

East Asian Security and South Korea's Middle Power Diplomacy

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Knowledge-Net for a Better World

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I. Post-Cold War World Still in Flux

The expectation that the end of the Cold War and the tide of mega-trend transformation of globalization would bring about post-Westphalian transition has gradually faded away. Some observers believed that a global governance in security architecture would form with the relative weakening of state power. Others predicted that the United States would create a genuine empire possessing unprecedented power as a single unit in human history, creating truly liberal institutions and providing global goods. However, the triple crisis that haunted the United States after 9.11, that is security, economic, and ideological problems impaired the American ability to produce global imperial power. Now the phenomenon of “return of geopolitics” is witnessed in many regions, and traditional realist great power rivalry seems to dominate the international order.¹

East Asia, reflecting these global changes, still preserves its own characteristics. With the so-called American rebalancing strategy, retrenchment of American power is less felt, while rivalry between the United States and China increasingly define the nature of the East Asian security order. Unlike other regions, especially Europe, geopolitics has never left the regional scene in security matters, and globalization or economic interdependence has not transformed the situation. Military competition has worsened even in the post-Cold War period. The combination of balancing strategy and the phenomenon of power transition defies the expectation that great power politics will make way for multilateral cooperation. But multilateral institutions are being reshaped to reflect great power politics. The rise of nationalism, composed of many different elements, haunts the region, further compli-



cating the security situation. Going through a series of hardships, nations in East Asia preserve a high level of suspicions and fears among themselves, which aggravates the security dilemma.

On the other hand, global security environments are in great flux. One of the main reasons is the change in American grand strategy, which may be termed as retrenchment, derived from the relative decline of American power. It is true that there is a lively debate on the decline of American hegemony, but there is a power vacuum in many regions, motivating many powers to take risks to accomplish regional ambitions. Rising tensions in Ukraine, the Middle East, and even in East Asia, shows that the hesitance of the United States to intervene with massive military power, especially ground forces, radically changes the security landscape in these regions.

These changes provide South Korea with opportunities and difficulties. At the global level, South Korea with its increased national power and status, acts as a prominent middle power. However, at the regional level, almost every time geopolitics reinforces itself, the Korean Peninsula becomes the focus of serious great powers' rivalry and even military clashes. When uncertainty for the future with the changes in power distribution becomes more evident, developing South Korea's foreign policy strategy becomes highly urgent. South Korea's main purpose is to contribute to enhancing systemic stability and flexibility to absorb the impacts of great powers' rivalry and to pave the way for resilient adaptation to new security surroundings. Theoretically, beyond the basic options of foreign policy; balancing, bandwagoning, hiding, hedging, bonding, and transcending. South Korea should develop a future-oriented, and advanced regional policy which can solve the dilemma of conflicting bilateral great power policies.²

South Korea has devised and elaborated the concept of middle power diplomacy for the past several years. In the area of security strategy, it is composed of six elements: 1) to help great powers lessen mutual strategic mistrust; 2) to develop an issue-specific dispute settlement mechanism; 3) to develop multilateral institutions or to actively participate in and further existing institutions; 4) to preemptively import globally established norms to the region to set up the principle on which East Asians can solve problems; 5) to make a cooperative network among like-minded middle powers to strengthen their positions vis-à-vis great powers; 6) to be a co-architect in making and reforming the regional security architecture. In what follows, this paper will delve into these points in more detail.



II. Decline of American Unipolarity and its Implications for Middle Powers

As the second term of the Obama administration meets mid-term elections, we can expect a debate over American grand strategy for the next administration. Especially as the world is in the middle of hot clashes in many regions at the same time, American foreign strategy after eight years of democrat leadership will draw a lot of attention. The debates are centered on the following points: whether American power is on the decline; between retrenchment/off-shore balancing and deep global engagement, which way the United States should follow; which region(s) should receive most intensive attention; what level of military preparedness the United States should maintain to defend itself and its allies; what kind of defense strategy the United States should adopt to effectively lead the world; how the United States should deal with potential competitors such as China and Russia, and so on.

Some argue that the United States should adopt the strategy of retrenchment, where retrenchment is defined as “a policy of retracting grand strategic commitments in response to a decline in relative power.” This strategy means “decreasing the overall costs of foreign policy by redistributing resources away from peripheral commitments and toward core commitments.” More concretely, “declining great powers select from a wide menu of policy options, but these options may be categorized as economizing expenditures, reducing risks, and shifting burdens.” Then, all the resources should be reallocated to only core interests renouncing peripheral commitments at the same time.³ Republicans, in times of stringency, have adopted this position, which may happen in the next Presidential election.⁴

Others argue that the costs of deep engagement cannot outweigh the merits and benefits of continued American leadership. Advocates of retrenchment overstate budgetary cost, the systemic costs of hegemonic leadership, and the distortion of U.S. interests, while underestimating benefits of deep engagement. Then, “the fundamental choice to retain a grand strategy of deep engagement after the Cold War is just what the preponderance of international relations scholarship would expect a rational, self-interested, leading power in the United States’ position to do.”⁵

American response at this time under the Obama administration is an emphasis on international collective action: “The starting point for that collective action will be our engagement with other countries. The cornerstone of this engagement is the relationship between the United States and our close friends and allies in Europe, Asia, the Americas, and the Middle East—ties which are rooted in shared interests and shared values, and which serve our mutual security and the broader security and prosperity of the world.”⁶ As global problems become more complex than in the 20th century, collective action is inevitable, and the United States holds that “The United Nations, NATO and our Asian alliances were



all built on the foundation of American strength and American values. American leadership established the Bretton Woods system and supported open markets.”⁷ This has big implications for middle powers, especially allies of the United States in the sense that they now take the role of co-architect of regional and global affairs on the basis of consultation with Washington.

In this vein, the United States defines most significant security purposes as follows: Counterterrorism and Irregular Warfare; Deter and Defeat Aggression; Project Power Despite Anti-Access/Area Denial Challenges; Counter Weapons of Mass Destruction; Operate Effectively in Cyberspace; Operate Effectively in Space; Maintain a Safe, Secure, and Effective Nuclear Deterrent; Defend the Homeland and Provide Support to Civil Authorities; Provide a Stabilizing Presence; Conduct Stability and Counterinsurgency Operations; Conduct Humanitarian, Disaster Relief, and Other.⁸

South Korea, as a robust ally of the United States, has contributed to the provision of global goods such as hosting global conferences (G20, Nuclear Summit Meeting, etc.), dispatching troops to Iraq and Afghanistan, sending Peacekeeping Operation (PKO) troops to many places in conflict, and contributing to non-proliferation efforts in many cases. South Korea’s growth in both hard and soft power, which enables its status as a middle power, changes the landscape of the U.S.-ROK cooperation, requiring more of a positive role of the latter.

The challenge ahead, however, is that as American fading unipolarity faces many difficulties, South Korea needs to develop new agendas for “going global” under the framework of the ROK-U.S. alliance,⁹ and to act as an independent middle power trying to realize universal norms in security affairs. Sometimes American initiative in dealing with security matters such as Iranian nuclear problems, and Russian annexation of Crimea, is not exactly in line with South Korean national interests. South Korea has maintained a close economic relationship with Iran, and Russia is an indispensable economic and security partner in Northeast Asia.

The solution is to confirm South Korea’s values in dealing with global matters and take concerted action with like-minded partners. The United States may be a natural partner sharing common values such as democracy, a market economy, and human rights, and in this sense, there could be a consensus about how to deal with specific issues based on close consultation.

Also, partnership is not confined to bilateral alliance relationships. South Korea’s active participation in major international institutions, and middle power initiatives will place South Korea in the right place. It is true that South Korea has effective security resources such as a well-trained military, long-preserved experiences in real combats and PKO operations, and a good reputation as a rapidly democratized and economically developed middle power.



For this global role, there should be a consensus in South Korea that active participation in global affairs will enhance South Korea's national interests in the long term. At first, middle power diplomacy may not seem so beneficial, but growing reputations and evaluation will ultimately benefit South Korean interests. Also South Korea's reputation as a global normative power will give South Korea a good basis in dealing with great power politics in East Asia. As long as South Korea is known as a country that takes care of collective interests, great powers will not be able to disregard South Korea's role.

III. Searching for South Korea's Middle Power Roles in East Asia's Transitional Security Environment

1. U.S.-China Rivalry in East Asia and South Korea's Middle Power Roles

One of the most significant elements that define the current and the future security architecture of East Asia is power transition. The rapid rise of China makes more plausible the prediction that the power gap between the United States and China will narrow, and that ultimately China may surpass American power at least in this region. How power transition in international politics will happen, however, will be shaped by the nature of change of international politics itself.¹⁰

The current power transition between the United States and China, contrary to typical power transition theories, is different from what has happened in the past, such as the two World Wars in the 20th century. In a narrower sense, China is rising under very different environments from the 20th century. In a broader sense, we are witnessing the transformation of global and regional international politics from the ground. There are several particular points in current power transition in Northeast Asia, which may be indicative of a possible peaceful process of transition. First, reflecting modern conditions, it is a power transition that is taking place under unipolarity. Rising powers should adapt themselves for a certain period of time to the structural frameworks made by the current hegemon. For example, China to further its rise, needs to conform to security, political, and socio-economic frameworks made by the U.S. for the time being. The need to rise under unipolarity might have the effect of orienting the rising power in line with the existing structural framework, lessening the degree of dissatisfaction of rising powers. This possibility is optimistic in that it increases the chance of regional, peaceful power transition. However there are still lingering doubts for



the possible cooperation between Washington and Beijing as experienced in many issues in 2010 such as the arms sales to Taiwan, military drills in the Yellow Sea, and the debate regarding the South China Sea. If unprepared for any possible controversial issues, these soon degenerate into problems that aggravate the security dilemma between the existing hegemon and the rising power.

Second, the current power transition is occurring not only in the area of hard power, but also in the area of soft power. International politics in the era of informatization and democratization works differently from before these megatrends appeared. The budding hegemon needs to develop the soft power resources to lead the region, inventing a better soft power vision for the region than that of the existing hegemon. Then, soft power transition occurs during the time of the rise of competing states, by which regional identity and normative politics became more complicated. China tries to strengthen its soft power strategy, both to advance a better regional framework than that of the U.S., and to search for the space of soft balancing against the U.S. with possible soft power alliances. Northeast Asian countries like South Korea, in the middle of soft power competition, sometimes have a hard time in taking a stance.

Power transition in the period of democratization, globalization, and information technology, then, will be affected not merely by military and economic power. In the 21st century, a rising power cannot accumulate economic power if it violates international economic norms. In times of democratization, public support and national preference in neighboring countries will decide how rising states will be supported by them. Institutions that rising states present as alternatives to established powers' institutions will be under scrutiny in surrounding countries. Then, power transition in this century, will be a transition of normative power, institutional power as well as hard power. Countries that are believed to conform to most developed norms and principles will acquire consent from the public and the government of neighboring countries.¹¹

2. New Modes of Rivalry between the United States and China

The rise of China, first witnessed in the economic realm, now translated into the military one, complicates surrounding countries' China policy. Unlike other regions where Washington directs toward retrenchment or off-shore balancing, the Obama administration takes Asia as a resourceful place in which it can find a platform for regaining hegemonic power. Asian markets including China, and its rapidly growing economy, can give the United States profitable trade partners, and based on economic reinvigoration, the United States will strive for hegemony in the 2020s.¹²



The East Asian international relations can be still defined as a unipolar system, at least in military affairs, with the U.S. military expenditure, military technology, and alliance networks still surpassing China. The United States is well aware of the narrowing gap between China and itself and pursues several strategic goals: 1) trying to engage with China with a view to socializing China into existing international norms, now coined in the term, “new type of major-power relationship”; 2) balancing against China with its major East Asian allies, to cope with the Chinese strategy of so-called anti-access and area denial; 3) forming multilateral institutions strengthening liberal norms and human rights in several areas such as trade, finance, and human security. National security advisor Susan Rice remarked that “With emerging powers, we must be able to collaborate where our interests converge but define our differences and defend our interests where they diverge.”¹³

For these goals, the United States, to back up its Asian rebalancing strategy, purports to strengthen its military preparedness, by doing the following: “We will also increase and more widely distribute our port visits, including in the important Indian Ocean region. And by 2020 the Navy will reposture its forces from today’s roughly 50/50 percent split between the Pacific and the Atlantic to about a 60/40 split between those oceans. That will include six aircraft carriers in this region, a majority of our cruisers, destroyers, Littoral Combat Ships, and submarines.”¹⁴

The United States has the perception that China continues to pursue a long-term, comprehensive military modernization program designed to improve the capacity of its armed forces to fight and win short-duration, high-intensity regional contingencies. According to a Pentagon report, “China’s leaders describe modernization of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) as essential to preserving and sustaining what they view as a ‘period of strategic opportunity’ to advance China’s national development during the first two decades of the 21st century.”¹⁵ It is to be noted that the United States try to read Chinese strategic goals at this particular state of power transition. Washington thinks that “China’s leaders see this period as providing an opportunity to focus on fostering a stable external environment to provide the People’s Republic of China (PRC) the strategic space to prioritize economic growth and development and to achieve ‘national rejuvenation’ by 2049.”¹⁶ This perception leads to the analysis of Chinese policies, such as to “maintain peace and stability along their country’s periphery; expand their diplomatic influence to facilitate access to markets, capital, and resources; and avoid direct confrontation with the United States and other countries.”¹⁷ For the regional strategy, the United States evaluates that “this strategy has led to a growing Chinese presence in regions all over the world, and particularly on its periphery, creating new and expanding economic and diplomatic interests. China’s expanding interests have led to friction between some of its regional neighbors, including allies and partners of the United States.”¹⁸



Also Washington puts great emphasis on strengthening alliance ties. This is coherent with American global security strategy of collective action and burden-sharing. Also the United States needs to repeatedly show its commitment to alliance partners when there is a growing doubt in American power and credibility to intervene, and China actively tries to draw neighbor powers on the basis of a mutual relationship. For example, Japan wants to be sure of American commitment in dealing with the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, when the United States cannot actively restrain Russia from annexing Crimea, and had a difficult time in criticizing China for its announcement of their aggressive Air Defense Identification Zone.

Also as the alliance network built by the United States transforms itself from the “hub-and-spoke” to “inter-spoke” network to ease the tension between China and its neighbors, America’s role in encouraging cooperation among its alliance partners becomes more important. For example, faced with rising tensions between South Korea and Japan due to territorial disputes and historical issues, President Obama’s role of mediator will draw much attention.

China, on the other hand, tries to strengthen itself for future all-out competition with the United States. Just after the 2008 economic crisis, China with its remarkably resilient economy, tried to challenge the U.S. hegemony at both a global and regional level, but after a couple of years’ of standoff with the United States, decided to maintain stable relations with them instead. Since the Hu Jintao-Obama summit meeting in January, 2012, China has paid more attention to normative, institutional politics utilizing a charm offensive toward neighboring countries. In the area of core interests, China was not willing to make concessions to any country and tried to realize its will even with military power. But in other areas, China actively publicized its principles and norms with elaborate efforts to advance alternative institutional frameworks to American liberal inventions.

In general, China is very cautious in coping with the American rebalancing strategy, because Beijing is deeply suspicious of the American intention of balancing against China. For example, Chinese media holds that “dealing with the U.S. containment attempts should be one of China’s diplomatic strategic goals. China should unite with all possible forces and keep certain strategic initiatives against the U.S. [...] Fast economic development has become the biggest advantage that China has when dealing with the U.S. The U.S. can hardly provoke China in the economic field, unlike its developing military strength which gives excuses for the West to suppress China. The more the two focus on economic competition, the more the situation will tilt China’s way. The growth and decline in economic strength is the starting point for national competition as well as its destination. It reflects national tendencies. But military and politics are often powerful tools to disturb or twist the trend. China should try to avoid a new Cold War with the U.S., but by no means should it give up its peripheral security in exchange for U.S.’ ease in Asia.”¹⁹



As China learns rapidly the nature of the new power transition game taking place on both the hard and soft power fronts, the Chinese leadership endeavors to suggest alternative institutional frameworks. President Xi Jinping in an address, “Keeping up with the Trend of the Times and Promoting World Peace and Development” at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, On March 23, 2013, expounded China’s view on the current international situation and its position on international relations. Xi advanced the idea of building a “new type of international relations” which posits that win-win cooperation, peaceful development is crucial and that people of all nations should combine their efforts to safeguard world peace and promote common development.²⁰

China also plans to assuage their neighbors concern's over the rise of China, by coining new principles in dealing with them, and hopefully to set up a Chinese version of the “Monroe doctrine.” In a conference on the diplomatic work on neighboring countries in Beijing, Oct. 25, 2013, Xi was reported to have stressed the necessity of good diplomatic work in neighboring countries to realize the “centenary goals” set by the 18th Communist Party of China (CPC) National Congress in November 2012: a moderately prosperous society by 2021 and a prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious and modern socialist country by 2049. Xi reportedly said that “CPC leadership in previous generations attached high importance to diplomacy with neighboring countries, raising important issues and guiding policy, opening up a generally sound environment, laying the foundation for diplomatic work.” It is notable that Chinese leadership increasingly emphasizes, “a three-dimensional, multi-element perspective, beyond time and space.” As the goal of treating neighbors, Xi said that “we must strive to make our neighbors more friendly in politics, economically more closely tied to us, and we must have deeper security cooperation and closer people-to-people ties.”²¹

It becomes more interesting that China now tries to propose an alternative security mechanism to deal with the Asian security architecture. At the fourth summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), President Xi Jinping delivered a key-note speech, saying that his country “advocates a new security concept featuring mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality and coordination, and supports the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, and the League of Arab States in playing a positive role in regional affairs.” Here a new security concept may mean that China now plans to suggest better security norms and principles, based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence. Xi, in this address, basically mentioned almost all important regional security issues covering the North Korean nuclear issue to Afghanistan, and promised “unremitting efforts in solving international and regional hotspot issues through dialogue and negotiation.”²²



As the all-front competition between the United States and China goes on, for the time being, U.S.-China relations are expected to go along the line of a “new type of major-power relations.” Both countries attempt to find dimensions of common interests, expand the scope of consent, and to operationalize cooperation. Susan Rice holds that “When it comes to China, we seek to operationalize a new model of major-power relations. That means managing inevitable competition while forging deeper cooperation on issues where our interests converge—in Asia and beyond.”²³ Both countries list most impending and easily agreeable issues for the platform such as the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, a peaceful resolution to the Iranian nuclear issue, a stable and secure Afghanistan, and an end to conflict in Sudan. Also the two countries can take concerted action to “bolster peace and development in places like sub-Saharan Africa, where sustainable growth would deliver lasting benefits to the peoples of Africa as well as to both our countries.” With China, Washington tries to enhance the military-to-military relationship and strategic security dialogues and to cooperate on issues like counter-piracy and maritime security.²⁴

3. Overbalancing Northeast Asian Security Environment and South Korea’s Middle Power Roles

In dealing with security matters in Northeast Asia, one significant factor is that Korea, China, and Japan have not completed modern transition, in the sense that the three countries have not accomplished their long-cherished goals of realizing normal, modern states. Both China and Korea are divided, failing to establish a unified modern state based on the traditional concept of one nation. Japan also failed to normalize itself having a constitutional restraint in wielding sovereign rights. As these three countries have no experience of mutually recognizing each other as normal, modern states, each still preserves serious doubt that other actors may strive for revisionist policies. Korea and Japan fears the revival of traditional Chinese hegemonic expansion, whereas Korea and China fear the return of Japanese imperialism in some form. These fears historically produced, make these states over-balance against each other, and become highly sensitive to each other’s interpretation of history. They assume that historical consciousness may reflect each other’s future strategic intention, thereby feeling the need to perform soft balancing acts against each other. These fears have been frequently aggravated by the element of domestic politics, in which some politicians make full use of these matters for the benefit of political calculation.

One example is Japanese conceptions of the rise of China. Frequently Japan remembers the traditional regional order under a Sino-centric world view. With the worsening of the relationship between South Korea and Japan, the Japanese also use history as grounds to ar-



gue that South Korea's traditional affinity with China will be revived in projecting the future regional order in the 21st century. This means that the traditional regional order still looms large in the perception of East Asians.

Augmented by this kind of fear, and also furnished by national aims to normalize itself, Japan has been taking steps to creating a stronger military. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, prefaced on the tenet of proactive pacifism, approved a new five-year defense plan, and the acquisition of drones and amphibious assault vehicles, and decided to reinterpret the constitutional clause for collective self-defense. It comes from a prolonged rivalry with China over islands in the East China Sea, but reflects Japanese perception on the rise of China in general.

4. The Evolving Korean Peninsula and South Korea's Middle Power Roles

South Korea, surrounded by four great powers, will face terrible times if power transition translates into military clashes. More than anything else, enhancing systemic flexibility is crucial. To do this, South Korea needs (1) to prevent war among great powers or military clashes for regional hegemony; (2) to peacefully manage difficult regional affairs which has implications for great powers' rivalry; (3) to establish universal, international norms in spite of power shift; and (4) to enhance the role of middle powers to lessen the strategic distrust among great powers, especially between the United States and China.

This goal is, in other words, to balance against "great power politics" itself rather than any specific great power for their specific national interests. It aims to balance against great power politics not to replace the role of great powers, but to transform the logic of power politics with a better logic of multilateral cooperation. Then, East Asians may advance a new picture of regional governance with more universal value orientation benefiting regional citizens regardless of power distribution.

Second, to cope with the complex nature of power transition and the problem of overbalancing, it is crucial to have a common, well-developed view on Northeast Asian international politics; to trace the origin of the problems, different combinations of organizing principles in East Asia international relations; to develop customized means for solving different problems.

Also South Korea with the help of other middle powers in the region, or hopefully of great powers, needs to develop knowledge diplomacy among middle powers. Here theoretical assumptions are important. If a common view on regional history can be developed, then, the problem of over-balancing will be easy to solve. In this case, to depoliticize the issue is critical, and in doing so, there may be hope of developing a regional identity among people in the region.



Third, the role of middle powers such as South Korea will be crucial in mini- and multi-lateral mechanisms. Northeast Asia-specific multilateral security institutions are rare. Only Six Party Talks qualify as a Track I network confined to Northeast Asian countries. However the issue area of the Six Party Talks is limited to dealing with North Korean nuclear issues, even though there is one working group related to regional multilateral cooperation. Also the Six Party Talks has been held at the level of assistant secretaries which is relatively insufficient to deal with major regional issues.

Under this situation, main venues for regional cooperation are bilateral, and mini-lateral ones. The U.S.-centered alliance network, the so-called hub-and-spoke network comprises cooperation among the United States, South Korea, and Japan. China has not pursued alliances as a central venue for cooperation from the Cold-War times, with the exception of North Korea. Russia's tie with North Korea in the form of an alliance does not exist any longer. However, bilateral networks among China, Russia, and North Korea are still central. Trilateral cooperation reflects both institutional balancing and institutional cooperation.

Anchored on U.S.-China relations, the U.S.-centered trilateral cooperative mechanism among the United States, South Korea, and Japan may be viewed to balance against the rise of China. As the first line of American rebalancing strategy is strengthening the relationship with alliance partners, mini-lateral mechanisms still looms large. China, on the other hand, endeavors to strengthen ties with neighboring countries especially in the period of the Xi Jinping administration, both at the bilateral and mini-lateral levels. ASEAN Plus Three (APT), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and other multi-track mechanisms are being developed to cope with U.S. centered mini-lateralism. Yet, mini-lateral mechanisms can contribute to alleviate competitiveness among great powers. The China-Korea-Japan trilateral has been initiated and still continues even though there is serious trouble between China and Japan, and between Korea and Japan.

Here mini-lateralism helps. Mini-lateral mechanisms are effective in that relevant participants focus on impending issues with a higher level of priority, flexible in that the scope of participants is adaptable depending on specific issues, and constructive in that a web of multiple mini-lateral mechanisms may ultimately end up as a solid multilateral mechanism.

In all these processes, middle powers do not pursue hegemonic dominance. They try to lessen strategic distrust among great powers because hegemonic strife endangers their interests; anchor the regional order on non-zero-sum game and normative politics; establish stable middle power cooperation to have stronger impact on architectural issues; and evade the pitfall of degenerating mini-lateral venues for institutional balancing among major powers.



IV. Issues of the Korean Peninsula and South Korea's Middle Power Diplomacy

Although the middle power diplomacy approach by South Korea in dealing with regional matters may seem plausible, it will be very difficult to persuade great powers to be flexible to try multilateral alternatives. In this case, South Korea needs promising issues to enhance its middle power role and to enlighten the prospect of solving the issues based on South Korea's suggestions. The North Korea problem, and the question of unification, so far, has been dealt with from the perspective of national interests. It is certainly true that these problems directly concern the interests of Korean people. However, we may choose to try and accelerate the process of unification, at the same time, to strengthen South Korea's capability to perform a middle power role and ultimately to enhance regional systemic stability and flexibility.

The core of North Korea's problem is how to define its future strategic status with credible guarantees from outside powers. The solution itself can be only given through the consent of the Korean people and regional powers. North Korea is a country constantly insecure over the chance of being absorbed by the South, feels betrayed by China, and allegedly is threatened by the United States. North Korea will not give up nuclear weapons unless it feels assured of its own survivability.

First, both South Korea and the United States have constantly declared their intention to guarantee North Korea's survival. However both lack of trust, incoherent policy coming from domestic considerations, and intransigent negotiation strategy prevented both parties from building trust with the North.

Second, it is also true that recent North Korean behavior to continue provocations in order to raise tensions embarrasses China. China, so far the most supportive ally of North Korea, is in a position to act as a consistent responsible stakeholder and to strengthen its soft power as a potential regional and even global leader. On the one hand, China has to conform to and strengthen universal norms such as non-proliferation which leads to wielding the influence to restrain North Korea.²⁵ On the other hand, the uncertain future for hegemonic rivalry with the United States, especially in the region of Northeast Asia and Western Pacific worries China, precipitating the need to keep North Korea closer as a useful geostrategic buffer. In that sense, China just cannot side with South Korea and the United States in raising the level of sanctions against the North, which might lead to the final collapse of North Korea and unification by absorption. Then, the most desirable picture is slowly reforming and a pro-China North Korea which ultimately contributes to the strengthening of a future China.

North Korea's recent behavior aggravated this dilemma. After China participated in international sanctions over North Korea's missile test in December, 2012, China is forced to



watch deeper engagement by the United States in the Northeast Asian military theater based on the alliance with South Korea, which might leave the long-term effect of changing the military balance of power in the region to favor the United States. To make matters worse, there are common voices urging China to take a more active position to restrain and coerce North Korea.

Under this situation, South Korea has the competence 1) to define the nature of the North Korea problem including the nuclear issue; 2) make the North Korea issue one of the most important regional issues needing the concerted acts of great powers; 3) establish and deepen the mechanism of multilateral consultation; 4) to use this as the platform for a more formidable multilateral institution. Also more tactically South Korea can prove itself as highly capable of lessening security dilemmas, and perform the function of a networking power.

In the example of the North Korea nuclear problem, North Korea will not be persuaded only by verbal guarantees or economic assistance short of full political support to give up nuclear weapons. At this stage strategic interaction should be complemented by more communicative interaction. Communicative action is about understanding the preferences of the other party, and delivering one's preferences in a more credible form. It aims at "coming to an understanding over the conditions of interaction rather than an orientation towards achieving immediate self-interest."²⁶ One way of reinforcing the credibility is to use publicity in communicative action. By raising the audience cost and verifiability through the public realm, signaling can be appreciated as more than just cheap talk. In this process, South Korean dynamic democratic political processes will help send signals to, and form North Korean preferences.

To convince North Korea of the genuine intentions of South Korea and neighboring countries, more public debate and discourses about the future of North Korea needs to be augmented. If North Korea witnesses the increase in public debate over its role and status in Northeast Asia, it may seek to conform to the expectations of international society, not because of its good intentions, but because of the will to survive.²⁷ In this process, even a slight representation of the intention to absorb North Korea by any government will incite North Korea's worry leading to increasing mistrust toward outside powers. If South Korea learns how to perform communicative action, and how to augment its network power as a middle power, this experience can be repeated for further problems in the region as a whole.

The question of Korean unification requires South Korea's highly keen strategic capability. Without prior strategic consultation with encompassing powers, especially the United States and China, the process of unification will be more difficult. The United States officially supported the unification of the Peninsula.²⁸ China, Japan, and Russia altogether bless the future of a unified Korea in principle. However, the strategic stance of a unified Korea, assumed by these



states will determine how they will react in the actual process of unification. The best prospect for a unified Korea's diplomacy will be middle power diplomacy which will contribute to regional common goods, with the view that unified Korea will not pursue the strategic line of expanding its power as a great power. Also as the event of the unification of Korea symbolizes the beginning of the completion of modern transition, it will inspire China and Japan to accomplish the same goals, and mutually respect each other as equal sovereigns. ■



Endnotes

¹ Walter Russell Mead, “The Return of Geopolitics: The Revenge of the Revisionist Powers,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 3 (2014), pp. 69+.

² See Robert S. Ross, “Balance of Power Politics and the Rise of China: Accommodation and Balancing in East Asia,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 3, (2006), pp. 355-395.

³ Paul K. MacDonald, and Joseph M. Parent, “Graceful Decline?: The Surprising Success of Great Power Retrenchment,” *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (2011), pp. 7-44; Steven E. Lobell, “The Grand Strategy of Hegemonic Decline: Dilemmas of Strategy and Finance,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2000), pp. 86-111.

⁴ See also Christopher Layne, “The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise,” *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (1993), 5-51; Christopher Layne, “The Unipolar Illusion Revisited: The Coming End of the United States’ Unipolar Moment,” *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (2006), pp. 7-41; Christopher Layne, “The Unipolar Exit: Beyond the Pax Americana,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (2011) pp. 149-64.

⁵ Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, “Don’t Come Home, America: The Case against Retrenchment,” *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (2012/13), p. 51.

⁶ The White House, *Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities For 21st Century Defense*, 2012, January.

⁷ The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, June 11, 2014, Remarks by National Security Advisor Susan E. Rice, “The Strength of American Leadership, the Power of Collective Action.” Keynote Address at the Center for a New American Security Annual Conference, Washington, DC.

⁸ The White House, *Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities For 21st Century Defense*, 2012, January.

⁹ See, for example, Kurt M. Campbell, Victor D. Cha, Lindsey Ford, Kazuyo Kato, Nirav Patel, Randy Schriver, and Vikram J. Singh, *Going Global: The Future of the U.S.-South Korea Alliance* (for a New American Security, 2009).

¹⁰ Randall L. Schweller and Xiaoyu Pu, “After Unipolarity: China’s Visions of International Order in an Era of U.S. Decline,” *International Security*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (2011), pp. 41-72.



¹¹ See Steve Chan, China, *The US and Power-transition Theory: a Critique* (Routledge, 2007); Zhiquan Zhu, *US-China Relations in the 21st Century* (Routledge, 2006).

¹² See Aaron Friedberg, *Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2011); Jonathan Kirshner, “The Tragedy of Offensive Realism: Classical Realism and the Rise of China,” *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2012), pp.53-75.

¹³ The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, June 11, 2014, Remarks by National Security Advisor Susan E. Rice, “The Strength of American Leadership, the Power of Collective Action.”

¹⁴ Leon E. Panetta, Shangri-La Security Dialogue, As Delivered by Secretary of Defense Leon E. Panetta, Shangri-La Hotel, Singapore, (June 02 2012).

¹⁵ Department of Defense of the United States of America, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2013* (2014).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ *People’s Daily* and *Global Times*, “Pentagon Plan Changes Game in Asia,” January 6, 2012.

²⁰ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, Xi Jinping Calls for the Building of New Type of International Relations with Win-Win Cooperation at the Core in a Speech at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations,
http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/xjpcf1_665694/t1024781.shtml.

²¹ *Xinhua*, “Xi Jinping: China to Further Friendly Relations with Neighboring Countries,” Oct. 25, 2013

²² *Xinhua*, “President Xi Addresses CICA Summit,” May 21, 2014.

²³ Susan E. Rice, “America’s Future in Asia” As Prepared for Delivery, Georgetown University, Gaston Hall, Washington, D.C. (November 20, 2013).

²⁴ Ibid.



²⁵ Reports say that a member of China's Politburo, Li Jianguo, led a small delegation to Pyongyang, North Korea's capital, in November. He carried a letter from China's new leader, Xi Jinping, which is said to have contained a simple message: Do not launch a ballistic missile.

²⁶ Marc Lynch, "Why Engage?: China and the Logic of Communicative Engagement," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 8, No. 2, (2002), p. 192.

²⁷ Fearon, James D., "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes," *American Political Science Review* Vol. 88, No.3, (1994), pp. 577–92; Fearon, James D. "Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands versus Sinking Costs." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* Vol. 41, (1997), pp. 68–90.

²⁸ "The deep longing for freedom and dignity will not go away. So, too, on this divided peninsula. The day all Koreans yearn for will not come easily or without great sacrifice. But make no mistake, it will come. And when it does, change will unfold that once seemed impossible. And checkpoints will open and watchtowers will stand empty, and families long separated will finally be reunited. And the Korean people, at long last, will be whole and free," Barack Obama, "Remarks by President Obama at Hankuk University," Seoul, Republic of Korea (March 26, 2012)



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