

POLI 7017 POLITICS AND SECURITY ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA
SPRING 2026
THE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

Instructor: Dr. Saera Lee

Office: JCT 9.64

Email: saeralee@hku.hk

Office Hours: Thursdays 14:00-15:50

Lecture: Wed. 19:00-21:50, CPD 3.41

Teaching Assistant: Dr. Michael Paul Sadler

Email: mikeps@hku.hk

Office Hours: By appointment

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course explores the complex political and security dynamics of the Korean Peninsula. As the world's only divided nation still technically at war—governed by an armistice rather than a peace treaty—Korea represents both a persistent challenge and a potential opportunity for the international community. On one hand, North Korea's nuclear weapons program and repeated threats of military action against South Korea and the United States remain urgent global security concerns. On the other hand, many scholars argue that meaningful cooperation between the two Koreas could yield significant economic and diplomatic benefits.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

1. Analyze the historical origins of Korea's division
2. Understand inter-Korean perceptions and narratives
3. Explore major political, security, and diplomatic issues on the Korean Peninsula
4. Examine the underlying sources of insecurity in the region

COURSE LEARNING OUTCOMES (CLOs)

At the end of the semester, students will be able to:

1. Critically analyze the historical and geopolitical roots of Korea's division and its enduring impact on inter-Korean and regional dynamics.
2. Evaluate the political, security, and diplomatic challenges on the Korean Peninsula using key concepts and theoretical frameworks from international relations.
3. Assess the perspectives and policies of North and South Korea toward each other and the wider international community.
4. Develop and present evidence-based arguments on Korean Peninsula issues in both written and oral formats, demonstrating effective communication and research skills.

CLO-PLO ALIGNMENTS

*Please refer to Appendix II for programme learning outcomes.

CLOs	PPA PLOs
CLO1	1, 3, 4, 5

CLO2	1, 2, 5, 6
CLO3	3, 4, 5, 6
CLO4	7, 8, 9

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Attendance and Participation: 20%

Weekly Memo: 20%

Group Presentation on current event and Discussion Leading: 20%

Final Presentation on Case Analysis: 40%

Attendance and Participation (20%)

Participation is a critical component of this course. Your participation grade is determined by your attendance as well as the quality of your participation. That is, you are awake, come to class prepared, paying attention, answering questions, and asking questions. Late for the class more than 15 minutes, as well as leaving the class before class ends without prior notice will be considered as missing.

You will be given one free absence without penalty in the semester.

Weekly memos on readings (20% = 10% * 2)

Twice a semester, students will submit memos on assigned readings. Your memo should combine a summary of the work with a reaction to it. The summaries ought to answer a few simple questions: (1) What is the issue that is being discussed? (2) What is the main argument? (3) Why is it important? (4) How will it impact (international) politics of Korea?

This assignment is designed to give you practice reflecting and critical thinking, and to help you prepare for discussion.

Memo must be double spaced with one-inch margins on all sides, written with proper grammar and spelling, Times New Roman and in a font size no smaller than 11 points. The memo must not exceed two pages. I will not accept longer papers. Memos are due by 9 pm on Tuesdays. Students are going to submit 2 memos, and each worth 10 points.

Group Presentation on current event and Discussion Leading (20%)

Starting on Feb. 18, groups will begin their presentations. Each presentation will consist of a 15–20 minutes report on a current event (from January 2025 to the present) related to the international relations of Korea (South or North), followed by 15–20 minutes of discussion. Students should upload presentation slides before the lecture.

Presentations should address the current event in depth and include:

1. A description of the event
2. An explanation of why the event is important and interesting
3. An analysis of the possible causes of the event
4. A prediction of its potential future effects

Groups must prepare 2–3 discussion questions and lead the discussion.

Every group member is required to speak during the presentation. Without a valid reason and prior notice to the instructors, absences will not be excused.

Rubric for the presentation is uploaded on Moodle.

Final Poster Presentation on Case Analysis (40%)

Groups will participate in a poster session on April 29. Groups may use the same topic as their current event presentation; however, the poster must focus primarily on theoretical analysis of the event.

For the poster session, groups must:

1. Select one theory—Realism, Liberalism/Institutionalism, or Constructivism/Idealism—that best explains the chosen event.
2. Analyze the theory by discussing:
 - o Its strengths in explaining the event compared to the theories not selected
 - o Its weaknesses or limitations
3. Develop and present your own theory (based on course readings) that, in your view, best explains the event.
4. Provide evidence and logical reasoning to support your own theoretical explanation.
 - o Compare to the best grand theory you chose
 - o Historical evidence and theoretical supports will be helpful
5. Apply your theory to address the following questions:
 - o How will this event affect other issue areas?
 - o How will this event affect the international relations of Korea?
 - o What policy choice would be best for Korea, and what outcomes could be achieved by implementing that policy?

Poster size should be about 121.9 cm × 91.4 cm (maximum 91.4 cm × 150 cm). For reference, visit this website: <https://apsa2025-apsa.ipostersessions.com/Default.aspx?s=apsa-2025-gallery>

Rubric for the poster session will be uploaded on Moodle.

COURSE POLICIES AND OTHER INFORMATION

Prohibition of Recording of Class Session by Students

Unauthorized student recording of classroom or other academic activities (including advising sessions or office hours) is prohibited. Students requesting the use of assistive technology as an accommodation should contact university. Unauthorized use of classroom recordings – including distributing or posting them – is also prohibited. Under the University’s Copyright Policy, faculty own the copyright to instructional materials – including those resources created specifically for the purposes of instruction, such as syllabi, lectures and lecture notes, and presentations. Students cannot copy, reproduce, display, or distribute these materials. Students who engage in unauthorized recording, unauthorized use of a recording, or unauthorized distribution of instructional materials will be referred to the appropriate University office for follow-up.

Electronic Etiquette

Cellphones may not be used during class. If you anticipate an important phone call (e.g. family emergency) put your phone on vibrate and leave the classroom, should you need to answer it. Other

electronic devices like laptops or tablets are only allowed for classroom purposes. This policy is aimed at providing the best possible learning environment for all students.

Email Communication

All email communication with the professor should include a subject line that begins with POLI 7017 followed by more specific information regarding the purpose of the email. For example, “POLI 7017: meeting to discuss paper ideas.” I check email periodically, and you can expect me to respond within 24 hours during the week and 48 hours or more over the weekend or holiday. Yet, if the answers to questions are already found in the syllabus, you may not receive an answer to your email. Always consult the syllabus before emailing a question.

Please read over this article as a guide to e-mail Professors:

<https://www.usnews.com/education/articles/emailing-your-college-professor-dos-and-donts>

Email is a useful way to ask quick questions. Replying to long questions about the readings/lectures, however, is highly inefficient for both you and me. If you want to talk about something you don’t understand, come to office hours! While I respond to student emails, I prefer to talk in person. Come see me during office hours!

Late Assignment

Late assignment will be penalized by one letter grade (e.g. A to A-) for each day late. Students must contact the instructor prior to the due date to avoid the penalty.

Use of GenAI is prohibited in this course:

This course focuses on the development of independent critical thinking and the mastery of international relations. To ensure that all submitted work accurately reflects personal understanding and original thought, the use of Generative AI (GenAI) tools in completing assignments or assessments is strictly prohibited. This policy supports our commitment to academic integrity, the development of each student’s learning, and direct interaction with international relations. Any work suspected to be generated by AI will be treated seriously and may face discipline.

Final Grading

Final letter grade will be given based on the following scheme:

A+	4.3
A	4
A-	3.7
B+	3.3
B	3
B-	2.7
C+	2.3
C	2
C-	1.7
D+	1.3
D	1
F+	0.49
F	0.25

CLASS MATERIALS

Required and recommended readings will be made available on Moodle.

COURSE SCHEDULE

NOTE: Readings subject to change

- Jan. 21 Introduction to the course
 - No reading
- Jan. 28: Intro to the study of international relations and to international relations of Korea
 - Snyder, Jack. “One World, Rival Theories.” *Foreign policy* 2004: 53–62.
 - Acharya, A. & Buzan, B. (2010) ‘Why is there no non-Western international relations theory? An introduction’, in *Non-Western International Relations Theory*. [Online]. United Kingdom: Routledge. pp. 11–35.
- Feb. 4: History of Korea
 - Kang, D. C. (2005) Hierarchy in Asian International Relations: 1300-1900. *Asian security (Philadelphia, Pa.)*. [Online] 1 (1), 53–79.
 - Korean History in Brief: <https://www.koreanculture.org/korea-information-history>
 - Japanese History in Brief: <https://www.japanpitt.pitt.edu/timeline>
- Feb. 11: The Korean War
 - Check out this website: <https://thekwe.org>
 - Ohn, Chang-II. (2010) “The Causes of the Korean War, 1950-1953”, *International Journal of Korean Studies*. 14(2): 19-44.
 - **Recommended readings:**
 - Tom Christensen, “A Lost Chance for What? Rethinking the Origins of US-PRC Confrontation,” *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 4:3 (Fall 1995): 249-278
 - Bruce Cumings, *Korea’s Place in the Sun*, (W.W. Norton, 1997), Chapters 4 and 5: “The Passions,” and “Collision.”
- Feb. 18: **New Years Break – No class**
- Feb. 25: Cold War in East Asia
 - Iain D. Henry, “What Allies Want: Reconsidering Loyalty, Reliability, and Alliance Interdependence,” *International Security* 44:4 (Spring 2020): 45-83
 - Recommended readings:
 - Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogy at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992): 72-96, 174-205.
- Mar. 4: Korea-China relations

- Chung, A. (2021) The Determinants of China-ROK Relations, 1993–2018: An Empirical Analysis Using Event Data. *Journal of Asian and African studies* (Leiden). [Online] 56 (4), 721–753.
 - **Recommended readings:**
 - Jaeho Chung, “South Korea Between the Eagle and the Dragon: Perceptual Ambivalence and Strategic Dilemma,” *Asian Survey* 41, no. 5 (Sept/Oct. 2001): 777–796
 - Chung, J. H. & Kim, H. J. (2023) East Asia’s strategic positioning toward China: identifying and accounting for intra-regional variations. *Australian journal of international affairs*. [Online] 77 (2), 107–128.
 - Kim, M. (2017) Cracks in the Blood-Shared Alliance? Explaining Strained PRC–DPRK Relations in the Post-Cold War World. *Pacific focus*. [Online] 32 (1), 109–128.
- Mar. 11: **Reading week – No class**
- Mar. 18: Korea-Japan relations
 - Kim, Ji Young. “Escaping the Vicious Cycle: Symbolic Politics and History Disputes Between South Korea and Japan.” *Asian Perspective*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2014, pp. 31–60
 - **Recommended readings:**
 - Thomas J. Christensen, “China, the U.S.-Japan alliance, and the security dilemma in East Asia,” *International Security* 23, no. 4 (Spring 1999): 49–79
 - Hagstrom, L. & Soderberg, M. (2006) Taking Japan-North Korea Relations Seriously: Rationale and Background. *Pacific affairs*. [Online] 79 (3), 373–385.
 - Bronza, R. & Podoler, G. (2025) Historical Gulfs, Strategic Bridges: A Pragmatic-Symbolic Analysis of the GSOMIA Between Japan and South Korea. *East Asia* (Piscataway, N.J.). [Online] 42 (2), 131–155.
- Mar. 25: Korea-US relations
 - Joseph S. Nye Jr (1995) *East Asian Security: The Case for Deep Engagement*
 - **Recommended readings:**
 - Ha, Y. C. & Wang Hwi Lee (2025) US–South Korean Relations at a Crossroads: Uncertainty and Challenges under the Second Trump Administration. *Asian survey*. [Online] 65 (4–5), 624–646.
 - The White House. 2023. *National Security Strategy*. Pp. 23–25 & 37
 - Beeson, M. (2009) Hegemonic Transition in East Asia? The dynamics of Chinese and American Power. *Review of International Studies*, 35, 95–112.
- Apr. 1: Meeting for final presentation – no lecture
- Apr. 8: Inter-Korean relationship after Korean War
 - KYOOCHEOL KIM (2023) The Peace Effects of Inter-Korean Trade and the Political-Economic Separation: Analysis of the Reciprocal Effects of Inter-Korean Relations and Inter-Korean Trade. *KDI Journal of Economic Policy*. 45 (3), 1–24.
 - **Recommended readings:**
 - Cha, Victor and Kang, David (2004) Can North Korea be Engaged? An Exchange between Victor Cha and David Kang. *Survival*, 46(2), 89–108

- Victor D. Cha and David C. Kang, “The Debate over North Korea,” in *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol 119, No. 2 (summer 2004), pp. 229-254
 - Hazel Smith, “Bad, Mad, Sad, or Rational Actor? Why the Securitization Paradigm Makes for Poor Policy Analysis of North Korea.” *International Affairs* 76, no. 3 (2000): 593-617
- Apr. 15: North Korean Problem
 - Martin, C. H. (2002) Rewarding North Korea: Theoretical Perspectives on the 1994 Agreed Framework. *Journal of peace research*. [Online] 39 (1), 51–68.
 - **Recommended readings:**
 - Choi, K. (2015) The North Korean Nuclear Problem: Twenty Years of Crisis. *Asia policy*. (19), 28–36.
 - Victor Cha and David Kang, “Think Again: the Korea crisis,” *Foreign Policy* (May/June 2003): 20-28.
 - Scott Stossel, “North Korea: The War Game,” *The Atlantic Monthly* (July/August 2005): 97-108
 - “The 1994 Agreed Framework between the United States of America and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea,” Geneva (October 21, 1994) <http://www.kedo.org>
- Apr. 22: Regional Cooperation and Korean Reunification
 - Hemmer, C. and Katzenstein, P. (2002) Why Is There No NATO in Asia? Collective Identity, Regionalism, and the Origins of Multilateralism. *International Organization* 56(3), 575-607
 - **Recommended readings:**
 - Shin, J.-W. (2014) Lessons from German Reunification for Inter-Korean Relations: An Analysis of South Korean Public Spheres, 1990-2010. *Asian perspective*. [Online] 38 (1), 61–88.
 - Robyn Lim, "The ASEAN Regional Forum," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 20, no. 2 (August 1998): 115-135
 - ASEAN Regional Forum homepage (<http://www.dfat.gov.au/arf/index.html>)
 - Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia* (Routledge, 2000).
- Apr. 29: Final Presentation

Appendix I: Guidelines on grading

Grade/ Competency	A+, A, A-	B+, B, B-	C+, C, C-	D+, D	F
Use of vocabulary and concepts	Student accurately and creatively uses concepts and key course vocabulary throughout the assignment, demonstrating a sophisticated understanding of each.	Student accurately uses concepts and key course vocabulary throughout the assignment, but does not demonstrate creativity in use or fluency.	Student uses concepts and key vocabulary from the course, but in a manner that does not demonstrate understanding or proficiency; use of concepts and vocabulary is perfunctory.	Student rehearses concepts or key course vocabulary but not in a way suggesting understanding at a university level.	Student fails to use concepts or key vocabulary correctly or at all.
Deployment of theories and argumentation	Student deploys theoretical arguments well using their own voice and substantive arguments in a sophisticated way.	Student deploys theoretical arguments well although voice, style and substantive critiques are similar to the source.	Student deploys theoretical vocabulary in a way commensurate with rules for argumentation, but does not show creativity or sophistication in substance or style.	Student rehearses theories and bits of argumentation from others and not in a way suggesting understanding at a university level.	Student fails to attempt argumentation or use of theoretical tools from the course.
Creativity	Student's choice of topic, sources, assignment completion modality, arguments, and solutions show sophistication and critical thinking at a high level.	Student's choice of topic, sources, assignment completion modality, arguments, and solutions show critical thinking skills.	Student's choice of topic, sources, assignment completion modality, arguments, and solutions are average and "modal".	Student shows no more creativity than what is required to complete the task.	Student misunderstands creativity or fails to complete the assigned task.
Persuasiveness	Student makes an argument using appropriate language and	Student makes an argument using appropriate	Student makes an argument using either inappropriate	Student rants or editorializes considerably, but stays	Student rants incoherently.

	rhetorical style necessary to persuade the reader to accept or accommodate their viewpoint.	language and rhetorical style necessary to complete the assignment.	language and/or rhetorical style. Ranting or editorializing.	largely on message.	
Use of fact and empirical evidence	Student brings factual evidence to bear upon the arguments and supports factual claims with adequate support from reputable sources.	Student brings factual evidence to bear upon some arguments and supports factual claims with support from limited or questionable sources.	Student brings some facts into their arguments but fails to provide support consistently for factual claims and uses trite or prohibited sources as support (e.g., Wikipedia).	Students factual claims are questionable or unsupported. Student rehearses facts from unacceptable sources (e.g., Yahoo answers).	Factual claims, if any are incorrect, ill supported, or incoherent within the argument.
Grammar and spelling	Student's writing is grammatically correct and there are no spelling errors.	Students writing is grammatically correct in most instances and there are few spelling errors.	Students writing is grammatically correct in many instances but spelling errors are found throughout the document, consonant with ESL students.	Grammatical infelicities and spelling errors appear frequently in the document, but these are errors common to ESL students.	Grammar and spelling are unacceptable for university level writing for any student.
Mechanics and style	Student's writing is fluid, fluent, and in an appropriate style for the task.	Student's writing is fluent but stilted and/ or is an odd style for the task.	Student's writing is halting and imbalanced and may be inappropriate for the task.	Student's writing is only marginally acceptable for university level courses.	Student's writing needs significant remediation by outside sources.
Citations	Student accurately and completely cites all sources, whether factual, argumentative, or theoretical	Student accurately cites all sources, whether factual, argumentative , or theoretical	Student cites most expected sources, but does not provide accurate or	Student's citations are incomplete and inconsistent throughout the paper.	Student fails to cite at all.

	claims according to the appropriate citation scheme.	claims but does not provide complete citations or uses an inappropriate citation scheme.	complete citations.		
Sources	Student's choice of sources demonstrates sophisticated use of research resources. Sources are from reputable, academic sources.	Student's choice of sources indicates a notable level of use of research resources. Sources are from reputable, academic sources.	Student's choice of sources shows minimal use of research resources. Sources are from a mix of academic and non-academic sources, some of questionable provenance.	Students include only minimal outside sources from sophomoric or prohibited sources (e.g., Encyclopedia Britannica online).	Student fails to demonstrate appropriate outside research.

Appendix II Programme Learning Outcomes

Master of International and Public Affairs (MIPA)

Upon completion of the programme, students should be able to:

1. Demonstrate advanced capacity in examining complex international relations issues.
2. Reflect upon the relevance and limitations of the existing concepts and theoretical basis of international relations studies.
3. Identify and analyze the key political, economic social factors shaping world politics and international political economy.
4. Assess how international and regional institutions and wider global changes have influenced the development of international relations with special emphasis on the Asia Pacific region.
5. Demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of international policy challenges from national, regional and global perspectives.
6. Become familiar with the debates on international issues and recognize the strengths and limitations of the different solutions advanced to address regional and global problems.
7. Demonstrate competence in communications and leadership skills.
8. Enhance their collaborative and team building skills in addressing international and public issues.
9. Identify appropriate research questions, conduct literature review, design appropriate research methods and collect empirical evidence for research findings.