reliance has previously resulted in the DPRK shifting its allegiances between Russia and China in an attempt to balance dependence on either power.

Examination of ROK-Russia Engagements

Why Russia?

When looking North, ROK decision-makers have historically considered engagement with Russia for two reasons: First, Seoul views Russia as a key partner in promoting peace on the Korean Peninsula and settling the question of the DPRK's nuclear and missile program, especially today, due to Moscow's increasing influence there. Second, increased economic cooperation with Russia has historically been seen as an alternate underexploited market, regarded as complementary to the ROK's other trade vectors towards China, the U.S., and Japan. The deepening of relations has traditionally been limited by several factors, chief among them sanctions, bureaucratic hurdles to the ease of doing business in Russia, and geopolitical concerns. As such, trade between Russia and the ROK remains negligible at best, with bilateral trade in 2024 barely reaching $11.4 billion.[13] So, what use then, is re-engagement with Russia to Seoul? To answer this question means isolating the core of what the ROK gains from engaging Russia: A potential partner in promoting peace on the Korean Peninsula.

Park Gyun-Hye's Eurasia Initiative

The first initiative focusing on this in earnest was the Eurasia Initiative, launched by President Park in 2013. It laid the foundations for later initiatives, in the sense that it focused on economic engagement, with a strong emphasis on spill-over to develop inter-Korean ties, and pressure the DPRK for reform.[14]

Nonetheless, the initiative, by and large, never evolved into a comprehensive and efficient framework.[15] Despite small successes such as several MoU's and a loosening of visa regimes,[16] the initiative was criticized for a lack of a

clear strategy and a central body for coordinating between the President's office and various ministerial committees. Moreover, no real roadmap or strategy was concluded by the agencies involved until the end of 2014, more than a year after the initiative was announced. In Russian foreign policy circles, it is similarly lamented that linking improving inter-Korean relations and re-unification with implementing the Eurasia Initiative as both its precondition and primary goal limited it 'enormously'.[17] This was evidenced when the DPRK conducted a long-range missile test launch on February 7, 2016, which triggered new sanctions from the ROK (Russia also introduced sanctions against the DPRK in 2016, albeit after having had their severity reduced).[18] This subsequently led to the withdrawal of the ROK from the trilateral Khasan-Rajin railroad project between the ROK, DPRK, and Russia.[19] Tensions caused by the THAAD missile deployment crisis only led to further withdrawal, and prospects for the Eurasia initiative withered.[20]

Moon Jae-in's New Northern Policy

President Moon Jae-in, upon entering the Blue House in 2017, undoubtedly sought to avoid the pitfalls of his predecessor. His New Northern Policy was accompanied by a clear strategy, the so-called Nine-Bridge Concept.[21] This strategy was tailored to expand cooperation with Russia, Mongolia, and Central Asia,[22] and to tie in with Moon's New Economic Map for Korea.[23] Possibly learning from the lack of internal coordination in the Eurasia Initiative, he also made sure to institute a central coordinating body known as the Presidential Committee on Northern Economic Cooperation.

At a 2018 Moscow summit with Putin,[24] Moon pointed out that he considered "Korea and Russia key partners for cooperation on the Korean Peninsula and the Eurasian continent". At the same summit, Putin even promised to continue to support the denuclearization process and the establishment of peace on the Korean Peninsula.[25] Nonetheless, skepticism by Russian foreign policy analysts, did highlight a continuous apprehension towards engagement efforts made by the ROK as being but a way of "setting up additional pressure on the DPRK",[26] and that they hoped for "a discussion on Korean security beyond the single-minded objective of regime breakdown".[27]

Nonetheless, meetings between the Presidential Committee on Northern Economic Cooperation and Moscow were held all the way until the end of 2021.[28] A combination of the Covid-19 pandemic, increasing inter-Korean tensions succeeding the 'warming year of 2018', and the outbreak of war in Ukraine—coupled with the mantle of government in Seoul passing from progressive to conservative—did, however, lead to the initiative largely failing to produce the results that the Moon government was hoping for.

A major complaint from Russian foreign policy circles was the feeling that the New Northern Policy and its Nine-Bridge Concept were never truly about Russia, but rather exclusively a tool for inter-Korean relations.[29] Addressing delays in the realization of long-standing trilateral projects, Putin spoke of the ROK's "shortage of sovereignty" at a press conference after holding his first summit with the DPRK's chairman Kim Jong-un in Vladivostok in April 2019.[30] Moreover, alongside not achieving its desired results, Moon's New Northern Policy, with its hyper-focus on the DPRK and Russia also partly alienated its allies, such as the EU, the U.S., and to some extent Japan,[31] the danger of which should be considered in any future efforts.

Lessons for a Pragmatic Foreign Policy

It is clearly noticeable that the Moon administration identified valuable lessons from the failures of the Eurasia Initiative, such as the launch of the Presidential Committee on Northern Economic Cooperation. As Moon learned from Park's failures, the Lee administration can, too, learn from the failures of Moon's New Northern Policy, to understand the costs and benefits associated with re-engaging Russia.

And there is appetite for engaging Russia in the ROK regime. President Lee himself has outlined in Task No. 119 of his '123 National Agenda', that the ROK needs to pursue "stable management and development of ROK-Russia relations" through "Pragmatic Diplomacy centered on National Interest".[32] Lee's current plan for building ties with Russia has, however, been relatively laconic, highlighting only possible cooperation on developing the Northern

Sea Route.[33] A few factors do, however, support President Lee's prospects should he decide to take up the challenge of re-engaging Moscow.

First, despite notable fluctuations in the scope of economic engagement initiatives, the pursuit of re-engagement with Russia has been a relative constant no matter which Korean political tradition occupied the Blue House. What is worth noting, however, is that progressives have had more success in reaching political agreements with Russia than conservatives. The latter's traditional alignment with the U.S., both in terms of sanctions and military cooperation, as well as its insistence on a tough stance on the DPRK is not in line with Moscow's perceived interests on the Peninsula.

Second, the geopolitical context was a key determinant of the success, or rather, failure of both Park's Eurasia Initiative, and Moon's New Northern Policy's engagement efforts toward Russia. The DPRK's currently improved strategic situation and the shelving of its own goal of reunification[34]34 constitute a death knell *ex-ante* to almost all attempts at re-engagement, as long as these directly involve the DPRK. The case can be made that past efforts between Russia and the ROK failed, precisely, because of their linkage, dependence, and vulnerability to the whims of Pyongyang, which easily could derail the engagement process if it saw fit. Notwithstanding that it is obviously difficult to imagine a reconciliation agreement not directly naming the DPRK as its main focus, the delinkaging of the DPRK from the Lee administration's next north-bound initiative with Russia could, paradoxically, bolster the stability or resilience of any such initiative. While the DPRK should not be a part of such an initiative in its early stages, it could be included further down the road in trilateral projects, as trust is built.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Re-engaging Russia does not hold any intrinsic value in and of itself for the ROK. However, it could serve as a real example of what President Lee's 'pragmatic diplomacy' could actually look like: in this case, leveraging the ROK's economic might and middle power diplomacy in order to pursue national interests, while adapting to an increasingly transactional

and dynamic world. A world in which yesterday's enemies can rapidly become tomorrow's partners. As such, this paper recommends that the Lee administration pursues the following policies:

1. Focus on Arms Control and Peaceful Coexistence

If engaging Russia on inter-Korean issues, it should be done on areas with higher prospects of consensus, such as arms control and peaceful coexistence, as Moscow sees stable Korean relations as important to the development of its own Far Eastern regions. This means shying away from prior staples such as 're-unification' and 'total and irreversible de-nuclearization'.

2. Avoid Linking Unification or Denuclearization Efforts on the Korean Peninsula with Re-Engagement Efforts Towards Moscow– at least explicitly

Re-engagement efforts with Moscow should steer clear of being explicitly linked with re-unification efforts—at least in the short run. In the medium run, as trust is built and the potential benefits are noticeable in, for instance, the Russian Far East, re-engagement efforts could be expanded to include trilateral cooperation with the DPRK.

3. Conduct Diplomatic Re-Engagement Through Traditional Multilateral and Technical Channels

Re-engagement with Russia should be conducted formally, without violating sanctions or undermining alliance cohesion. Reinstating joint participation in non-sanctioned projects in the Russian Far East—such as fisheries management, academic and business forums, disaster response or transboundary pollution initiatives—could be relevant first steps. Complementing this with a Track 1.5 diplomacy approach could be a solution to balance possible negative public backlash against re-engaging Russia.

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2 Social Resilience as Security: Sweden-Korea Cooperation for Intergenerational Stability

Isabella Tanevski

Introduction

Sweden and South Korea face demographic pressures that, if left unaddressed, will weaken the fiscal and workforce foundations needed to sustain welfare services and societal stability. Aging populations, historically low fertility (Sweden ≈1.4 vs. South Korea <1.0 births per woman), and shrinking working-age cohorts are raising the dependency ratio.[1] The result is a dual strain on public finances and service capacity, increasing risks of intergenerational unfairness. In this context, social resilience needs to be treated as a strategic priority, not only for domestic stability but also for long-term security. Here, social resilience refers to the capacity to absorb demographic shocks while keeping employment, essential services, and public trust intact across generations.

These pressures make a strong case for a focused Sweden–South Korea agenda. Because the two countries start from different institutional models—Sweden's long-standing welfare state with universal services[2] and South Korea's stronger reliance on families and market-based solutions[3]—mutual learning is both timely and valuable. To optimize the likelihood of introducing future successful policies, the launch of a three-year program combining (1) a regular dialogue on work–family policy, labor supply, and fiscal sustainability; (2) an employer partnership track to embed reforms in workplaces; and (3) long-term social investment in childcare, education, and lifelong learning could prove to be a pivotal means of strengthening social resilience in both Sweden and South Korea.

Why this, Why now?

In South Korea, the population is aging faster than in any other OECD country, and the National Pension Fund could run out by 2054, placing growing pressure on younger generations.[4] The old-age dependency ratio, meaning the share of people aged 65 and over relative to those of working age, is projected to rise from about 20 percent today to nearly 70 percent by 2050.[5] This means that within a generation, there will be fewer than two working-age adults for every older person—a demographic shift with major implications for societal sustainability and intergenerational balance. At the same time, youth labor-market outcomes are weak and youth employment rates lag the OECD average.[6]

In Sweden, demographic pressures are less abrupt but still significant: fertility has fallen to a historic low, the old-age dependency ratio is rising, and sustaining welfare services will increasingly depend on high employment among younger and mid-life cohorts.[7] Sweden's coordinated family and labor-market reforms (earnings-related parental leave, childcare, flexible work) have delivered high female employment, but important gaps remain, such as uneven leave uptake and gendered lifetime earnings.[8] Younger adults also face a fragile entry into the labor market; roughly one in four young people, measured as a share of the youth labor force, is unemployed, placing Sweden among the higher rates in the EU.[9] With both Sweden and South Korea facing versions of the same intergenerational challenges, Sweden–South Korea cooperation should be understood as a mutual learning opportunity.

Resilience as Security

As such, social resilience should not only be perceived as a means to create domestic stability but also as having a broader strategic value, as pension funds, labor supply and family policy increasingly intersect with national security, fiscal stability and even currency management.[10] Just as financial resilience underpins a stable tax base and economy, social resilience shapes how many people can work; if the population shrinks, revenues follow and there is less money for defense and other core state functions.[11] It is also, much like military capabilities, constrained by demography: low fertility

and shrinking youth cohorts mean fewer future combatants and fewer staff for essential services in crises.[12] Strong work–family policies that ease care burdens and support employment are thus "dual-use" investments that reinforce both welfare systems and security.

In both Sweden and South Korea, the link between care, labor supply and security is becoming more visible, albeit in different ways. In Sweden, renewed total defense planning risks underestimating health and social-care staffing needs in crises if it ignores how labor markets and family responsibilities have changed since the system was first designed after the Second World War, including the heavy unpaid care burden carried by many of the women expected to keep services running.[13] Similarly, in South Korea, ultra-low fertility and a highly gendered division of unpaid care are shrinking the future labor pool and have prompted warnings that demographic decline and work–family strain could undermine both economic performance and, over time, defense capacity.[14] At the same time, security challenges are becoming more knowledge- and technology-intensive, from cybersecurity and AI-enabled systems to complex crisis-management infrastructures.[15] This further strengthens the case for a social investment approach. High-quality early childcare, education, and lifelong learning are not only employment and productivity policies; they expand workforce capacity and the supply of skilled labor over time; capacities all countries, including Sweden and South Korea, will need to staff and operate advanced digital security and preparedness systems.

A Window of Opportunity

The Lee Jae Myung administration's commitment to building a "basic society"[16] signals a strategic shift toward strengthening the social foundations of the South Korean welfare state. The vision seeks to move beyond fragmented welfare programs toward a more comprehensive guarantee of basic living standards across several social policy areas such as family, healthcare and education. The current President, Lee Jae Myung, in his prior role as governor of Gyeonggi Province, introduced a Youth Basic Income (YBI) that gained broad public support, placing

intergenerational fairness at the center of South Korea's political agenda.[17] By integrating these ideas into a now broader "basic society" framework, the administration creates a timely opportunity for structured Sweden–South Korea cooperation focused on shared social challenges and joint policy innovation. Recent initiatives such as the Korea Population Forum 2025,[18] attended by Korean policymakers, Swedish representatives and researchers, further indicate growing readiness on both sides for joint learning and cooperation on demographic change.

In Sweden, the recent drop in fertility has pushed demographic sustainability and family formation higher up the policy agenda. In response, the government has launched a new investigation into the declining birth rate to examine the causes and propose measures to reduce barriers to starting a family.[19] Sweden has sustained high female employment through universal services and family and labor-market policies, while South Korea has expanded family benefits rapidly in recent years. Despite these different policy models, both countries face similar constraints on fertility and women's long-term earnings and career progression: heavy care burdens and uneven parental-leave uptake; access to early-years childcare and practical flexibility; long-hours workplace norms; and weak employer implementation.[20] In both contexts, women still carry a disproportionate share of unpaid care, with long-term consequences for earnings and pensions.[21] Their different starting points shape what each side can bring to a joint program: Sweden brings long-horizon institutional design, while Korea shows how visible reforms (e.g., YBI) can rapidly shift public debate.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

By treating social resilience as a security asset and working together, Sweden and South Korea can use family, labor-market and social-investment policies to stabilize tax bases, protect care systems and sustain public trust. A structured dialogue, active employer engagement, and long-term social investment would give both countries practical tools to manage demographic shocks while strengthening welfare-state capacity and long-term security.

Evidence on long-term policymaking and social policy shows that single, short-term measures rarely change outcomes in a durable way; more lasting effects tend to come from multi-year, context-sensitive packages that support families, employers and welfare institutions in practice.[22] Sweden and South Korea should therefore launch an initial three-year bilateral cooperation program with clear governance, milestones and deliverables, led by the relevant ministries/agencies and with a "renewal if results" clause.

1. *Regular Dialogue on; Work-Family Policy, Labor Supply, & Fiscal Sustainability*

The program should include a regular dialogue focused on the intersection of demographic change, work–family policy, security and labor supply. The two countries could agree on a small, stable set of shared indicators to produce a joint status report on "social resilience as security", identifying priority areas for policy development in each country, including where employer partnerships and social investment could make the greatest difference. Over three years, the program should translate into a short set of country-tailored policy options and a small number of pilots with employers and social partners.

2. *An Employer Partnership Track to Embed Reforms in Workplaces*

Reforms are unlikely to be sustainable unless employers are actively involved. In Sweden, employer organizations and trade unions are key co-producers in labor-market policy and implementation.[23] In South Korea, employer and business associations participate in national social dialogue and are influential actors in the policy process on labor-market issues.[24] Building on these roles, Sweden–South Korea cooperation could include a dedicated employer partnership track (e.g. through major employer confederations and chambers of commerce such as the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise and the Korea Chamber of Commerce and Industry), to co-design simple, practical tools for work–family balance, predictable scheduling and youth hiring, giving employers a structured way to address staff shortages, retention and work–family strain, while supporting productivity in practice.

3. Long-Term Social Investment in; Childcare, Education & Lifelong Learning

Finally, Sweden and South Korea should make long-term social investment—early childcare, education and lifelong learning—a core pillar of their cooperation on social resilience as security. As security challenges become more technology-intensive, both countries will increasingly depend on a highly skilled workforce. Within the bilateral program, the two governments could compare how they invest across the life-course, identify factors that might keep certain groups out of high-skill sectors, and share targeted measures that strengthen both employment and security-relevant capacities. In doing so, Sweden and South Korea can turn demographic change from a source of vulnerability into a shared strategic asset for the next generation.

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3 Engaging Young Men in Fixing the Problem of Korea's Low Birth Rate

Anna Haj Lyngholm Andersen

Introduction

South Korea, a super-aging society, is facing significant demographic challenges due to its low birth rate. While it is impossible to assert a single cause of the low birth rate, gender inequality is a contributing factor that is also hindering inclusive solutions. In 2023, South Korea hit a record-low birth rate of 0.72 children per woman, the lowest of any country in the world.[1] As a result, Korea's birth rate is a widely discussed topic both locally and abroad, with many pointing to gender inequality and the economy as the main causes of young people opting out of having children. Until now, administrations have prioritized monetary compensation as the solution to the challenge, but this approach has proved ineffective. As such, social strategies that target South Korean men rather than women only could be a productive change in birth rate focused policy.

Since 2015, the gender equality discourse in South Korea has become a bigger and more public topic of debate. However, the perceived focus on women's benefits and rights has been shown to contribute to polarization between young men and women. As a result, many young men have grown to be pessimistic about the idea of gender equality, due to feelings of perceived lost benefits. Therefore, policies focused on fathers and their benefits may hold untapped potential to improve the birth rate. Such measures have been used in Denmark, where designated paternity leave has shown improved equality between mother and father, which has contributed to increased equality in society overall. By drawing on the Danish model of designated paternity leave, this paper intends to propose similar policies that focus on benefits for fathers in Korea.

The Severity of the Low Birth Rate

While Korea's birth rate showed its first improvement in nine years with a rise to 0.75 in 2024, there is still far to go for Korea to reach the average replacement level of 2.1 children per woman. Beyond being the country with the lowest birth rate globally, Korea is also defined as a "super-aging" society, meaning that over 20 percent of its population is aged 65 years or older. This puts Korea in the most severe bracket, with The United Nations classifying aging, aged, and super-aged societies in their own brackets according to percentage (7%, 14%, and 20% respectively).[2] While many European countries, including the Nordics, are facing similar issues, they also have immigration to rely on for population growth and are not burdened with such a low birth rate. This is why the birth rate is a key issue in solving Korea's demographic problem, and why new, effective policies must be considered after nine years of declining birth rate.

It is established that women taking the majority of the parental leave after childbirth affects their wage growth, total lifetime earnings, and pension savings. The term used to address this phenomenon is 'the maternity gap', a central issue in gender equality that the policy of designated paternity would help combat. As of 2025, each employed parent in South Korea has 18 months of total parental leave, and this can be split into four sections to be used at any time before the child's eighth birthday.

Birth Rate as a Women's Issue

Focusing on past governments' approach to the issue of the country's birth rate, I want to highlight a specific event from 2016, when the Interior Ministry published a 'birth map' on its website. This map, using shades of pink, showed the number of women of 'childbearing age' (between ages 15 to 49) in the country by city district and region. The regions with a higher number of 'fertile women' were marked by a darker pink, and the regions with a low number with a light pink. According to the ministry, the purpose of the map was to "*increase people's understanding of the low birth rate*," and "*positively induce local governments' benchmarking and free competition by comparing the entitlement programs for fertile women between local*

governments". The map caused public outcry and was removed mere hours after its introduction.

This revealed how the government placed the responsibility for the birth rate's decline onto the female Korean population, i.e. the same women they were trying to convince to start families. Many criticized the government for making the birth rate a women-only issue. Researchers have called the map an attempt to govern fertile women, which has been described as a core national development strategy for Korea. They argue that this is nothing new, but rather a practice with roots in the Park Chung Hee regime, where family planning and thereby the governing of women's bodies was regarded as a prerequisite for national development.[3]

This practice transformed after the introduction of a democratic electoral system in the late 1980s, and the focus shifted from birth control and family planning to promoting childbirth. In this context, the birth map published in 2016 was not a one-time slip up from the government's side, but rather a political decision that falls in line with the government's many failed attempts to address the issue. The fertility map controversy is emblematic of the Korean state's approach to the issue of the low birth rate, underlining how ignoring women's needs and demands has backfired.

The Divide

While many Korean women report feeling ignored and reduced to 'fertile bodies' due to government initiatives such as the birth map, studies show that young men feel a sense of victimization. Research shows that perceived male victimhood in young Korean men correlates with less favorable attitudes towards marriage, and marital intention.[4] In short, there is a prevalent tendency among young Korean men to feel victimized by feminism. They see women as demanding, overly sensitive (in regard to discrimination), and feel that society acquiesces to women's demands, which is unfair to men. However, research shows that male victimhood is driven more by perceived loss of status than by actual marginalization.[5]

This is crucial to the issue of the birth rate, as any policy proposed to address the issue should not trigger the sense of perceived loss of status in men, as this will worsen the divide between young men and women. It's possible that the group of men who feel this sense of victimhood may never marry or the growing divide between men and women in general could lower the chance of young men and women marrying and having children. Researchers have also identified a demographic issue where men outnumber women in the marriage market, referring to this as the 'marriage market squeeze'. This phenomenon further contributes to men's feeling of victimhood and resistance to marriage, as well as their overall resistance to policies designed to address systemic disparities.[6] It is therefore crucial to formulate policies in which men feel they can benefit and that enable them to see marriage and childbirth in a more positive light.

Designated Paternity Leave: The Danish Model

This paper proposes designated paternity leave as a possible solution to the birth rate problem. While paternity leave is an option in Korea, the father's leave entitlement has only recently been increased from 10 to 20 days, still far from equal to the mother's 90 days. In Denmark, the amendment to the parental leave law introducing designated paternity leave was passed in 2022 to improve gender equality between parents. The law secures 11 weeks (77 days) of leave for each parent. If the father or co-mother does not use their 11 weeks, they cannot be transferred to the mother and therefore shorten the parental leave overall. The first two weeks are available after the birth of the child, and the remaining nine must be used before the child turns one year old. This system is meant for the employed, as there is more flexibility for students, the self-employed and unemployed individuals, who can transfer nine of the 11 designated weeks to the mother. In Denmark, there are also another 13 weeks of leave after these initial 11 weeks, which can be freely transferred and used between the two parents. Denmark provides extensive state-funded social security, including parental leave benefits.

As a stable democracy and a strong welfare state, it is difficult to compare Denmark to South Korea, a relatively young democracy with relatively low

social spending. For reference, Denmark's social expenditure amounted to 26.2 percent of its GDP in 2022, whereas South Korea's was 14.8 percent in the same year, the fifth lowest among OECD countries.[7] As such, Danish policies cannot be used in Korea without adaptation.

However, the concept of designated paternal leave is one that could tackle several issues in Korean families. Statistics on the Danish fathers' use of paternal leave after the introduction of the designated paternal leave law show a drastic decrease in the number of fathers who take none or a maximum of two weeks of leave (from 49 percent to 17 percent). The statistics also showed a decreased correlation between the mother's pay range and the father's length of leave. Previously fathers would take shorter leave when the mother's pay was in the lower category, but this tendency became less evident after the introduction of designated paternal leave. These results were visible across sectors, which also shows an overall increase in equality in society, where parents can take an equal amount of leave no matter their gender, job, or pay.[8] In this manner, a policy like this could address the inequalities between mother and father that often contribute to skewing the balance of childcare and household tasks towards women in Korea.

The Current Limitations

Despite the recent uptake of men taking parental leave in Korea, there are still many limitations that current policy does not address. In the first half of 2025, men made up 36.4 percent of all new parental leave recipients, the highest share on record.[9] However, statistics also show that social pressure in office settings still prevents many men from taking leave when they have a child. Men accounted for almost half of parental leave recipients at companies with over 1,000 employees, but this number dropped drastically to 25.8 percent at workplaces with fewer than 50 employees. Even among government workers, who receive up to 80 percent of their salary during parental leave and are not marked as 'not working' during their time on leave, only 39.2 percent of male workers took parental leave in 2024. For reference, 96.2 percent of female workers took maternity leave that same year.[10] So, while improvements have been made, there is still a significant

gap between men and women's use of paternal leave, and social pressure in the workplace is a major contributor to this problem in both the public and private sectors. This issue is even more severe for non-regular workers, who are excluded from standard labor protections, which underlines how socio-economic inequality exacerbates the issue of unequal access to paternal leave and childcare support. As such, it is crucial that any new policies address this issue.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This paper proposes the following solutions, with the aim of helping close the maternity gap and thereby promoting greater equality between men and women in the workplace more broadly. A more gender equal approach to parental leave could also be beneficial for minorities in the future, if South Korea were to legalize same-sex marriage and recognize the rights of co-parents regardless of gender.

1. Designated Paternity Leave Focused on Post-childbirth Period and First Year of the Child's Life

Following the recent improvements to Korean paternal leave policy, Korea should look to Denmark as an example and pass a law on designated paternity leave. Fathers should receive one week of designated leave to use right after the birth of the child. This will help relieve the burden on the mother to rely on (often female) relatives for help during this time and will ensure that the father forms a bond with the baby. In addition, the father should receive a minimum of 10 weeks designated leave to use within the first year of the child's life. This ensures that the father is incentivized to share the childcare burden with the mother during the most crucial and difficult time and does not wait to form a bond with the child until later. Fathers spending more time with their children in the first year means they will be better equipped for childcare and household tasks. This could contribute to an overall more equal household even after paternal leave, and to fathers being better prepared to take care of the child when sick later in life. Finally, the government should subsidize support for non-regular workers not covered by labor regulations to match that of a regular employee. This will make it

easier for young Koreans to have children and secure the welfare of families despite socio-economic differences and financial difficulties in an extremely competitive society and job market.

2. Establishment of Support System for First-Time Fathers

To support first-time fathers, the establishment of a comprehensive support system is needed. This should include free classes on childcare, including basic knowledge such as changing diapers, feeding, and advice on managing sleep while tending to a household during the first year. There should also be training on cooking and other household tasks so that fathers are equally well equipped to look after the child and the household when the mother is working. First-time parents should also have easy access to educators, advisors, and doctors during this time. In addition, the establishment of new dads' groups through local community centers would complement the policy of designated paternity leave. Here, first-time fathers would be put in contact with other local first-time fathers who are taking leave at the same time. This ensures a social life with other adults during their time of leave and creates a space for the fathers to share advice and experiences. Mothers often rely on female relatives and female friends, but men have more difficulty creating community around childcare and family. Therefore, locally supported communities can ensure an extra level of support for first time fathers.

3. Easier Access to Improved Discounts on Daycare Packages

Lastly, there should be increased discounts on daycare packages, especially for first-time parents, as childcare after leave has ended is a major expense for parents. The government should also facilitate easier access to such discounts, for example by ensuring the dissemination of information through the local community center. Ensuring equal access to good quality childcare is crucial to establishing a more egalitarian society, where children are not forced into a competitive society from childhood.

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4 Demographic Security and Policy Innovation: Lessons from Finland and South Korea on Fertility

Maija Palomäki

Introduction

The importance of analyzing the social policies and present-day factors influencing childbearing in Finland and South Korea extends beyond their positions in global fertility statistics. A persistently low fertility rate, together with aging populations, translates into structural challenges to state capacity itself. Shrinking workforces, pressure on pension and welfare systems, and the erosion of economic and social foundations are all results of declining fertility rates. A very low fertility rate can be a serious security threat, as over time these dynamics threaten fiscal sustainability, social cohesion, and national resilience.

Demographic decline has challenged states around the globe since the 1960s. World Bank Group data from 2023,[1] shows that South Korea, in terms of fertility rate, has a value of 0.7, placing it as the second-lowest in the world, only surpassed by Macao. Since 2015, the number of births per woman has declined annually, but in 2024, South Korea reversed this trend, by 0.05,[2] which could suggest slight improvements in welfare policies and incentives. However, a deeper analysis of culturally embedded societal factors reveals that there is a long way to go despite the recent rise in the fertility rate.[3]

Despite being ranked among the world's most family-friendly welfare states, Finland's fertility rate has declined over the past decade, indicating underlying social barriers to childbearing. In 2023, the fertility rate stood at 1.3 births per woman.[4]

Drivers of Declining Fertility

Cost of Parenthood and Societal Expectations

According to the latest news in 2025 in South Korea,[5] together with the fertility rate itself, public opinion seems to be more positive towards childbearing, and interestingly, it is young men who are more supportive of having a family with children than women. Both sexes, however, highlight the same two main reasons for not having children: uncertainty about one's own ability to raise a child well, and the perception that South Korean society is not ideal for child-raising. In both South Korea and Finland, the heightened expectations of successful parenthood reflect declining fertility trends.

Additional societal pressures that tend to stem from competition are school success and status. From a young age, children—and their parents—struggle to keep up with extracurricular requirements to survive in the very competitive world of education and highly rated schools. This competition does not only originate from the wish for a bright future but from a status culture, which remains overpowering in South Korean society. The importance of long-term stability can be recognized in Finland, too, and this emphasis raises the perceived threshold for becoming a parent.

Gender Roles

In South Korea, traditional gender roles continue to place primary responsibility for childcare and domestic work on mothers, reinforced by the persistent gender wage gap, thereby discouraging childbearing. Difficulty in balancing career aspirations with family life leads to postponed and foregone childbearing plans. Women whose husbands participate in housework more extensively than traditionally expected tend to earn more income and want more children too.[6] Similarly, the degree of power women have in discussing and using family funds correlates with their childbearing willingness. In contrast, despite Finland's more equal division of labor, fertility postponement persists, indicating that gender equality alone is insufficient to sustain higher birth rates.

The challenge of settling down with a compatible partner is closely tied to the expectation of marriage. The number of marriages is relatively low, as is

the number of births, and a correlation may exist. Single-parent households and childbirths outside of marriage are still somewhat stigmatized, even though acceptance from younger generations is growing as they increasingly recognize variations in lives and lifestyles.[7] This highlights the importance that young women place on carefully deciding on life partners in South Korea. This signals a need for policies that support people who want children but not marriage.

Although officially a Christian country, marriage in Finland is not socially required for having children. Different modern family types exist, and taboos are progressively diminishing. Therefore, a straightforward correlation between the fertility rate and the number of marriages in the country is largely absent.

Political Polarization

Another major impact on the fertility rate of South Korea is heightened political polarization, in which the sexes tend to be on opposite sides, causing an even deeper social division. Not only is gender equality called for by women, but the concept of 'reverse discrimination' has been increasingly raised by young men.[8] Reverse discrimination is described as feminist-driven discrimination against men through unfairly favoring women and minorities over Korean men,[9] and cancel culture keeps even companies in South Korea on their toes regarding this.[10]

Young men cite mandatory military service as unfair, a grievance that further complicates efforts to boost fertility rates. A declining population means decreasing numbers of soldiers, and bases empty of troops cannot protect their country from physical threats,[11] although digitalization, automation, and numerous technologies do provide additional support to modern warfare. The politicization of gender relations—sometimes referred to as a gender war[12]—makes the fertility problem into a societal zero-sum conflict, leading to the risk of policy failure across sectors. In Finland, politics are not polarized as strongly along gender lines, making this impact less significant.

Welfare Security and Lifestyle Preferences in Finland

Finland is praised not only as the happiest country in the world—for eight successive years in a row[13]—and for its high level of education, but also for its comprehensive and inclusive welfare system, administered by the Social Insurance Institution of Finland.[14]

The above factors seem to create a safe framework within which to build a family upon. However, multiple reasons keep the biologically prime from reproducing. Economic instability is perhaps a relevant factor to consider, but social security systems reveal that there is more to the issue. People are worried over the unpredictability of the world and the future of societies, due to escalating conflicts worldwide and climate issues. However, individual lifestyle choices and personal aspirations also carry significant weight in childbearing decisions.

People are constantly online, and there is a declining interest in childbearing. Furthermore, social media has been shown to negatively impact romantic relationships.[15] Accordingly, increased time spent indoors and on mobile phones is associated with greater loneliness and lower childbearing intentions.[16] These shifting norms and priorities, together with broadened perspectives on positively perceived opportunities outside childbearing, discourage fertile people from having children.[17]

For many Finnish women, remaining childless preserves personal autonomy, including freedom from the pressures of perfect parenting. High expectations regarding the timing and conditions of childbearing[18] often delay family formation in favor of career and financial security, narrowing the biological window for reproduction in both countries.

Policy Responses – What has Worked and What has Not?

Financial Incentives and the Structural Paradox in Benefit Eligibility

The policies of poverty reduction and income maintenance, direct compensation for the economic cost of children, fostering employment, improving gender equality, and support for early childhood development[19]

create a positive foundation for the fertility rate. Although South Korea has a social benefits framework regarding parental leave and the opportunity for extended leave per parent to help with work–life balance, the coverage leaves a substantial portion of the workforce outside this social safety net, effectively securing only employees of large conglomerates. While a 2025 reform extended parental leave to 1.5 years and increased income replacement ceilings to 2.5 million Korean won, the National Employment Insurance system continues to exclude non-regular and self-employed workers.[20] In stark contrast, in Finland, Kela offers parental grants and child benefits to all residents, regardless of labor market status.

The Korean model leads to a mere 4-5 percent of leave takers and unintentionally reinforces inequality and the gender wage gap when lower-earning spouses abandon their careers due to insufficient financial support.[21] Broadening the eligible recipient groups of these benefits would not only impact equality matters but also help counteract the suppression of national fertility levels through greater inclusiveness.

Work–Life Balance

In terms of fostering employment and improving gender equality, workplaces in South Korea are slowly catching up to women's expectations, which positively impacts their willingness to have children. One study highlights that 73 percent of women consider the possibility of having offspring if their workplace offers a family-friendly system.[22] These systems represent positive developments; however, the Global Gender Gap Index 2025[23] places South Korea only 101st globally.

Still, income differences and unequal treatment between the sexes in the labor market leave significant room for improvement. Men earn much more than women,[24] making maternity leave appear as the only option, thereby reinforcing traditional division of home and childcare labor. Thus, even if some companies have family-friendly systems that facilitate parental, maternity, and paternity leave, and some companies, with government support, offer subsidies for having children,[25] further reforms are required. Finland, by contrast, has been praised for its work–life balance, parental

benefits, and labor laws. Regarding equality, the Global Gender Gap Index 2025[26] places Finland second among all states.

State-Supported Partner Formation in South Korea

The Yoon administration planned to respond to housing costs, schooling pressures, and to boost parental leave allowances,[27] but Yoon's 2024 self-coup froze many of these planned policies. One initiative that a subsequent government implemented at the regional level was the establishment of state-run dating services to further support family building.[28] These programs, which analyze and match people based on financial, appearance-based, and personality-related features have been gaining popularity in South Korea, as meeting suitable partners has become more challenging. People are more isolated than ever, and many experience loneliness due to increased time online and little to no socializing, which has led to the relative success of these government-supported dating and marriage programs. However, these programs permit only the formation of traditional, socially accepted couples and family types, thereby excluding non-traditional arrangements and missing an opportunity to support childbearing more inclusively.

Universal Welfare and Institutional Trust in Finland

To highlight some of Kela's child-bearing related benefits,[29] we can consider the maternity grant and maternity package, pregnancy and family leaves and benefits, pregnancy allowance, childcare leave, part-time leave and child home-care allowance, and child benefit paid until the age of 17—all of which support child-bearing regardless of income or status.

Not only are Finland's family- and child-related social security benefits among the most comprehensive globally, but public trust in the system remains high across the life course. Support from Kela extends from child benefits to student grants after the age of 17, followed by income protection during unemployment and coverage for disability and illness. In addition, a new government-driven general social security benefit, set to be introduced in spring 2026, aims to simplify access and reduce administrative complexity.[30]

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

As outlined above, demographic security—and societal survival—depends on evolving equality, inclusive welfare policies, and human interaction, rather than financial incentives alone. Cross-national learning opportunities for South Korea exist regarding the inclusion of all individuals wishing to bear children, regardless of their working conditions or status. Furthermore, adopting elements of Finland's equality efforts might normalize the use of paternal leave and increase the financial security of women in South Korea. Finland, for its part, needs to focus on creating a social movement to mobilize people of childbearing age and could benefit from expanded policy experimentation.

Cooperation between the two countries could include exchanging early childhood education practices that lessen the need for excessive competition. Similarly, joint dialogue on equality through evidence-based policies could depoliticize the issue, leading to a decrease in the 'gender war' in South Korea. Exploring welfare policies and models from both countries could bring insight, without pressure to export any existing models. The achievement of mutual learning—and unlearning—from old, ineffective practices could help reduce stress and expectations for individuals in both countries. Therefore, the following policy actions are recommended:

1. *For South Korea;*
    - Further promote partnership formation through government initiatives. Importantly, the inclusion of various family types should be considered, including non-marital and cohabiting households.

    - The scope of parental leave and income replacement eligibility should be broadened to reach the social benefit coverage gap. The inclusion of non-regular and self-employed workers would reinforce equality and fertility among more economically vulnerable groups.

    - Policies aimed at strengthening male uptake of parental leave through non-transferable leave and income replacement parity could address household inequality and gender polarization.

2. ***For Finland;***

- Reframe parenthood to align with contemporary life values of childbearing-aged people. This is valuable in forming a broader social meaning and collective value of parenthood. Emphasis should be placed on overcoming the ideological trap of 'perfect parenting'.

- Develop and implement campaigns that encourage in-person social interactions and community-based activities as a positive alternative to prolonged online engagement at home.

3. ***Mutual Recommendations:***

- Create a joint task force for demographic security. This task force would facilitate evidence-based bilateral policy learning to provide tools for inclusive family policy design, gender equality, and social infrastructure, thereby lowering thresholds to childbearing.

Endnotes

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Conclusion

2025 marked a year of significant change for South Korea with the inauguration of a new president, Lee Jae Myung, and the introduction of new policy objectives and aspirations under his administration. These include a reorientation of foreign policy shaped by evolving geopolitical dynamics surrounding the Korean Peninsula and renewed approaches to inter-Korean engagement, as well as domestic initiatives aimed at strengthening a 'basic society' and ensuring a minimum standard of living through the expansion of public services. The four essays submitted by the participants reflect these developments through their analyses and policy recommendations, taking into account the political priorities of the current administration.

Mr. Branner's paper examines the Lee administration's "pragmatic policy" objective and its selective aspiration to re-engage with Russia as a means of maximizing economic gains, enhancing strategic maneuverability, and facilitating renewed engagement with the DPRK. While the paper argues that re-engaging Russia holds little intrinsic value for South Korea, it suggests that such a policy could serve as a real example of what President Lee's "pragmatic policy", one that adapts to an increasingly transactional and dynamic world, where yesterday's adversaries can quickly become tomorrow's partners.

In contrast, the papers by Ms. Tanevski, Ms. Andersen, and Ms. Palomäki focus on South Korea's ongoing demographic challenges, emphasizing the need to address them through new legislation, norm-changing incentives, and potential collaboration with the Nordic nations. Despite differences in social security systems and approaches to social policy, all three papers contend that shared experiences of demographic decline and associated challenges, create opportunities for increased cooperation between South Korea and the Nordic states. Such collaboration could enable mutual learning—and unlearning—from each other's past policy practices.

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