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The Ukraine lesson



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The event dominating the international news as Korea's presidential campaign reaches its conclusion is Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Koreans, while disturbed by the news, probably think it doesn't mean much to them, except perhaps a rise in the price of some things.

But Koreans should look at the news as yet another example of a great lesson for their country. Ukraine became the object of big country politics and power projection. Even a few years ago it didn't seem anything really bad could happen. But then it did.

Koreans all know the saying, "When whales fight, the shrimp's back is broken." They think it applies to their sad national history. But somehow they stubbornly refuse to think through what is needed to prevent a broken back the next time whales fight.

Korea is the smallest country in Northeast Asia, and its division in two makes it even smaller. It is geographically surrounded by three whales and the South is formally allied to another whale.

Meanwhile, through tough rhetoric, the two main presidential candidates appear to argue incompatible strategies for South Korea going forward, with the prospect of possibly flip flopping strategies every five years. So the stubbornness may continue. But can the winner — no matter which of the two frontrunners it is — finally give up the stubbornness and start to build a consensus on how Korea can prevent being a Ukraine in the future?

Or will Korea remain the Korea of the past — again, and again? Korea's history is one of internal divisions while others decided its fate. Perhaps worst was at the end of the 19th Century when internal squabbling led to a failure to modernize and colonization by the whale Japan. In 1945, colonization was only ended by the actions of other whales, the U.S. and the USSR. They divided Korea into two for their own reasons. In 1949,

both the US and USSR left Korea, but instead of uniting, the North attacked the South. The U.S. whale saved the South and tried to unite the country. But the Chinese whale saved the North. And the two shrimp Koreas have remained squabbling ever since.

When it has found consensus, South Korea has been able to use its whale alliance to its benefit. From the mid-1960s onward, all parties in Korea supported education and economic development. While there were often very bitter disputes about details, there was no dispute over the goal. Korea got U.S. buy in and the U.S. provided a good portion of national defense, freeing up resources for economic development, and investment capital and markets for increasingly sophisticated Korean products, as well as advanced technological education. Korea explained clearly what it wanted, and the U.S. helped.

Likewise, after Korea's democratization, all parties supported the country's outreach and integration into the world. The U.S. supported Nordpolitik, relations with China and Russia, and entrance to the UN and the OECD. Korea told the U.S. what it wanted, and the U.S. helped.

Korea now faces a changing geopolitical environment. The dramatic rise of the whale China is the biggest story of the 21st Century. How is Korea to position itself for dealing with that rise? How can both the North and the South end the diversion of their resources to squabbling? How do the two shrimps protect themselves from the four whales?

The first step has to be finding a strategic consensus in South Korea — a South-South dialogue. What is the goal, what are the key elements necessary to reach the goal? Only after that is achieved can the South then find a strategic consensus with the North. And only then can the people of the Korean peninsula maximize their independence of action and ensure they are making the key decisions about their future and not the whales. And if Korea can explain clearly what it wants, it can achieve U.S. buy in and assistance. But the U.S. has to know what Korea wants — not what it says it wants in this election, but what might change by the next election.

Although the candidates seem to be far apart on strategy because of the heated tone of the rhetoric between them, they might not actually be that far apart. Both candidates laid out their views for the U.S. magazine Foreign Affairs. There might be more overlap than it seems.

Lee Jae-myung says an all-or-nothing approach to dealing with the North will not work and the North should be incentivized to take meaningful steps. "This does not mean that sanctions should be eased immediately," but significant steps by the North can be met with "phased" sanctions relief, which could be "immediately restored" if the North fails to follow through.

Lee calls for a strong continued alliance with the U.S.

Interestingly, Yoon Suk-yeol argued in his Foreign Affairs piece that sanctions "might be eased in line with verifiable and irreversible steps Pyongyang must take toward denuclearization" with Seoul setting clear "parameters" and "corresponding measures" for such steps.

Yoon also called for a strong continued alliance with the U.S.

South Korea cannot continue to endlessly be the shrimp that squabbles among itself, and then also squabbles endlessly with the other shrimp of Korea, while the whales are circling each other menacingly. Korea must decide what it wants. And persuade the whales it has the power and will to enforce what it wants. If it can clearly articulate what it wants, it can get U.S. support. If all Korea appears to do is squabble, then the U.S. will always prioritize its own analysis of the situation.

Whoever wins on March 9 had a historic choice: continue the squabbling and hope that in the coming decades no whale does to Korea what Russia is doing to Ukraine; or launch a serious South-South dialogue with the party of his defeated opponent to determine a detailed strategy for a North-South dialogue, and a way of peaceful coexistence and maybe eventual reunification, that can withstand the five-year election cycle in the South. And then take control of the Korean peninsula's future with the assistance of the U.S. ally, with the goal of maximizing the independence and prosperity of all Koreans, North and South, for the rest of the 21st Century.