

Korea trapped in shifting sands of US-China rivalry

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SEOUL – South Korea’s foreign minister was meeting his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi in Beijing on Friday as Seoul’s national security advisor jets across the Pacific for a meeting in Washington with his Japanese and US counterparts.

The divergences implicit in these missions are difficult to encompass with a single metaphor: Is Korea walking a diplomatic tightrope? Or is it feeling its legs stretch at a diplomatic crossroad?

Either way, the conundrum is gaining ever-greater force, for according to a high-profile former diplomat and academic in Seoul, global paradigms are changing and new alignments are coming into play.

Countries are shifting away from the Cold War-era politics of values toward more introspective politics of identity. The latter encompass policies of victimhood and of antagonism – either unilateral or multilateral.

Within this complex space, South Korea is conflicted. It is a conflict that may become apparent in Washington – and with considerably higher visibility at the G7+3 leaders’ meeting in London in June.

What is at play? South Korea’s national identity and its global strategy as both a polity and an economy.

New cracks in geopolitical maps

For decades after 1945, the world’s political fault line was the Cold War. That conflict was ideologically defined by a bloc of communist states and dirigiste economies opposing a coalition of democracies and market economies.

Only in 1991 did the winner and loser become apparent. The seismic shift was the implosion of the flag bearer of communism, the Soviet Union. In its wake, thinkers scrambled for new paradigms to define the post-Cold War world.

Francis Fukuyama posited that a history of struggle was over – that the West’s political/economic format had won, and would become the new global norm. Another US scholar, Samuel Huntington, posited that a new conflict was taking shape – a clash of civilizations.

Neither proved correct.

The inexorable rise of authoritarian China, wielding an economy that was capitalist but closely controlled, today presents a massive challenge to the market capitalism of the democracies.

Meanwhile, the “war on terror” pitted a US-led coalition against Islamic fundamentalist terrorism and their state supporters. But it never spiraled into an existential war between Western states versus Islamic states.

What, then, could be the next paradigm to explain geopolitics?

According to South Korean scholar Han Sung-joo, the world may be entering a new era – that of “identity politics.”

Han knows whereof he speaks. A former foreign minister and South Korea ambassador to the United States, he held multiple roles in the United Nations and currently heads up a conservative think tank, the Asan Institute in Seoul.

“Identify politics” as a concept has largely been defined among primarily race, but also gender-based groups asserting specified identities under the broad banner of “American” identity in the United States.

Han, however, suggests the concept can be expanded to the global space. And recent global developments suggest its force.

In the West, Donald Trump’s “MAGA” movement led to new assertiveness among predominantly white, middle Americans. Brexit spurred an upsurge in Scottish nationalism, and a resurgent surge in Englishness that may result in the break up of the UK.

In continental Europe, national identities have not been subsumed by membership of the EU, a powerful economic union but one that struggles to find a unified political voice on global affairs.

Elsewhere, Vladimir Putin in Russia, Xi Jinping in China and Recep Erdogan have all promoted a rise in their respective countries' nationalism as they assert themselves in global affairs.

What of the rest of the world – and Korea?

"I think identity politics is more appropriate than 'victim politics,'" Han said – though he conceded that the latter concept has a place within his paradigm.

He also suggests that "adversarial politics"– i.e. the unity of otherwise diverse states against a common threat, on the principle of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" – is seeing renewed vigor.

This latter concept covers what Han calls an "axis of convenience" between China, Iran and Russia as they face off against their common competitor, the US.

East Asia's identities

To quote a proverb that is now a cliché, Korea was traditionally the "shrimp between whales" in Northeast Asia, surrounded by greater powers. For much of the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910) the country managed to maintain a low, and largely peaceful, profile in regional affairs.

The 20th century was crueler. The country was colonized by Japan, divided by the Allies, then torn asunder in a civil war that spiraled into an ideological war between Cold War foes. It remains divided to this day.

In today's South Korea, the concept of national victimhood is a significant component of national identity – though it is a selective victimhood.

"Koreans suffer from a victim complex," Han said. "Korea is the only country that was colonized by another Asian country – China was invaded, not colonized."

Anti-Japan sentiment provides a unifying force in a country that is ideologically riven.

“Koreans are divided between those who are maritime and globally oriented, and those who are continentally and domestically oriented,” Han said. “I’d say a third of Koreans see China as a potential enemy, a third of Koreans see the US as a potential enemy, but most have antagonism toward Japan.”

Seventy-five years after colonial rule ended, who is at fault for the dire relations between the two countries? Korea for fetishizing a long-ago past? Or Japan for not being adequately contrite for that past?

“Koreans over-react to the injustices they felt,” Han said. “Japan over-reacts to Korea’s reactions and doesn’t pay enough attention to Korean feelings.”

This highlights the problem for South Korea.

Economically, the nation is prosperous. Politically, it is democratic. These factors align it with similarly prosperous democracies that were formerly imperialistic – France, Germany, Japan, the UK and the US.

But as a country where being a victim of Imperial Japan is a core pillar of national – or nationalist – identity, South Korea finds itself in company with a former Korean War foe: China, which suffered horrifically during the Pacific War from Japanese conquest.

Adding further pull to this historical magnetism, communist China is capitalist South Korea’s leading trade partner. In the years before Xi came to power, when China was less globally assertive, this was not a problem for Korea.

Now, as China squares off against Korea’s democratic fellow travelers in the West, it is.

Discussing the identity politics of China under Xi, Han said: “Some call this a nostalgia for the days of Chinese empire, but I think it is more about making up for the humiliation the West and Japan placed upon China. This is victim politics.”

Those humiliations range from the Opium Wars to the Pacific War and encompass such disasters as the burning of the Summer Palace and the Nanjing Massacre. They provide Beijing with a convenient and oft-used diversion for overseas criticism – one that plays up its own power against former exploiters.

“China complains about interventions in its internal affairs,” Han said, “Whether the issue is Taiwan, Hong Kong, Xinjiang or Tibet, it’s all phrased that way – as if that would absolve [Beijing] of any wrongdoing.”

Another master player of victim politics is the nation that stands guard on China’s northeast flank: North Korea.

The legitimacy of the Kim regime derives from its role as the perceived protector of its citizenry against a predatory US, with which it fought a brutal 1950-53 war that literally leveled North Korea.

But in a sign of the complexity of power relations – “big brother, little brother” in East Asian terms – Han notes that Pyongyang is not only aligned against Washington.

“When North Korea detonated their first nuclear bomb, I heard that they said, ‘Now, China will not bother us anymore,’” he noted.

Of course, for South Koreans – and most particularly for the Moon Jae-in government now in power in Seoul, which has prioritized cross-border engagement – North Koreans are ethnic kin. That adds another element – cross-DMZ identity politics – to South Korean motivations. It is a dynamic that is not shared by the United States.

Rising US pressure

Since the 1960s, South Korea has had a tremendously successful trade policy. The country prospered on the back of global commerce and its mighty conglomerates are visible in every corner of the world.

The principles at work there were pragmatism and commercial gain. But Seoul’s foreign policy is opaque. No overall principle is easy to discern.

Echoing US Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s critique of the Donald Trump administration, Han criticizes the current Moon administration for not having “people, procedures or policy” when it comes to foreign affairs.

Han defines the policy – such as it is – as being “unfriendly toward Japan, accommodating toward China and working with the US.”

Under Trump, such a policy was feasible. The former president was a bilateralist rather than a multilateralist, with little taste for diplomacy.

The Biden administration’s more multilateral policy slant could place more stress on Moon’s approach.

US officials have not directly demanded that Korea join the “Quad” alliance but they have made no secret that they want to see Seoul join or at least operate more closely with it – and with Japan.

That is dicey for Seoul, particularly as there is a consensus that Washington favors Tokyo before Seoul.

Japan, after all, is a larger economy, hosts more US troops and is far more willing to raise its voice against China – even though, like South Korea, Japan’s biggest share of trade is with China.

But South Korea cannot ignore Washington’s wishes. It lives in a tough neighborhood where its security is underwritten by its alliance with the US – an alliance that is broadly popular with the Korean public.

Moreover, Seoul wants, in Han’s words, to be “almost a neutral country between the US and North Korea, and between the US and China.”

This, he avows, could be a very difficult position to maintain – particularly at the upcoming “G7+3” meeting in June.

G7 to G10: Korea on the spot

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson has invited South Korea, along with India and Australia, to join the G7 pow wow. That is welcome recognition of – and new respect for – South Korea’s lofty position in world affairs.

The three newcomers' democratic credentials suggest a return to the traditional Cold War "politics of values" – and possibly the growth of a G10 out of the G7. If that transpires, a talking shop of democracies would feasibly speak with a stronger and more focused voice than the unwieldy and wobbly G20.

Not only do the three new London participants share democratic governance, they have a common competitor under the rubric of adversarial politics: China.

Australia is engaged in a high-profile and costly trade and investment spat with China. India and China last year fought deadly clashes along their Himalayan border. And South Korea faced economic sanctions from China after it allowed the emplacement of THAAD, a US missile defense system on its soil, in 2016.

Australia has been vocal in its opposition to China. But India and South Korea – which also share the common "identity politics" heritage of being former colonies – have been less so. India has traditionally sought to be non-aligned while South Korea has been reluctant to irk China.

But the pressure may be on for all parties to raise their voices.

Further pressure has built as the democracies critique the Myanmar military for their coup. Han reckons that action could not have been taken "without the expectation that China would fill the gap" left by Western sanctions, and notes that Russia and China are both putting obstacles against anti-Yangon action at the UN.

In this situation, South Korea could face an unwelcome spotlight.

"Now that the G20 is fizzling, I think having the opportunity to join the G10 is a tremendous bonus," Han said. "But there is risk."

If required to speak up, nod along or sign a statement condemning China, Korea, Han repeats, "will be in a very difficult position."

Yet the contours of global affairs are not conforming to a situation where a country as prosperous and prominent as Korea can keep its head fully below the parapet.

“There was a time when Korean scholars talked about Swiss-style neutrality,” said Han.
“Nobody talks about it now.”

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