



The International Order and Inter-Korean Relations after COVID-19

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There are various prospects and predictions about the world after the coronavirus (COVID-19) and changes in future strategies toward North Korea and inter-Korean relations remain an area of primary concern.

Division of the Global Economic Bloc and the Centrifugal Force of Capitalism

One of COVID-19's greatest impacts has been that on the global economy. The United States suffers from the world's highest number of confirmed COVID-19 cases and death toll. Its economic downturn has also overshadowed the boom that continued until the end of last year. The overall prospects remain dim, and it has been predicted that the U.S. economic growth rate will reach only around 20 percent this year, leaving 20 million people unemployed with the unemployment rate rising to 10 percent. China's economic growth rate also fell to minus 6.8 percent throughout the first quarter of 2020, which is a record low since 1992, when its official quarterly gross domestic product (GDP) was first recorded and announced. This is also a huge drop from China's GDP last year, which remained at 6 percent up until December 2019.

The economic prospects of both U.S. and China—two nations engaged in strategic competition—are certainly key elements for the international order. However, in addition to these two nations' strategic competition, the structural changes brought upon the global economy will have greater lasting impacts for the international community. Although there are various pictures that people have about the future global order, many agree that the world will be considerably narrower than it is now. With the COVID-19 variable causing many countries to look inward and avoid risk-averse economic engagements, the future of global interdependence—which contributed to the formation of various networks—remains in question. COVID-19 has revealed the weakness of the global supply chain, simplifying its underlying logic to the maximization of individual

economic profits. Although economic globalization was already experiencing a crisis due to the ongoing trade war between the U.S. and China and the upcoming fourth industrial revolution, the phenomenon of selective decoupling between the two countries is expected to accelerate due to the pandemic. By breaking up the global supply chain, COVID-19 will likely push forth the centrifugal force of global capitalism rather than contribute to its centripetal force. In the post-COVID-19 era, there is an undeniable possibility for divisions to occur amid the economies of the U.S., China and Europe, which will diminish economic interdependence and lead to security instabilities.

Strategic Autonomy, Self-reliance, Competition and Compromise in International Cooperation

Although it is difficult to predict the general trend or pattern of post-COVID-19 international politics and relations, the absence of hegemonic leadership will lead to a contradictory phenomenon in which both power transition and power diffusion will occur simultaneously. Key terms that help to explain this trend include strategic autonomy, self-reliance and international cooperation.

First and foremost, increased strategic autonomy among countries will be an important phenomenon for the post-COVID-19 global environment. As witnessed in the last 20th century, there is a high possibility that the strategic autonomy of regional countries will continue to strengthen since the world is experiencing less pressure and coercion from the centripetal force of the U.S.-led unipolar order. It is increasingly becoming difficult for major powers to exercise leadership in maintaining a stable international order, in addition to managing their own regional and international affairs. Due to COVID-19, the world has been brought closer to the era of "G-Zero" as mentioned by Ian Bremmer, with an interregnum in hegemonic leadership over the distribution of global public goods.

The second phenomenon will be self-reliance. In the wake of COVID-19, countries will further strengthen selective cooperation by focusing primarily on their national interests over international cooperation. This prediction is not new. Since Brexit in 2016 and President Donald Trump's 'America First' policy, reinforcement and prolonged survival of self-reliance had already been foreseen for the future of international relations. COVID-19, however, has not only strengthened the logic of self-reliance but has also reversed the existing flow of local and international affairs. As a result, the world is likely to experience limited space for multilateralism and international cooperation in addition to heightened self-reliance following COVID-19. Paradoxically, however, international relations post-COVID-19 will require even more multilateral cooperation.

With respect to rising self-reliance, more countries are voicing the need for heightened international cooperation based on multilateralism. Under the current circumstances, it is difficult to imagine the reemergence of international cooperation immediately following COVID-19. For example, the European Union—a symbol of international cooperation since the mid-20th century—has only shown disappointment in its handling of the COVID-19 crisis. The international community has witnessed how fragile integration, solidarity and multilateral cooperation can be, as well as how rapidly border barriers and nationalistic sentiments can rise when faced with an unexpected crisis. However, what should be taken away from the pandemic is that there exists a

common enemy of mankind that is ecological. In addition, the reversal of globalization is not the solution to this problem and instead, what is needed is a speedy establishment of a new multilateral system. The prospect of international cooperation will depend on how thoroughly and preemptively the international community recognizes these key takeaways of COVID-19.

COVID-19 as a Variable within the Political Landscape of the Korean Peninsula

How will COVID-19 affect the situation on the Korean Peninsula and the strategy towards North Korea? First, there is a high possibility that North Korea's dependence on China will increase as China's status is strengthened both regionally and internationally. Despite its initial failure to respond to the pandemic, China boasts the fastest recovery rate in the world. The country is also emerging as a leader with respect to healthcare by exercising effective quarantine guidelines and by providing medical equipment to more than 120 countries around the world.

Without a proper domestic quarantine system, North Korea is highly sensitive in handling COVID-19. For North Korea, COVID-19 extends beyond the question of protecting and safeguarding its people, but addresses the very existence and continuity of its regime and leadership. As such, North Korea sealed off its borders and isolated itself from the outside world immediately following the COVID-19 outbreak and selected COVID-19 management as an important agenda for the April 11 meeting of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Worker's Party of Korea. Although North Korea has enjoyed a bit of autonomy from China while utilizing its hedging strategy, the regime has been induced to further rely on China following the COVID-19 outbreak as it has a history with not disclosing its international affairs to the rest of the world.

However, we cannot completely rule out the possibility that North Korea, which is wary of its excessive dependence on China, may seek another way out from the pandemic. Considering how the U.S. is currently occupied with the imminent presidential elections and unable to focus solely on diplomatic affairs, there is a low likelihood for U.S.-DPRK negotiations to resume and bilateral relations to normalize in the near future. If COVID-19 is to continue onto next year, the new U.S. administration is unlikely to prioritize North Korea. In the traditional perspective, North Korea seems to be ramping up its strategic weapons. However, if it is unable to resolve the COVID-19 issue, it may turn toward South Korea as a negotiating partner. It will be difficult to alleviate existing tensions in inter-Korean relations within a short time frame but if COVID-19 becomes prolonged, North Korea will have to find ways to reinitiate dialogues with South Korea in order to secure its leadership by maintaining the public's dependence on the regime. The South Korean government also has to devise a comprehensive and inclusive North Korea strategy in preparation for the changing dynamics of the situation on the Korean Peninsula and inter-Korean relations following COVID-19. Inter-Korean dialogues have to extend beyond those related to medical issues to encompass the facilitation of bilateral relations in the post-COVID-19 era.

After COVID-19, emerging security threats such as diseases, as well as ways to manage them through healthcare systems and quarantine will serve as the new focus of international discussions. South Korea should embrace for the return of diplomatic and security competitions which will follow the period of respite provided by COVID-19. In particular, South Korea should

seek for a new North Korea strategy, considering the changes in the Korean Peninsula's surrounding political environment in the wake of COVID-19.

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