

# How COVID-19 Has Affected the Geopolitics of Korea

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COVID-19 has not gone away, and observers are now discussing possible long-term effects of the pandemic, including on geopolitics. A report by the European Parliament discussed five COVID-generated factors that could impact the geopolitical environment, i.e., supply chains, health multilateralism, digital diplomacy, climate change, and democratic activism. It predicted a reshuffling of value chains, where cooperation within the same “bloc” would be strengthened, while states continue their reshoring efforts, consequently shifting the current geopolitical environment. The report pointed out that the pandemic necessitated thorough scientific cooperation and information sharing beyond the level that the WHO had initially offered, suggesting changes in patterns of behavior, as in adapting to digital platforms while opening opportunities for nations to counter climate change and strengthen their geopolitical positions. Moreover, it also looked at the number of protests resulting from the pandemic and its economic effects and suggested that such pressure would encourage governments to mollify inequality. Missing is optimism that countries will be stirred to pursue common interests. Missing too is the geopolitical fallout from acutely worsening Sino-U.S. relations, as in South Korea, which stands at the forefront of states facing pressure from both sides.

With the unforeseen disruption in both global and domestic economies, much attention has been paid to the effect of COVID-19 on the economic side rather than the political side, perhaps because many did not expect that the pandemic would last this long. However, recent disruptions are clearly rife with serious political implications, both domestically and globally. Above all, as seen from Seoul, their impact on the relationship between Beijing and Washington demonstrated how much the economic forces could spill into geopolitics. Koreans follow this impact attentively, realizing that worsening Sino-U.S. ties may reverberate on one or both powers, increasing pressure on Seoul’s efforts to sustain a precarious balance for the sake of its North Korean policy and its hope for regional stability.

Many nations in the Indo-Pacific have recently struggled between the United States and China, trying to find the most advantageous equilibrium between security and economy. South Korea has uniquely stood on the frontlines, as in 2016-17 when it bowed to the U.S. and deployed the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense targeting North Korea, which was met with strong Chinese pressure—strict economic sanctions through unofficial channels and demands to promise the “three noes” that restricted further missile defense deployment to deescalate the tension. President Biden’s new measures to bridge security and economy through multilateralism call for Seoul to choose between acceding to U.S. requests or risking China’s threats to respond aggressively—even as some anti-THAAD sanctions remain in place. President Xi Jinping’s warnings point to China’s harsh response.

South Korean concerns have grown because of the relationship between the current global supply chains and geopolitics, which is a preoccupation of the Biden administration. Situated at the juncture of supply networks centering around China, South Korea’s economy is almost certain to be heavily hit. Furthermore, the pandemic brought ongoing pressures for de-globalization and de-dollarization to the forefront with major ramifications for Seoul. Much of the anxiety has focused on the geopolitics of deteriorating relations between Beijing and Washington. The former is warning Seoul against joining the Quad, agreeing to trilateralism with Japan and the U.S., and tilting the balance away from China in the

Sino-U.S.-ROK triangle. Meanwhile, the Biden administration, even before it clarifies its regional strategy, is nudging Seoul in precisely the opposite direction. The year 2020 raised challenging issues for Seoul, which loom in 2021 as more severe geopolitical tests for the Moon administration.

To properly gauge the effect of COVID-19 on South Korea's geopolitics, it is crucial to understand the world before the pandemic. Has COVID-19 functioned as an independent variable in South Korean geopolitics? If there is a discernable difference, we have to see whether that difference was caused by COVID-19. This paper proceeds in four parts: 1) outlining the pre-pandemic status quo up until 2020; 2) assessing how COVID-19 affected international geopolitics; 3) examining how it influenced South Korea's supply chain and geopolitics; and 4) analyzing ongoing discourse on South Korea's strategic choice amid the U.S.-China rivalry. These sections are followed by brief conclusions on implications for policy choices.

## Pre-pandemic Status Quo

### Global

Globalization faces a crisis from the retreat of democracy, de-globalization, and the U.S.-China rivalry. Some attribute the crisis to China's growing assault on the liberal international order since at least 2008, accelerating with Xi Jinping's ascent to power in 2012. Others attribute it to the election of Donald Trump in 2016, but the retreat of democracy began even before his presidency. Still others point to domestic pressure arising from inequalities and economic stagnation.<sup>1</sup> With "new authoritarianism" appearing in Hungary, Poland, the Philippines, and Turkey, the world has seen "would-be autocrats" emerging from democratic systems.<sup>2</sup> "Already before the COVID-19 pandemic, democracy worldwide had been under severe stress, with overall global democracy scores displaying negative trends for the last 10 years."<sup>3</sup>

Along with the retreat of democracy, nations also started to de-globalize before the pandemic. From Brexit to Trump's America First policy, nations joined the march of nationalist movements, and the global community started to question the role of China in the global economy.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, as the division between the China-bloc and the U.S.-bloc became more apparent, many countries had to deal with their own domestic discontent against multinationalism. This great power competition between the U.S. and China created a geopolitical environment that resembled the Cold War. China's ambitions were highlighted by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), designed to increase China's geopolitical clout and build dependency on Chinese investments, China invested in an Anti-Access Denial (A2/AD) strategy to stymie the projection of American military power into East Asia, eventually pushing it out of Asia.<sup>5</sup> Such a rivalry creates a dilemma for nations such as South Korea even if the U.S. government has never directly forced South Korea to choose a side.<sup>6</sup> The relationship between the U.S. and China has been deteriorating since before the pandemic, and COVID-19 worsened the situation. With China hiding the origins of COVID-19 and not being transparent, negative perceptions of China within the U.S. (and South Korea too) were only reinforced.

## Korea

Even before the pandemic, South Korea had been caught in a dilemma between China and the U.S. Sino-Korean relations have been deteriorating since the 2016 THAAD deployment and subsequent sanctions. South Korea has often been called a “shrimp among whales” and has been reluctant to choose sides lest it jeopardizes its power, economy, and future unification. The ongoing strategic competition between Washington and Beijing has reduced the space within which it can hedge and is instead pressuring the peninsula to side with either nation.

Victor Cha argued that Korea, caught between its security patron and its giant neighbor, will be increasingly forced to choose between the two in ways that are detrimental to the longstanding alliance.<sup>7</sup> Choosing one or the other is difficult because of three dilemmas that Korea faces: power dilemma, economic dilemma, and unification dilemma. Also, Abraham Denmark pointed out that the geopolitical competition between China and the United States has profound implications for the Indo-Pacific generally, and for the Korean Peninsula in particular. While Washington blames China for North Korea’s lack of progress toward denuclearization and sees China orchestrating persistent challenges on the Korean Peninsula, China accuses the U.S. of hurting Chinese interests in the region, even when the U.S. engages in a completely justified reaction to North Korean belligerence that does nothing to impact Chinese interests.<sup>8</sup> This has put South Korea—which seeks positive relations with China while also maintaining a robust alliance with the U.S.—in an uncomfortable position.

South Korea has found itself in the awkward situation of relying on the U.S. as its security ally and China as its top trading partner.<sup>9</sup> Due to its long history of being a proxy battlefield, it is acutely aware that the competition ahead will be even more consequential to its territory than in other key U.S. allies, Japan and Australia. Moon’s administration has remained deliberately ambivalent as to its geopolitical commitments, unwilling to openly side with either nation. Ji-Young Lee explained South Korea’s indecisiveness in terms of four factors: North Korea, the domestic divide between progressives and conservatives, economic interests, and Korean identity.<sup>10</sup>

South Korea has been reluctant to endorse U.S. policy in fear of undermining its relations with China. For example, in 2017, Moon Jae-in was disinclined to back Trump’s “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” initiative. Kim Hyun-chul, a presidential aide, made it clear that Moon did not agree to the country’s participation in the FOIP. Kyle Ferrier laid out two possible explanations: South Korea’s economic dependence on China through trade; and Seoul not looking to rock the boat because of China’s close ties with North Korea.<sup>11</sup> Andrew Yeo also pointed out that with a hard lesson learned from the Chinese retaliation against THAAD deployment in 2017, Seoul felt burdened to actively join FOIP. To avoid antagonizing Beijing and to diversify its economic and strategic options, the Moon government launched its New Southern Policy (NSP) to boost ties with ASEAN’s ten member countries and India.<sup>12</sup>

## Possible Changes Caused by COVID-19 at the Global Level

Though COVID-19 may not have fundamentally changed the global order, it exacerbated the existing tensions. Because the pandemic began while the tensions between the U.S. and China were rising, it was inevitable that the virus that originated from Wuhan, China, would only elevate the tension. The pandemic also revealed the vulnerability of the existing supply chain and liberal international order, causing nations to de-globalize.<sup>13</sup> Regarding the intensified rivalry since the pandemic began, Park provided two scenarios. On the one hand, if the pandemic were to end soon with a cure or vaccine, the competition would stiffen and, consequently, the world would enter an era of Neo-Cold War. China would continue expanding its military power and the U.S. would try to throw China off sooner than later. On the other hand, if the pandemic continued until late 2023, the world would experience another global depression causing economic nationalism to gain a greater voice in almost every country. Most nations would lose faith in globalization, and strict reciprocal relationships would, instead, prevail. Subsequently, there would be a rise of multipolarity in the global environment as the U.S. and China would want to decrease their own costly role.<sup>14</sup>

The pandemic caused trade volumes to decrease (partially because of tighter inspections), and factories to cease operations. This deterioration of the global supply chain pressured leaders to find solutions domestically. COVID-19 also underscored the inefficiencies prevalent within the international institutions, especially in the beginning of the spread, as the WHO proved incompetent in handling the crisis, undermining confidence in global governance in general.<sup>15</sup>

Although the pandemic only showed the importance of international cooperation, especially in terms of global health management, the world is moving in the opposite direction. De-globalization and digitalization have affected the way of life for many nations, shifting the structure of the global production chain. Sang-Hwan Lee finds a Neo-Cold War likely as the U.S. and China have already started creating a digital iron curtain.<sup>16</sup> The U.S. has launched a war in global standards by excluding China on security grounds, hampering China's ability to participate in the global competition if it wants to enter markets aligned with the U.S. This could be a step towards hegemonic competition between the two and between the global north and global south.

## Possible Changes Caused by COVID-19 in Korea

There are two possible ways that COVID-19 might have affected South Korean geopolitics: 1) by directly disrupting the global supply chain and Korean economic structure; and 2) by forcing a change in strategic calculations in the short run or long run, perhaps as an indirect effect of changes in China or the U.S.' geopolitical calculations. Even so, South Korea may cling to its past positions.

## Supply Chains and Geopolitics

Disruption of the global supply chain could be serious for South Korea, as its economy heavily depends on trade. As is often argued, the pandemic has caused more problems for states heavily linked to the global production chain; and South Korea is one.<sup>17</sup> This disruption of the supply chain depends on the number of countries that adopt restrictions, and it worsens the longer the restrictive measures and lockdowns stay in effect.<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, South Korea experienced a 10.3 percent contraction in its exports and 5.4 percent contraction in imports. The European Parliament (2020) notes a disruption in the supply chain, especially in the sectors of electronics, computing, textile manufacturing, and certain medical supplies produced in China and India. It notes that the recent outbreak not only was a sign that the existing supply chain is vulnerable to external shocks but also that some of these products could be utilized strategically, and therefore have an impact on geopolitics.<sup>19</sup> For instance, Biden, painfully aware of the global shortage of semiconductors and U.S. reliance on Chinese and Taiwanese manufacturers, on February 24, 2021, signed an executive order to review and improve U.S. supply chains of not only semiconductors but also of batteries and minerals.<sup>20</sup> The message was clear: if companies fail to improve the resilience of their supply chains, nations will find it increasingly challenging to adapt to the post-pandemic world.<sup>21</sup>

The pandemic could cause nations sharing the same values to create their own block in order to safeguard themselves from another unforeseen crisis. In other words, nations under the influence of the Chinese BRI might have difficulty entering certain markets. The environment encouraged nations to devise measures to rescue a failing economy. For example, Finland, like other globalized nations, placed itself at the upper part of the value chain while outsourcing manufacturing. When the outbreak started to affect the country, the government became the “last resort” to initiate various financial packages.<sup>22</sup> However, countermeasures are not always successful. For example, the South Korean government’s efforts to encourage firms to re-shore production back home through benefits and subsidies have yet to produce meaningful results.<sup>23</sup> It is argued that countries have become overly dependent on Chinese production, making supply chains very vulnerable and leading to policy interventions intended to reconfigure supply chains.<sup>24</sup> However, it is unclear how COVID-19 has affected the geopolitical strategy of South Korea. That is why we need a lens through which we can analyze the effects of COVID-19 on its geopolitics, especially in terms of the U.S.-China rivalry.

## Chinese Pressure on South Korea

Historically, China has exerted the full wrath of its economic power when Sino-Korean relations have soured. Most recently, China has threatened to retaliate against South Korea if its companies choose to comply with the U.S. ban on Huawei. Yet, the novel pandemic presents somewhat of a paradigm shift in that the South Korean public’s view of China has significantly deteriorated, making it difficult for the South Korean government to implement pro-Chinese policies. In order to endure a U.S. offensive, China has intensified its pressure tactics against South Korea. In an attempt to dissuade South Korea from strengthening its bilateral relations with the U.S., China has been luring Korea with close trading ties.<sup>25</sup> Unable to procure technology from the U.S., China has begun outsourcing from Korea and Japan in order to facilitate interregional development and, perhaps more importantly,

increase the two nation’s dependence on the Chinese market. To further this strategy, China has been striving for the normalization of relations between Japan and South Korea through a three-way FTA.<sup>26</sup>

There has been no shortage of Chinese warnings about possible retaliation if Seoul were to cross one or more of a myriad of putative red lines. A few were formalized when Moon agreed to Xi’s “three noes” as conditions for getting beyond the impasse over THAAD and China’s retaliation for it. Others have been asserted directly or indirectly. The overall theme is that tilting to the United States on security or technology related to security is unacceptable. This applies to missile defense, trilateralism with Japan, Taiwan and South China Sea policies, the Quad, internal Chinese human rights issues including Hong Kong, and even North Korea policy if it veers more toward sanctions and deterrence. Roh Moo-hyun is held up as the one president who came closest to the ideal. Conservative presidents are faulted for straying the farthest from it. China’s demands have intensified; so, what was tolerated some years ago is no longer acceptable. Clearly, China is watching carefully how the Moon administration will respond to the Biden administration, especially after the U.S. security review is completed.

### **U.S. Pressure on South Korea**

The U.S. recognizes that countering China will be difficult due to the fact that China has adopted a market economy and maintained staggering growth rates. It aims to check Chinese expansion together with its allies and partners by advancing common interests in politics, economy, and technology. As laid out in the 2019 Indo-Pacific Strategy published by the Department of Defense, the U.S. made clear its intent to share security costs and responsibilities with key allies.<sup>27</sup> The Biden administration has further pressured China by strengthening ties with Japan, India, and Australia through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, while exploring a more expansive framework for Indo-Pacific cooperation: the Quad Plus. Vasudeva and Panda claimed that this is “not just a mechanism to address a common challenge” but rather the “coalition of like-minded countries from the prism of its competition with China.”<sup>28</sup> Talk of incorporating South Korea in building a “new grouping of like-minded nations” faces a wary response, given concern about China’s reaction. It entails preventing China from setting global standards by publicly criticizing it, for instance, for adopting a widespread AI surveillance system, infringing upon intellectual property rights, and obstructing democracy.<sup>29</sup>

On March 3, Secretary of State Tony Blinken said,

Our relationship with China will be competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be. The common denominator is the need to engage China from a position of strength. That requires working with allies and partners, not denigrating them, because our combined weight is much harder for China to ignore. It requires engaging in diplomacy and in international organizations, because where we have pulled back, China has ‘filled in.’ It requires standing up for our values when human rights are abused in Xinjiang or when democracy is trampled in Hong Kong, because if we don’t, China will act with even greater impunity. And it means investing in American workers, companies, and technologies, and insisting on a level playing field, because when we do, we can out-compete anyone.<sup>30</sup>

In the Quad summit, the 2+2 meetings in Tokyo and Seoul, and the Anchorage exchanges with China, U.S. officials amplified Blinken's speech. The Japanese side was enthusiastic, the Indian side was newly supportive, and the Chinese officials were vigorously opposed. Of all the key players, only the Korean side remained hesitant, if not cornered on how to react to the U.S. posture toward China. Speculation centered on what the U.S. side was seeking. One unmistakable theme was the reinvigoration of trilateralism with Japan, politically and militarily. A second U.S. aspiration was the inclusion of South Korea either in the Quad or in a Quad Plus with a role in maritime security including the South China Sea, and in institutionalizing this new grouping, which China calls "NATO of the East." A third well-understood U.S. theme was to prepare for tougher sanctions on North Korea should a provocation ensue and for new missile defense coordination and deployment. Fourth, Huawei had come to symbolize U.S. insistence on technological decoupling in terms of dual-use and security-sensitive matters. Finally, there was an obvious value component to the Biden administration's desired agenda, issuing specific high-sounding words about the multilateral coalition forming in support of democracy and a rules-based order without letting China's recent behavior pass without comment. All of these issues under discussion in U.S. policy circles posed a serious challenge for Seoul, especially because acquiescence to the U.S. would alienate China.

## Korea's Choice

While China demands that neighboring countries refrain from acting against its "core" interests, the U.S. has made new efforts to maintain a strategic balance in East Asia through bilateral relations with allies and partners. South Korea is expecting stronger pressure from both with no solution in sight.

Some advocate remaining somewhat neutral, or strategically ambiguous between the United States and China. Considering severe economic and cultural retaliation from Beijing during the THAAD deployment, one expert argued that Seoul should pursue an alliance with the U.S. while adopting flexible, somewhat neutral foreign policies. He explained that choosing one country and acceding to its demands would weaken South Korea's flexibility and adaptability, therefore harming national interests.<sup>31</sup> Another also insisted that it would be unwise to adopt an anti-Chinese stance solely because an ally demands so. In his view, although the U.S. boasts a hegemonic position in terms of its military and economic strength and is the most preferable ally for South Korea, China is Korea's largest trading partner.<sup>32</sup> Acutely aware of its economic muscle, China has been using its purchasing power and attractive domestic market to counterbalance any potential moves away from it, e.g., announcing its intent to economically retaliate if the South Korean government bans companies from using Huawei products. Challenging China will likely open South Korea to disastrous retribution reminiscent of the garlic dispute in 2000, or the THAAD incident.<sup>33</sup> In this perspective, South Korea must precariously position itself with the U.S. and its allies while minimizing pressure on China.

On the other side of the debate, some assert that sharing of values must be considered before any economic calculations when security is at stake. Although both values and interests are important, Sang-Hwan Lee argued that if China continues to implement its anti-democratic policies, it would be wise for South Korea to side with the U.S. as a free



and democratic country.<sup>34</sup> As the alliance structure is generally formed and maintained in consideration of mutual benefits, South Korea needs to be able to present its value as an ally as well.<sup>35</sup> The alliance has been crucial in the management of North Korea's nuclear threat and the security of South Korea in general. In this view, South Korea should extend its hand to the U.S. and maintain a strong alliance, even in the face of pressure by China.

Never has Seoul faced a dilemma similar to the push-and-pull awaiting between Washington and Beijing, while the Pyongyang factor adds more difficulty. No respite can be sought from Tokyo, which is more adamant than Washington that Seoul must change course, and Moscow, leaning to Pyongyang even more than earlier and more hostile to the U.S. agenda even than Beijing. The breaking point could occur in 2021 over one of several possible causes: 1) the Biden North Korea review presses Moon to deviate from his engagement first approach to North Korea; 2) Moon impatiently defies the U.S. position on North Korea in the waning days of his administration; 3) North Korea provokes a response that splits the U.S. and China; 4) a Sino-U.S. crisis occurs, wherein both sides grow more insistent that South Korea show its hand; and 5) the overall Biden policy review leaves Seoul isolated as Washington bolsters a wide-ranging Indo-Pacific strategy with other partners. The year 2020 was difficult with Trump applying pressure on bilateral relations and demonizing China, but 2021 promises to be more so with Biden prioritizing multilateralism to forge a regional coalition.

## Conclusion

Some studies were conducted to find the relationship between COVID-19 and Korea's domestic politics. Joseph Yi and Wondong Lee argued that the Moon government used containment measures to promote the ruling party's overall political agenda. The party's victory in the April 2020 elections would most likely have not been possible without the pandemic. Then, the government used its secured power to implement a leftist-nationalist agenda with public support exemplified by the election results.<sup>36</sup> Some have argued that South Korea's comparatively excellent response to COVID-19 will help the nation expand its soft power and foreign policy influence.<sup>37</sup> For example, Kathryn Botto said that South Korea's successful containment of the virus has led to the apparent bolstering of South Korean soft power. The Moon government has since tried to link South Korea's pandemic response to its broader global goals such as peace on the Korean Peninsula, as if it could successfully convert its newfound soft power into actual political influence despite the uncertainty that changes caused by COVID-19 will have any positive effect on the geopolitics of Korea.

The geopolitical environment is heavily influenced by the strategic competition between the U.S. and China, which leaves little room for South Korea's soft power. Neither South Korea's domestic politics nor its enhanced soft power can affect its strategic position amid fierce strategic competition between two global powers. COVID-19 has accelerated the existing trend of geopolitics, especially with respect to the relationship between the U.S. and China. The combination of ever-increasing mistrust between the two and overdependence on China in global supply chains has led the U.S. to decrease its dependence on China and seek greater cooperation, including from South Korea—an objective more apparent since Biden took office. It has become more difficult for South Korea to navigate between the U.S. and China without damaging relations with either side. So far it has only been postponing

decisions by trying to maintain the stability of the alliance structure and by not crossing China's red lines. The first foreign leader with whom Moon had a phone call after Biden's inauguration was Xi of China. We also observe a stark contrast in the statements made from the U.S.-Japan 2+2 meetings and the Korea-U.S. 2+2 meetings in March.

One way that the pandemic can change the course of South Korea's strategic decision-making is through domestic politics. As the world lauded South Korea for its exemplary management of COVID-19, the ruling Democratic Party swept last year's legislative elections. Yet after a year riddled with governmental scandals and controversies, the opposing People Power Party won this year's mayoral by-elections in a landslide. Numerous factors are behind this shift in the political atmosphere: i.e., the fact that the by-elections were held due to the wrongdoings of the former mayors of Seoul and Busan, the ruling party's real estate policy fiasco, and the Korea Land and Housing (LH) scandal. Amidst such considerations, public criticism of the government's failure to procure COVID-19 vaccines has been instrumental in the downturn in support for the ruling party. Although it cannot be said that the pandemic acted as a direct factor in influencing the election results, it is clear that it did not work in favor of the ruling party as it had a year earlier. South Korea was conflicted over ROK-U.S. relations well before the pandemic hit. Although COVID-19 has not been a direct variable in relevant decisions, it has indirectly augmented criticism towards the Moon administration.

In 2021 the Moon administration in its final months is finding it harder to steer great power policies toward North Korea with engagement in the forefront and a regional agenda that avoids confrontation between China and the United States. The Biden administration is intent on regional coordination in the face of security threats while the Xi Jinping government regards South Korea as the weak link in the U.S. alliance and defense network, ready to retaliate against a tilt to Washington, as it did in 2016. There is no easy answer, as forces beyond Seoul's control are setting a more confrontational course.

## Endnotes

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