



SOUTH KOREAN FOREIGN POLICY AND THE ASIAN PARADOX

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The abrupt end of the Cold War was a momentous event in the geopolitical history of the world. This marked the beginning of a new world order and the emergence of new strategic relations between the remaining powers of the world. It also led to some interesting paradoxical phenomena in the international relations of the countries, in particular- the Asian Paradox. This paradox, although visible in many countries, found a special host in the form of South Korea which had recently launched itself on an upward trajectory of unprecedented economic growth dubbed as 'the miracle of Han River. This, however, was achieved based on the US-led 'hub and spokes model' of regional security architecture put in place after the end of the Korean War in 1953. Both these factors have had a profound impact on South Korea's rise as a middle power and its relations with the North as well as the long-term dream of a unified Korean peninsula that remains almost just as far away as it has ever been.

Keywords: South Korea, Asia, Inter-Korean relations, Paradox, Security, Economy

Introduction

South Korean foreign policy has changed drastically since the end of the Cold War. Earlier it was heavily influenced by its anti-communist stance in tandem with the US strategic interests in the region. The Cold War system maintained the regional situation in a tense but stable equilibrium, while South Korea's position in this system was defined by the existing network of alliances.¹ After the process of democratization in the late 1980s, South Korea had to discover a new role for itself as a newly democratic and developed state in a rapidly changing environment. During this time, a new concept called the 'Asian paradox' was propounded that highlighted the growing dichotomy between political and economic cooperation and integration in Asia.² South Korean foreign policy is mostly focused on three main issues: First, the security challenges that it has to face, mostly from North Korea³, the recent phenomenon of 'strategic triangles'⁴, and figuring out its new role as an emerging middle power⁵. The paradox, in the South Korean case, has grown

¹ Milani, M., Fiori, A., & Dian M. (Eds.). (2019). *The Korean Paradox: Domestic Political Divide and Foreign Policy in South Korea*. Routledge

² Manning, R. (1993). The Asian paradox: Toward a new architecture. *World Policy Journal*, 10(3), 55–64.

³ Hwang, E.G. (2010). *The search for a unified Korea*. New York: Springer

⁴ Ye, M. (2017). *China–South Korea relations in the new era: Challenges and opportunities*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

⁵ Hwang, W. (2017). *South Korea's changing foreign policy: The impact of democratization and globalization*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books

stronger by day with the normalization of diplomatic relations between South Korea and China in 1992. Mostly as a result of an unprecedented increase in trade between the two countries and China's re-emergence as a global power. The second issue that South Korea now has on its plate is to chart out a roadmap for its future visions and policies as an emerging middle power that has the potential to alter the balance of power in the region. On top of these new problems, South Korea has to deal with the evergreen North Korean threat which has significantly increased in the last decade with back-to-back nuclear tests by Pyongyang. The situation has become even more precarious with the growing US-China rivalry⁶ leaving Seoul with very limited choices to conduct its foreign policy independently.

This paper aims to put forth the current issues faced by Seoul in terms of its foreign policy-making, especially in the context of the 'Asian Paradox' which is increasingly becoming a 'Korean Paradox'. First, an analysis of the paradox itself is carried out to see how it affects Seoul's strategic decisions and the kind of policy options that it has to deal with this paradox. Second, a study of South Korea's position as an emerging middle power is warranted since this new identity would have a huge impact on not just how Seoul views itself but also how other actors in the region recalibrate their policies under this new reality. Lastly, and by no means the least, the current status of the Inter-Korean relationship has been analysed in a historical setting as well as the recent developments in the Korean peninsula keeping any prospects of peace as distant as it has ever been.

The Paradox

South Korea's foreign policy is caught in a contradiction between economic-trade relations on one side, and political-security relations on the other. The economic interdependence with China and the security alliance with the US is a relationship struggling to find a balance between the two biggest rivals of the century. While the term 'Asian Paradox' itself was coined in 1993 by Robert Manning⁷, its actual implications started to take shape in the first decade of the twentieth century. South Korea is currently faced with a strategic dilemma involving balancing, on the one hand, the ROK-US alliance that represents its security interests against, on the other hand, the strategic

⁶ <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/10/21/south-korea-is-caught-between-china-and-united-states-pub-83019>

⁷ *Ibid.*

cooperative partnership with China representing Seoul's economic interests.⁸ Seoul is forced to consider Beijing's actions and intentions regarding North Korea, which can form an obstacle to South Korea's aim for Korean unification.⁹ Although this is not completely a new situation that Seoul has found itself in given the Korean peninsula's historical role as a 'shrimp between whales', the dynamics are certainly very different from that of history. Even as a key US ally, South Korea's response to China's rise and its increasing influence has been different from other countries such as Australia and Japan. This is where the paradox helps us to understand the differential approach pursued by Seoul in dealing with US-China relations.

Manning assumed that the lack of an institutional mechanism under a multilateral framework was the reason for the security challenges in the region. He argued that the optimal solution to the paradox was to enhance the institution-building process and base that process on the preliminary achievements reached in economic and trade cooperation.¹⁰ Unfortunately for him, this process of geoeconomics did not succeed in producing the desired result, instead the opposite happened. The continued lack of mistrust between the regional powers has led to the classical Thucydides trap as argued by the realists.

The ROK-US alliance has existed since the Mutual Defence Treaty was signed on October 1, 1953, two months after the signing of the Korean Armistice Agreement. From then onwards, South Korea has been under the nuclear umbrella of the US, and this has allowed Seoul to put all its focus on economic development. After the democratization of South Korea in 1987, the aspects of foreign policy also came under public scrutiny which up till now had been tightly under the government's prerogative. The emergence of two political traditions- the conservatives and the progressives, has led to different responses by different governments in power to tackle the main challenges, essentially highlighting the deep impact of domestic politics in South Korea's foreign policy-making process. Despite few disagreements over the years, the ROK-US alliance has been maintained and strengthened as the cornerstone of Seoul's security policy against North Korea and to some extent China.

⁸ Stokreef, M. (2014). A rising middle power facing a strategic dilemma: South Korea and East Asian security. *Atlantisch Perspectief*, 38(5), 12-16. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48581144>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Manning, R. (1993). The Asian paradox: Toward a new architecture. *World Policy Journal*, 10(3), 55-64.

In the case of the Seoul-Beijing relationship, the primary foundation is commercial and economic.¹¹ The diplomatic normalization between the two countries only occurred in 1992. By 2014, the two sides had upgraded their relationship to an “Enriched Strategic Cooperative Partnership”. China’s short-term goal appears to be to control South Korean behaviour so that Seoul does not act in ways that augment the power and influence of the United States against what China perceives as its core interests. South Korean policymakers’ desire to achieve their own geopolitical goals—especially the denuclearization of North Korea and reunification—remains a powerful reason for Seoul to continue to show sensitivity to Beijing and seek friendlier political relations with Beijing.¹²

With growing regional tensions, South Korea’s image as a strategic pivot and a middle power would be called upon to play its part. As observed by the late South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008), “Depending on what choice [Koreans] will make in future, the power structure in Northeast Asia will change.”¹³ Some scholars argue that for South Korea, the security dilemma created by the ‘Asian Paradox’ is nothing but a corollary to the larger question of the changes in the regional security architecture. In recent years apart from its usual North Korean threat, Seoul has come to face more challenges due to its attempt to achieve a new international role as an emerging middle power.¹⁴

The Middle Power Conundrum

Since the onset of democratization in South Korea along with a domestic political divide between conservatives and progressives, Seoul has witnessed multiple attempts by different administrations to chart a new path for a new economically developed and democratized Korea on the world stage. However, progressives and conservatives have generally interpreted the country’s interests, its role at the regional and global level, and the national identity in profoundly different ways.¹⁵ This has resulted in several turning points in the country’s foreign and security policies. During the 1960s

¹¹ LEE, J.-Y. (2020). *The Geopolitics of South Korea—China Relations: Implications for U.S. Policy in the Indo-Pacific*. RAND Corporation. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep27748>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Quoted in “Again Roh Fails to Consult the People,” Chosun Ilbo, March 22, 2005, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2005/03/22/2005032261037.html.

¹⁴ Lee, S.J. (Ed.). (2016). *Transforming global governance with middle power diplomacy: South Korea’s role in the 21st century*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

¹⁵ Milani, M., Fiori, A., & Dian M. (Eds.). (2019). *The Korean Paradox: Domestic Political Divide and Foreign Policy in South Korea*. Routledge

and 70s, under the leadership of President Park Chung-hee, South Korea achieved rapid economic development and with that came political development in the form of democracy leading to greater public opinion and say in the foreign policy formulations of the country. These developments motivated South Korea to play a bigger role in regional and global forums and at the very least try for autonomy in its strategic considerations.

In recent years, South Korea has demonstrated its activism in finding solutions to regional and global problems offering a new Asian model for middle power diplomacy. In the face of great power rivalries, it has advocated for the establishment of institution-building processes to achieve regional stability. There is a broader consensus among the countries of the Indo-Pacific that an institutional mechanism or a community-building process is vital for long-term peace and stability in the region. However, the scholars remain divided about whether the emerging security architecture rests more on a stable strategic equilibrium rooted in the hub-and-spokes model of American alliances—or the multilateral community-building in forums such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) or the East Asia Summit (EAS).¹⁶

In general, middle powers are considered to act as coalition facilitators, catalysts for new initiatives, and as managers of existing international institutions.¹⁷ They are supposed to be interested in maintaining the institutional mechanisms as it provides them with relative security vis-à-vis great powers. South Korea, however, is a victim of its geography given that it sits right at the centre of the great power playground. Seoul faces an uncooperative North Korea and a China that has become both the South's largest trading partner and the major enabler of Pyongyang's dangerous behaviour. As a result, support for U.S. regional and global leadership runs deep in South Korean foreign policy, but so does fear of entrapment in any U.S. or U.S.-Japan confrontation with China over issues extraneous to the Korean peninsula.¹⁸

¹⁶ Michael J. Green and Bates Gill, "Unbundling Asia's New Multilateralism," in Bates Gill and Michael Green, *Asia's New Multilateralism: Cooperation, Competition, and the Search for Community* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 1–30; Also see John Ikenberry and Jitsuo Tsuchiyama, "Between Balance of Power and Community: The Future of Multilateral Security Co-operation in the Asia-Pacific," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 6 (2006)

¹⁷ Andrew F. Cooper, "Niche Diplomacy: A Conceptual Overview," in Cooper, ed., *Niche Diplomacy: Middle Powers after the Cold War* (New York: Macmillan, 1997)

¹⁸ Green, M. J. (2017). KOREAN MIDDLE POWER DIPLOMACY AND ASIA'S EMERGING MULTILATERAL ARCHITECTURE. In V. D. CHA & M. DUMOND (Eds.), *THE KOREAN PIVOT: The Study of South Korea as a Global Power* (pp. 17-34). Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep23175.6>

On the other hand, Seoul's desire to improve its relations with China does not mean that it is bandwagoning with Beijing on regional affairs. One can see that there is a repeating pattern of breakdown in Seoul-Beijing relations after each upgrade. The recent case in point is President Park Geun-hye's *trustpolitik* followed by the THAAD¹⁹ crisis. Although South Korean leaders remain sensitive to Chinese interests, both progressives and conservatives have pursued China policy within the bounds of South Korea's alliance with the United States and South Korea's interests, particularly its desire for a breakthrough in relations with North Korea toward unification.²⁰ Thus, South Korea's ambitions to project itself as an emerging middle power suffers from many constraints and has different variables that can affect its efforts towards this goal in more ways than one.

In terms of shaping the Asian multilateral architecture, South Korea has shown leadership in setting the global agenda on financial policy, nuclear safety, economic development, and the promotion of democracy. As Michael J. Green puts it, Seoul's connecting function by virtue of its middle power status, does not create insecurity spiralling among the great powers in the context of such initiatives. According to Green, South Koreans should be proud of their middle power status, Americans should be grateful and the nations of the Indo-Pacific should get inspired by South Korea in terms of setting regional and global diplomacy agendas. Some, however, argue that South Korea's description as a bridge between great powers of the Pacific is overestimated since Seoul does not have the capacity to act as such without considerable risk to its core interests. Moreover, such endeavours are also limited by the domestic nationalism and policy choices made at home.

Peace and the Peninsula

One of South Korea's primary concerns, in fact, an existential one, is the defence and deterrence against the North Korean threat. North Korea's acceleration of its nuclear and missile programs²¹

¹⁹ Meick, E., Salidjanova N. (2017). China's Response to U.S.–South Korean Missile Defense System Deployment and Its Implications, U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Staff Research Report, Washington, D.C.

²⁰ For example, in response to Roe Tae-woo's balancer argument, President Kim Dae Jung said, "It's best that our diplomatic relations operate within the three frameworks of a strong Korea-U.S. relationship, the tripartite alliance and cooperation between the region's four Great Powers. . . . This is not a choice, but a position we have to accept fatalistically, our destiny." See Snyder, 2018, p. 124.

²¹ Sheen, S. (2018). Security Outlook 2018: A South Korean View. In R. Huisken, K. Brett, A. Milner, R. Smith, P. Vermonde, & J. Wanandi (Eds.), *CSCAP REGIONAL SECURITY OUTLOOK 2018* (pp. 23-25). Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep22262.9>

has made the Korean peninsula a focal point of interest and concern not just for Seoul but also for the international community. As a product of the great power politics of the Cold War era, Inter-Korean relations have seen significant changes after the end of the Cold War. The efforts made by South Korean Presidents in this regard have brought some changes in the relationship but there has been no concrete outcome either in terms of peaceful coexistence or towards the ultimate goal of reunification. The prospect of permanent peace on the Korean peninsula depends on the internal dynamic between the two neighbours but at the same time, it is also constrained by the external power equations among the great powers in the region, in particular, the nuclear confrontation between the US and North Korea and the increasing tension in Sino-US relations.

The evolution of Seoul-Pyongyang relations can be classified into four main phases, each with its own characteristics. The first phase, characterized by a zero-sum game of mutual antagonism, ended with the July 4 Communiqué of 1972, based on which Seoul and Pyongyang for the first time established official contacts.²² This phase was also important for its version of West Germany's Hallstein Doctrine under which both Koreas refused to recognize each other's existence and refused to maintain diplomatic relations with any foreign country that recognized the other. The second phase lasted till the end of the global Cold War and finally culminated in the Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-aggression, Exchanges, and Cooperation (Basic Agreement)²³ of December 1991, the Agreement on Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in February 1992, and the entry of the two Korean states simultaneously into the United Nations in September 1992. This was a period of multiple overtures and disappointments in the Inter-Korean relations.

The third phase in the relationship could be marked by the historical 'Sunshine Policy'²⁴ of the South Korean President Kim Dae-jung towards the North with the tentative opening of North Korea to external economic and political forces, culminating in the historic June 2000 summit meeting with the North Korean leader Kim Jong Il. President Kim Dae-jung stressed that his Administration would actively pursue inter-Korean dialogue and exchanges in a wide range of fields, including culture, trade, tourism, family exchanges, and humanitarian assistance particularly focusing on increasing inter-Korean economic relations, separating the economic from

²² K. Armstrong, Charles (2005). Inter-Korean Relations in Historical Perspective. *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies*. Vol. 14, No. 2, 2005, pp. 1-20.

²³ Bureau of International Security and Non-proliferation (2004). Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-aggression and Exchanges and Cooperation between the South and the North. U.S. Department of State. <https://2001-2009.state.gov/t/ac/rls/or/2004/31012.htm>

²⁴ Kim, Hyun-Key (2012). "South Korea's Sunshine Policy, Reciprocity and Nationhood": 99–111.

the political, in the hopes of encouraging greater openness and economic development within North Korea itself.²⁵ The fourth phase started with intensifying economic linkages on the Korean Peninsula within the broader framework of an evolving regional dialogue among the two Koreas, Russia, China, Japan, and the United States, partners in the Six-Party Talks that began in Beijing in 2003.²⁶ However, this momentum died down when on February 10, 2005, the DPRK Foreign Ministry confirmed that North Korea had “manufactured nukes” and was now a “nuclear weapons state.” This was followed by North Korea’s first nuclear test in 2006²⁷ and subsequent tests in 2009, 2013, 2016 and 2017. The 2006 test marked the beginning of a nuclear shadow on the Korean Peninsula and a confrontation between North Korea and the United States adding another dimension to an already complicated security landscape in the region. Now, without a breakthrough in the North Korean nuclear crisis, US-DPRK relations cannot move toward normalization, and consequently inter-Korean relations will remain constrained.

With regards to the domestic politics of South Korea, Seoul’s foreign policy takes a turn every time there is a change in the government. Generally, South Korean conservatives tend to be more aligned with the United States and privilege deterrence over engagement towards North Korea, while progressives aim at reaching a more independent foreign policy and promoting dialogue and cooperation with Pyongyang. The ROK-US alliance though is not part of this change, that remains constant, in fact, more strengthened in the face of increasing security threats. The conservative-progressive divide also plays out vis-à-vis China. There is a mutual understanding on both sides that unification if at all it happens, would be a gradual and long process otherwise it would prove to be very harmful and disruptive to the South Korean economy as well as the society. For the North, it could mean almost an entire collapse of their system and along with that the special privileges that come with it.²⁸ Considering the present situation and the history of Inter-Korean relations, unification remains an elusive dream.

For the Kim Jong-un regime, the biggest fear is of a regime change in North Korea by the US in conjunction with the South. The Chinese fear that the collapse of North Korea would

²⁵ Han, Yung-Sup (2005). Peace and Arms Control on the Korean Peninsula. Kyungnam University Press. p. 209.

²⁶ K. Armstrong, Charles (2005). Inter-Korean Relations in Historical Perspective. International Journal of Korean Unification Studies. Vol. 14, No. 2, 2005, pp. 1-20

²⁷ Burns, Robert; Gearan, Anne (October 13, 2006). "[U.S.: Test Points to N. Korea Nuke Blast](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/10/13/AR2006101300576.html)". The Washington Post. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/10/13/AR2006101300576.html>

²⁸ K. Armstrong, Charles (2005). Inter-Korean Relations in Historical Perspective. International Journal of Korean Unification Studies. Vol. 14, No. 2, 2005, pp. 1-20

probably mean greater encirclement by the US and its allies. The general South Korean view of China is that of an enabler of Pyongyang's reckless activities against the South and an obstacle to the ultimate aim of reunification. The United States is interested in eliminating the threats posed by the nuclear weapons of North Korea. Such mutually suspicious perceptions of each other and differing ulterior motives of each party significantly reduce the chances of a peaceful and acceptable outcome for the Korean Peninsula. The problem gets even more exacerbated with the paradox coming into play which in turn is a result of larger geopolitical and strategic calculations of great powers supposedly involved in maintaining peace in the peninsula.

Conclusion

The South Korean foreign policy has indeed come a long way since the end of the Korean war in 1953 and has witnessed momentous changes, especially after the Cold War. South Korea's impressive economic growth and subsequent democratization have offered it a new form of power identity. As a middle power, Seoul finds itself with multiple challenges and opportunities that it can exploit to tackle those challenges. The task, however, is anything but easy and involves its interests which might be at stake if there are strategic miscalculations. The Asian paradox will continue to shape South Korea's policies in the foreseeable future wherein the country would struggle to balance its firmly embedded ROK-US alliance with its strategic partnership with Beijing. It is already playing the 'balanced diplomacy'²⁹ game seeking to pursue friendly relations with both the great powers. The United States adversarial relationship with China now puts South Korea in a position of having to make decisions among undesirable choices.

South Korea has emerged as a positive factor in the region's security architecture promoting an institutions-based mechanism to limit the impact of great power competition in the region. How far it can succeed in this endeavour will depend on how it perceives itself and what choices are made by its leaders in times to come. The middle power conundrum, as a corollary of the Asian paradox, is here to stay. Amongst all this juggling between great powers, it cannot ignore the North Korean threat which has gone nuclear now, raising the stakes much higher than before. The Inter-Korean relations are key to solving the larger issues of the region but at the same time, they are also ticking time bombs. Therefore, it is in the interest of all parties concerned that a

²⁹ LEE, J.-Y. (2020). *The Geopolitics of South Korea—China Relations: Implications for U.S. Policy in the Indo-Pacific*. RAND Corporation. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep27748>

peaceful and cooperative approach is adopted to solve the bilateral and multilateral issues which are acceptable to all.

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