



South Korea's Strategy towards US-China Relations and North Korea amid Intensifying US-China Strategic Competition

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As the US-China strategic competition gradually shifts toward a hegemonic challenge, South Korea's North Korea strategies are faced with increasing difficulties. North Korean nuclear issue currently shows no signs of resolution, and it is clear that the geopolitical environment will continue to worsen if US-China competition intensifies. A variety of proposals for South Korea's strategy in the middle of US-China rivalry have been presented, but recent changes in US strategy towards China pose challenges to South Korea's position.

China, in US strategic thinking, is perceived as pursuing hegemonic power not only in Asia, but also globally. Anti-Chinese sentiment following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has fueled this opinion. China's relatively quick economic recovery adds to the concern over the rise of China. Chinese intrusions into major disputed territories including the South China Sea are increasing, and China continues to expand its global presence by supplying global public goods in many areas especially for global health. Challenges posed by China today make the US more nervous than during the 2008 Financial Crisis. With the US presidential election a month away, the US China policy has been heavily politicized and is emerging as an important electoral agenda with other overwhelming domestic political issues.

The year 2020 marks a milestone in the US strategy toward China. Before 2020, the Trump administration was focused on various economic assistance including infrastructure assistance to Asian countries, and the promotion of free within the Indo-Pacific strategic framework, which was related to security strategies toward Asia as a whole. At the same time, the administration also pushed for trade negotiations to reorganize bilateral economic relations with China.

However, the Trump administration's China policy has become much tougher in 2020. Since the global onset of the COVID-19 crisis, the US has intended to reduce its reliance on China for core medical supplies by creating an alliance called the "Economic Prosperity Network," and tried decoupling from China in advanced technologies sectors crucial to China's future development. Such US moves are accompanied by a policy to further decouple Asian countries from China. Furthermore, the security architecture seems to depart from the US-centered bilateral alliance network, namely the hub-and-spoke system, to form a multilateral security system similar to NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization). This attempt can be confirmed by the recent remarks of the Defense Secretary Esper and Deputy Secretary of State Biegun¹.

The US takes issue with the ideological characteristics of the Chinese regime and President Xi Jinping's leadership. This is well-illustrated in Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's recent speech at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library. Pompeo mentioned in his speech that Chinese regime is fundamentally totalitarian Marxist-Leninist one, and that it is forcing coercive governance on its neighboring countries and throughout the globe, thereby weakening freedom. This new Cold War rhetoric implies that the liberal countries cannot coexist with communist China. The US has shifted to an offensive stance towards China, claiming that its engagement policy toward China for the last five decades has failed.

However, it is difficult to conclude that US engagement policy towards China over the past 50 years has totally failed. China has developed under the existing US-led liberal economic order, has not explicitly posed military challenges, and still values the existing global norms. If the US and the international community had not pursued a policy of engagement with China, China's external behavior might have been more aggressive.

Second, the new Cold War type of strategy could give the impression that the US is seeking regime change. China, which is well aware of the fact that the end of the Cold War resulted in the collapse of the Soviet Union, will have no choice but to respond in a very aggressive fashion. This may eventually lead to a military confrontation between the US and China, having an adverse impact on the neighboring countries.

The new Cold War atmosphere also increases the potential for a confrontation between the

¹ "...there's too much one-on-one, too much US-Australia, too much—I shouldn't say too much, but we're very good when it comes to the bilats, US-China—I'm sorry, US-Japan, US-Korea, US-Australia, etc. We—we need to start doing more where it's— where it's multiple countries...So I think the more we can multilateralize the relationships in this theater, the better. You know, NATO is a great standard to hold up, the collective security and cooperation among allies and partners. So, I think the more we can move in that direction, the stronger we are and obviously, the more aligned we are, the more interoperable we are, etc." Secretary of Defense Dr. Mark T. Esper, Secretary of Defense Engagement at RAND Corporation. Sept. 16, 2020.

US and China to turn into a hot war. After World War II, George Kennan insisted on the geopolitical containment of the Soviet Union. However, he did not necessarily agree with the use of military means. The NCS-68 advocating for the military containment only came into force after the Korean War when fear of a military attack by a communist regime spread widely. If short-term and high-intensity disputes occur in the South China Sea between the US and China, the current status quo could unexpectedly turn into a hot war. To prevent such changes from occurring in the near future is extremely important.

Fourth, the allies and strategic partners of the US do not necessarily agree with the US perception of China and the strategic calculation in line with a new Cold War. This is not only due to differing perceptions of China, but also due to differences in ultimate policy goals. The US believes that from a global strategic perspective, China's military modernization and stronger national power can be a threat. However, many Asian countries do not feel that China poses a direct security threat with differing degrees.

The, the so-called new Cold War strategy towards China has a number of problems, and is bound to backfire if it is forced on America's allies. First, the existing US-centric international order arose from a set of policies that encompassed a number of different arrangements. Alliances were formed to promote the active forward deployment of the United States, provide defense support to allies, pursue an international order based on embedded liberalism which benefitted America's allies economically and promoted compromise between governments. Also the US government served as a model for the pursuit of human-rights oriented policies and democracy.

Second, the new Cold War offensive has already provoked a fierce reaction from China. This is because China feels that the new US strategy undermines the ideological legitimacy of the Chinese regime. This move is believed to frustrate China's growth and strengthen the collective security of Asian countries in competition with China. If Asian countries join the US offensive against China, Chinese retaliation will be stronger. If the US fails to provide a viable alternative that can both prevent and respond to Chinese retaliation against these Asian countries, the new Cold War structure will eventually weaken.

Third, if the allies nevertheless decide to join the US-led anti-China camp, we can expect retaliation from China which will hurt the industry sector of Asian countries. This will likely intensify anti-Chinese sentiment, but also it may also lead to anti-American sentiment, as the US has established a new Cold War structure. The US could end up with economically weakened allies who lay some blame on US policies.

Amid the US-China rivalry, it is not easy for South Korea to find a path toward effective

North Korea policy. It is difficult for South Korea to pursue successful policy towards North Korea without diplomatic engagement with its neighboring countries, especially China.

South Korea, as a middle power, must work to design policies that will impact the politics of both the US and China. Under the current circumstances, South Korea should devise various ways to influence US policy towards China. One potential way to achieve this goal is to deliver policy ideas to key policy advisors through Track II talks. The US is facing major upcoming changes in its policy towards China and its national security strategy. Input from US allies on policy alternatives would enable the US to devise better policies. Second, Korea must clearly communicate the fundamentals and norms that it wishes to pursue through its policies. It is necessary to devise policies that are differentiated from those of the US and are based on more universal norms, with concrete logic and theories that support such policy endeavors. Successful policies may eventually influence US policies by setting a good example. The third option is to present Korea's policy alternatives through strategic dialogues in Track I talks between Seoul and Washington. It is crucial to engage in a strategic dialogue that preemptively presents policies that benefit not only Korea but also the US and the wider international community.

US strategy towards China that South Korea may recommend is as follows. Currently the discourse on China policy in the United States varies. The advocates of the new Cold War confrontation, offensive realists, and liberals all have different opinions on the ultimate purpose of China policy. The supporters of the new Cold War and the offensive realists both emphasize ways to reinforce the role of Asian allies. The former focuses on possible result of the collapse of the Chinese regime, while the latter stresses changes in the balance of power between the US and China, recommending the strategy of off-shore balancing and the increased role of alliances. Liberals argue for consistent and reinforced open engagement with China. The new Cold War is unacceptable to Asian allies and also active US intervention remains necessary. Therefore, South Korea should pursue active diplomatic efforts to maintain the military status quo and enable China's external behaviors to be consistent with existing norms, and foster close cooperation within the international community to positively influence China's future development path.

Second, it is difficult to create a collective security system without invoking aggressive response from China. As a hegemonic power, the US is proposing the idea of broad collective security, taking into account China's breach of norms and disputes over maritime territorial and transportation routes. When the US still maintains a military advantage over China with the current bilateral alliance system being able to keep China in check, the imposition of artificial collective security could result in a backlash. There must be an alternative to the bygone collective security of

the 20th century—an alternative that seeks to create a more flexible and creative network within the current bilateral alliance system.

Third, complete economic decoupling would entail substantial costs. It is also unclear whether pursuing such a strategy would in fact harm China, as China has the capacity to minimize economic damage through the establishment of the so-called “red supply chain.” Excessive politicization and securitization of markets would inevitably affect the global economic order. Even under the US-led economic order, politicized and secured economic practices could have negative impacts. Therefore, we must find ways to maintain the existing liberal order and international organizations while convincing China to cease its breaching of norms. We must pursue a recoupling, not decoupling, of cooperation.

Fourth, we should actively develop areas that facilitate cooperation with China. In this regard, South Korea’s role in resolving the North Korea nuclear issue is essential. It is true that the visibility of the North Korea nuclear issue has decreased significantly in the US presidential elections. However, the North Korea nuclear issue is a matter of cooperation between the US and China, as Deputy Secretary Beigun commented during a recent Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on July 22nd ². Since South Korea is an important party to the North Korean nuclear issue, Seoul must work to exercise its influence on US-China relations by establishing a track record of policy success. The resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue and the successful North Korea policy are vital, but these will become more possible when South Korea reinforces its position within the rapidly changing global dynamics, especially with regard to the US-China relations. ■

² “...the United States and the PRC could cooperate to solve global challenges...Among the issues that we could start with are strategic stability around nuclear capabilities and doctrine; coordinated efforts to identify the origins and spread of COVID-19; a denuclearized North Korea that ensures peace and stability on the Peninsula...” US Policy Toward China: Deputy Secretary Beigun’s Remarks to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. July 22, 2020.

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