

South Korea's geopolitics: Challenges and strategic choices

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Being located at the crossroad of a continent and an ocean, geopolitics for Korea has been the source of both blessings and curses. It was a blessing when the land and sea powers co-existed harmoniously. It was a curse when the two collided. The Korean Peninsula has been constantly intertwined in a geopolitical vortex in which land power and sea power clashed. As [Hans Morgenthau](#) aptly observed more than half a century ago, 'the destiny of the Korean Peninsula of over 2,000 years was determined by the balance of power between the strong powers competing for the governance of hegemonic countries that control the Korean Peninsula or the control thereof.'

South Korea is currently facing growing rivalry between China and the United States. Whereas Beijing has been calling for a neutral stance from Seoul, Washington has been pressing it to take its side in countering the rise of China. Such pressures have precipitated intense debates on South Korea's strategic positioning. The purpose of this article is to elucidate the nature of domestic debates on geopolitical challenges and strategic choice in South Korea. The first section presents a brief historical overview of geopolitical dynamics of the Korean Peninsula. The second looks into South Korea's strategic dilemma in the face of China-U.S. hegemonic rivalry. Thirdly, the article identifies four strategic options currently being debated in South Korea and traces how they are factored in the domestic politics of the March presidential election, 2022. Finally, it suggests a transcending diplomacy as an alternative to the current strategic dilemma.

Geopolitics and the Korean Peninsula

The history of Korea is littered with ample examples of geopolitical entanglements. Continental powers, be they the Han, Mongol or Manchu, tried to expand their power and influence into the Korean Peninsula. The Sui and Tang dynasties staged protracted warfare with the Goguryeo dynasty in ancient times to conquer the Peninsula. The Mongols (Yuan dynasty) invaded Korea in 1231 and ruled it for 100 years. One of the Mongols' strategic intentions was to use the Korean Peninsula as a platform to invade Japan. The Chosun dynasty, which succeeded the Goryeo, survived by entering a tributary relationship with the Ming dynasty in the early 15th century. But the submissive peace secured by the tributary system was shattered by the Japanese invasion in 1592, which Japan justified by its ambition to conquer Ming China. Power transition on the continent again affected the geopolitical destiny of Korea. The Chosun dynasty made a wrong choice in maintaining ties with the declining Ming dynasty, while ignoring the newly rising Houjin (later the Qing dynasty). The Manchus invaded and subjugated Korea in 1676. After that, Korea remained as a Qing periphery.

Geopolitical dynamics have become more complicated since the late 19th century. A newly rising Japan challenged the declining Qing dynasty for hegemonic control of the Korean Peninsula, resulting in the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1894. Japan won the war, and China surrendered its suzerainty over Korea to Japan. The new regional hegemon won the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, paving the way to its colonial rule in Korea through the annexation of the Chosun dynasty in 1910. Korea was liberated from Japan's colonial rule in 1945 after the end of the Pacific War, but it instantly fell prey to big power geopolitical rivalry. The Soviet Union effectively occupied its northern half, the United States its southern half. The Cold War, which ensued from the U.S.-Soviet Union ideological confrontation, was responsible for national division on the Peninsula and the outbreak of the Korean War (1950-1953). During the Cold War era, South Korea lost its peninsular character and remained an

island with its ties to the continent cut off.

The end of the Cold War in 1990, however, opened a new horizon of peace and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula. Under the blessing of a unipolar moment of American hegemony, South Korea could normalise diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union and China. The two Koreas also signed the Basic Agreement on Non-aggression, Reconciliation, and Exchange and Cooperation and adopted the [Declaration on the Denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula in 1992](#). Although North Korea's nuclear ambitions have occasionally impeded the process of exchange and cooperation between the two Koreas, successive governments in the South initiated four rounds of Korean summits (2000, 2007, and April and October 2018). Progressive leadership in Seoul has been trying to take advantage of improved ties with the North as a springboard to venture back into the continent by relinking the railway system, establishing energy networks, and jump-starting a wide range of economic exchanges and cooperation with North Korea, as well as China and Russia. Such efforts to restore Korea's peninsular character bridging the continent and the ocean faced a major setback initially by stalled inter-Korean relations, and later by a growing confrontation between China and the U.S.

Korea's dilemma in the face of China-U.S. strategic rivalry

Strategic rivalry between China and the U.S. over their spheres of influence, which was accelerated by the outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan, is taking place on four major fronts. The first is the geopolitical front in which the U.S. has taken a strategic offensive to encircle and even contain China's military expansion by pursuing its Indo-Pacific strategy and strengthening its alliances in the region, as exemplified by the so-called Quad (the security dialogue involving the U.S., Japan, India and Australia) and the AUKUS defence arrangement (involving Australia, the UK and the U.S.). The Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea, the East China Sea, and even the Korean Peninsula have intensified as flash points.

Second, the geo-economic arena such as trade and investment has also been subject to fierce competition between Beijing and Washington. The U.S. has been seeking a decoupling strategy that aims to isolate China from the global supply chain. China has been responding through a coercive economic diplomacy, a 'dual circulation strategy (relying on exports as well as domestic consumption), and ultimately a self-sustaining economy.

Third, technology has become a dividing factor. Realising the acute technological challenge that China poses in terms of competitiveness, national security and technology standards, the U.S. has taken tough measures against China by restricting its access to American core technologies as well as forming a technology alliance with like-minded countries.

Finally, values, if not ideology, have emerged as another contentious front. The U.S. has been mobilising the support of other countries to criticise deteriorating conditions of democracy and human rights in Hong Kong and among Uyghurs in Xinjiang. China, for its part, denies any human rights violations and emphasises its own version of democracy with Chinese characteristics.

South Korea is torn between the two sides. The U.S. is South Korea's ally, while China is its strategic cooperative partner. Although Seoul wants to maintain the *status quo*, mounting pressures from both sides have placed South Korea in a difficult position. Washington has been pressing Seoul to endorse its Indo-Pacific strategy and participate in related military activities; to join American decoupling efforts in trade and investment; to form a technological alliance to cope with China's challenges; and to support America's campaign to criticise Beijing's violation of democracy and human rights. In contrast, Beijing has been sending a subtle warning to Seoul that although it does not want South Korea to take sides with China, it should stay neutral. If Seoul allows the U.S. to strengthen its missile defence assets in South Korea such as augmenting its THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defence) missile system and/or the deployment of American intermediate-range ballistic missiles, China will treat South Korea as an enemy and take corresponding

measures.

Economic decoupling is not easy either because China accounts for almost 25 percent of South Korea's total trade, whereas the U.S. and Japan account for 12 percent and seven percent, respectively. Moreover, economic interdependence between China and South Korea formed through global supply chains is deep and wide. More than 20,000 South Korean companies are currently doing business in China. Technology seems less problematic because South Korea's technological cooperation with China has been very limited. For example, South Korea is not dependent on 5G technology of Chinese origin. But cooperation in semiconductors and batteries for electric cars has become a source of American concern, and the U.S. has been urging South Korea to take its side in coping with China's technological rise. Up to now, Washington has not been explicit in calling for South Korea to take an anti-China stance on democracy and human rights. Nevertheless, the U.S. has been reminding South Korea that the South Korea-US alliance goes beyond its military dimensions and includes shared values. But Seoul's room to maneuver is constrained by the 'one China policy' and the principle of non-interference in domestic politics it pledged at the time of diplomatic normalisation.

The geopolitical dilemma, South Korea's strategic choices, and domestic politics

The geopolitics of the U.S.-China strategic rivalry poses a dilemma for South Korea which is difficult to overcome. Current domestic debates suggest four strategic choices: [pro-American balancing, 'bandwagoning' China, standing alone, or maintaining the status quo by muddling through.](#)

Conservative pundits and media favor a **pro-American 'balancing'**, which refers to taking sides with the U.S. to balance the rise of China as a revisionist power. Like realists, they contend that China as a rising power cannot help but be aggressive, and that the re-emergence of China is a potential and substantive threat to the

Korean Peninsula, leading to its 'Finlandisation' in which South Korea will lose its autonomy by being subjugated to China. Negative public perceptions of China stemming from its past invasion, domination, and participation in the Korean War against South Korea contributes to support for this pro-American option. In addition, they argue that values are another reason why South Korea should strengthen its alliance with the U.S. and balance the rise of China.

Its proponents call for active participation in U.S.-led regional military activities, joining the decoupling strategy in trade, investment and technology, and voicing greater objections to China's violation of human rights and democracy. It is expected that the balancing act will enhance South Korea's conventional and nuclear deterrence against North Korea and China and prevent the 'Finlandisation' trap.

However, this approach is not without substantial costs and limitations. Contrary to their expectations, South Korea's security could be jeopardised rather than stabilised, not only because China will emerge as a direct threat, but also because close military cooperation between Beijing and Pyongyang including the supply of weapons and logistic support will make North Korea a more formidable additional threat to South Korea. China's economic retaliation—such as the formal and informal economic and cultural sanctions imposed by China on South Korea after it allowed the deployment of the THAAD missiles in 2017—could deal a critical blow to the South Korean economy.

Some historians suggest **bandwagoning China** as an alternative. This approach seeks security and economic benefits by taking sides with the rising power. They invoke a lesson from the humiliating defeat in the Manchu War of 1636 in which King Injo of the Chosun dynasty had to make three big bows and nine kowtows to Houjin's leader Hong Taiji. The tragedy was a result of Chosun's miscalculation of the power transition in which it took sides with the declining Ming, not with the rising Qing. For them, China is rising and the U.S. is declining with a greater possibility of disengagement from South Korea. Thus, bandwagoning China means a fundamental geopolitical realignment through which South Korea belongs to the

Chinese sphere of influence. Under this scenario, the South Korea-U.S. alliance would come to an end, and South Korea would likely seek more active military and economic cooperation with China. South Korea would also be a robust participant in the Belt and Road Initiative, while remaining silent on China's democracy and human rights situation.

The bandwagoning China strategy could facilitate peace and stability, particularly if the U.S. disengages from the Korean Peninsula. However, short-term risks resulting from transitional strategic uncertainty, fear of 'Finlandisation', if not absorption by China in the long term, and the high economic opportunity costs of taking sides with China, while shrinking or losing economic ties with the U.S. and Japan, could shake South Korea's security and economic foundations. In addition, silence on human rights in China could severely damage South Korea's global reputation. More importantly, strong anti-Chinese public sentiment in South Korea will limit its feasibility. Moreover, Beijing does not seem to welcome such a sudden shift in Seoul, because it prefers the status quo.

Some in South Korea champion a **standing alone strategy** for a more autonomous diplomatic space, breaking away from the influence of the big powers. There are two contending approaches. The right-wing nationalists doubt the reliability of the American nuclear umbrella and its extended nuclear deterrence strategy and maintain that South Korea should become a middle power with nuclear armaments. For them, South Korea's military independence backed by nuclear weapons is the only way to effectively manage the whims of big powers and to ensure national security and dignity. In stark contrast, however, the left-leaning pacifists argue that South Korea should be free from the influence of strong powers by declaring a permanent neutral state. They call for the withdrawal of American forces from South Korea and the termination of the alliance with the U.S. Both approaches might appeal to nationalist or pacifist sentiments but are neither practical nor feasible. Being too idealistic, they are not likely to gain public support.

Most South Koreans, whether they are intellectuals or laypeople, prefer the strategy

of **status quo via muddling-through** that is predicated on a simultaneous pursuit of an alliance with the U.S. and a strategic cooperative partnership with China. Since the days of President Kim Dae-jung, governments in South Korea have followed this strategic line in the name of a balanced diplomacy or a diplomacy of '*anmi gyeongjung*' (security with the U.S., economy with China). Its proponents claim that although the U.S. should remain the top priority as the most valuable ally, it should not be at the expense of China. They also argue that such double dipping or double hedging is the best way to ensure national security, maximise economic benefits, and balance national interests and values. Such 'muddling through' may work when relations between the U.S. and China are congenial. But political scientist Stephen Walt warned a decade ago that 'If Sino-American rivalry heats up – as I believe it will – then Beijing and Washington will press Seoul to choose sides.'^[1] That is what is currently happening in the Korean context. The U.S.-China relationship is deteriorating, and the status quo strategy is reaching a breaking point, especially on the U.S. side. American pressure is not limited to the security area, but extends to the economy, technology and values. A moment of truth is approaching, and South Korea may have to make an agonising choice.

The strategic choice in the face of China-U.S. rivalry was a hot topic in the lead-up to the March 9th presidential election. Yoon Suk-yeol, the presidential candidate of the main opposition conservative People Power Party (PPP) has been championing the pro-American balancing strategy, while criticising the incumbent Moon Jae-in government of taking a skewed policy toward China and trying to act as a middleman between the U.S. and China. He advocates '[a comprehensive South Korea-US alliance covering all areas, not only security, but also health, administration, climate change and cutting-edge technology.](#)' He has also pledged to strengthen the military alliance with the U.S. by not only allowing the deployment of additional THAADs, but also supporting South Korea's participation in the US-led Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) and cooperation with the Five Eyes—the intelligence-sharing alliance between US, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. He also stresses the importance of a [values alliance with the U.S.](#) to promote liberal

democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Although he acknowledges China as an important trading partner, he believes that countering China's rise through the strengthening of the alliance with the U.S. serves South Korea's national interests well.

Meanwhile, Lee Jae-myung, the candidate from the ruling Democratic Party of Korea (DPK), has indicated the continuation of the Moon Jae-in government policy of status quo via muddling through by stating that 'solid progress in South Korea-U.S. ties and strategic cooperation with China are the cornerstone of national interest-centered practical diplomacy.' For him, the US is 'South Korea's only ally' and China is a 'strategic partner,' and the nation needs to act between the two sides on an issue-by-issue basis. He also adds that ['South Korea is the world's 10th-largest economy, while possessing the world's sixth-most-powerful military, so why should we be pressured to make a choice in accordance with other countries' interests? I think the situation is coming where we can make decisions independently, putting our national interests first.'](#) Unlike his opponent Yoon, he has shown a more cautious attitude toward the deployment of additional THAADs, participation in America-led regional military cooperation such as the Quad and AUKUS, taking sides with the U.S. in trade, investment, and technology, and strengthening a values alliance with the U.S.

Concluding remarks

Of the four contending strategies, pro-American balancing seems readily available, but not desirable because of high security and economic costs. And there are doubts about American capabilities and commitment to protecting South Korea. Weak public support and transitional uncertainty make the bandwagoning China strategy neither feasible nor desirable. Standing alone might sound appealing, but its feasibility seems inconceivable. The most desirable approach seems to be the continuation of the status quo via muddling through. But its feasibility is growing dimmer because of worsening China-U.S. relations. The strategic choice will be ultimately shaped by domestic political change. Yoon Suk-yeol won the March 9th

presidential election by a narrow margin, and his government is likely to seek the pro-American balancing strategy. However, it will not be easy for the Yoon government to totally ignore the geopolitical and geoeconomic threats coming from China. While strengthening alliance ties with the U.S., his government will also try to deliberate on a moderate form of muddling through strategy to avoid China's economic retaliation and military antagonism as well as to facilitate the negotiated settlement of the North Korean nuclear problem.

What should be done? While sticking to the status quo option, Seoul needs an imaginative and innovative approach to go beyond it. In this regard, we propose a transcending diplomacy. [Paul Schroeder](#) coined the term 'transcending' to describe the attempt by weak states to 'surmount international anarchy and go beyond the normal limits of conflictual politics; to solve the problem, end the threat, and prevent its recurrence through some institutional arrangement involving an international consensus or formal agreement on norms, rules, and procedures for these purposes.' A transcending diplomacy could be a useful option to mitigate the rivalry and confrontation between China and the U.S. because it proposes multilateral security cooperation as well as the restoration of multilateral regimes to resolve pending trade and technology problems. The same can be said of human rights.

Such transcending diplomacy poses a daunting challenge, and South Korea alone cannot initiate this effort. It should work with other middle powers that face a similar dilemma: Japan, Australia, Canada, France, Germany and Italy. This group should forge a new international consensus on norms, rules, and procedures to prevent U.S.- China conflicts in geopolitics, geo-economy, technology and value. They are all American allies and at the same time major economic partners with China. Their collective action is the only viable way to take China and the U.S. out of their 'game of chicken' and to restore international order through multilateral cooperation. Geopolitics is not destiny. We can overcome geopolitical destiny through multilateralism.

^[1] **Stephen M. Walt, “The Shifting Security Environment in Northeast Asia,” Paper Presented at the International Conference on Korea Questions: Balancing Theory and Practice, organized by the Institute for Foreign Affairs and National Security, Seoul, South Korea, October 7, 2011.**

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Image: Aerial view of the Korean Peninsula, May 2019. Credit: [European Space Agency/Flickr](#).