

**Facing China Differently and Equally:
A Comparison between
South Korean and Japanese Policy Behaviors⁺**

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Abstract

Widespread rhetoric suggests South Korea's tilt toward and Japan's balancing act regarding their relationship with China. This seems based not on a systemic analysis, but superficial observation. Extensive literature highlights the two nations' response to China's rise, but very few works have conducted a comparative study. This article attempts to do that by analyzing both Seoul's and Tokyo's "China policy" behaviors from early 2013 to mid-2019. Six key topics related to threat perceptions are compared: threat perception, primary security concerns, strategy between the US and China, economy and economic security, identity politics, and domestic politics. We determine that Seoul's policy is based on "de-geo-politicization", whereas Tokyo revives a "classical or neo-classical" geopolitical game. This study concludes that the rhetoric mentioned above may be myths or temporal phenomena at best. The two

nations' rationale seems to converge into a middle-power strategy, which we predict will have a meaningful impact on East Asian geopolitics.

Keywords: *South Korea and Japan, China policy, comparative study, geopolitical consideration*

1. Introduction

Political observers theorize that South Korea (Republic of Korea, ROK) and Japan maintain opposing foreign policy behaviors regarding China, despite sharing a democratic and market economy system, common values, and a military alliance with the US. Widespread rhetoric suggests Seoul has stronger ties with China than the US, while Tokyo maintains a balancing with China and a more pro-American stance. This rhetoric, however, appears to be based not on systemic analysis or inductive reasoning, but superficial observation, and at times, political stigmatization. Miscalculation of South Korea's and Japan's policy behaviors toward China could lead to irrelevant policy planning and long-term strategic instability in Northeast Asia.

Extensive literature highlights both countries' reactions to the rise of China (Kang, 2009; Han, 2011; Heginbotham & Samuels, 2002; Hornung, 2014; Vidal & Pelegrin, 2018); however, few studies focus on the similarities and differences between their strategies toward China. Chung (2009/2010) classifies South Korea as "active hedgers" along with Thailand and Singapore, while Japan is balancing, similar to Australia and Taiwan. Pascall (2013) argues that both countries have adopted hedging, but at varying degrees; Japan is characterized by indirect balancing and dominance denial, while South Korea by indirect balancing and limited bandwagoning. Wong (2015) proposes a dual-

threat framework—“imminent” and “structural”—to explain behavioral divergence between the two. Proponents of the hedging theory accurately assume that most East Asian countries do not implement balancing or bandwagoning strategies in a strict sense of the terms, but adopt a middle position or a combination of multiple strategies or approaches (Goh, 2005: viii; Kuik, 2008: 163-166). Nevertheless, previous studies tend to regard a country’s China policy as merely a response to its growth; they do not consider it as just one of the variables affecting a country’s China policy. The role of political leadership and domestic politics requires further consideration. A greater understanding of practical geopolitics, that is the domain of policy making and geopolitical reasoning for concrete foreign policy actions, is necessary (Mamadouh & Dijkink, 2006: 355).

We assume that geopolitical factors have been deeply associated with both South Korean and Japanese security policies toward China. Regardless of being conservative or progressive, Seoul has a deep-rooted antipathy toward “great power politics” and “geopolitical games;” therefore, it employs an inherent “de-geopolitics” approach with China. Tokyo (Abe Shinzo’s cabinet, in particular) appears to renew a kind of “classical or neoclassical geopolitical game” in its China policy, specifically with its security policy regarding Beijing. This article compares Seoul’s China policy behaviors during the Park Geun-hye and Moon Jae-in administrations with those of Abe Shinzo’s Cabinet from early 2013 to mid-2019. Representative topics are explored, providing analyses of both countries’ China policy behaviors in Parts II and III, respectively. In each part, we focus on six key topics: (1) threat perceptions, (2) primary security concerns, (3) strategies between the US and China, (4) the relationships between economy and security, (5) identity politics relating to historical conflicts, and (6) the relationship between domestic politics and geopolitical visions of political leaders. In

conclusion, we will discuss the implications of our comparative work and make a general prediction on both countries' China policy.

2. South Korea: Middle Power Strategy on Drive

2.1. Heightening Structural Threat Perceptions

After the 1992 diplomatic normalization, South Koreans viewed China favorably, and at times, more favorably than the US. A decade later, however, the China threat emerged and gained popularity, with the honeymoon officially ending after the trade dispute over importing garlic from China, so called “garlic war” of June 2000. Following this, the 2004 historical controversy of Koguryo, which was an ancient Korean kingdom entrenched in Manchuria, raised public concern for Sino-centric hegemonism. In 2010, China's siding with the North on two incidents—the sinking of the ROK Cheonan warship and the artillery attack against Yeonpyeong Island—became another target of criticism. Seoul's decision to deploy the American Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system (THAAD) in July 2016 became the hottest dispute yet. These events contributed to the radical transformation of South Korea's perception of China from one extreme to the other.¹ Seoul's anti-Chinese sentiments remain overshadowed by its anti-Japanese sentiments. China's favorability rating has always been higher than that of Japan, except for March 2017, when a survey revealed a shift in attitude immediately after Beijing's THAAD retaliation (ASAN, 2018, 2019).

As per Yee and Storey's categorization (2002: 2-6), South Koreans did not stress about China's political system, the possibility of political and economic collapse, or China's anti-Korean sentiments.² However, there has been the perception of a significant structural threat since the late 2000s, when China surpassed Japan as the world's second-largest economy, and US-China bilateral relations began to show full-scale

military and economic competition. Although the “re-emergence” of China as a great power is rarely considered a threat to South Koreans, their position between the two giants imposes the need to choose sides. Issues like the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), THAAD, Indo-Pacific Strategy have convinced South Koreans of a possible threat. South Korea tends to consider China’s rapid military modernization as a *potential* threat, rather than a real one, since its relationship with North Korea is far more troubling due to sharing the Military Demarcation Line as well as the buffer zone between ROK and China (Lee and Yoon, 2016).

South Koreans also have a deep geopolitical concern over China’s policy toward North Korea, and particularly, its general policy on the Korean Peninsula. They recognize that China has officially supported peaceful unification based on mutual consensus between the two Koreas; however, they do not believe that China would abandon their geostrategic considerations over the peninsula. The Chinese proverb: “if the lips are gone, the teeth will be cold,” is a widely known reference to the strategic importance of North Korea as a geographical security buffer. China has never agreed to discuss North Korean contingencies with its neighbors (Chung, 2012: 231). Seoul’s deep economic dependence on China can be considered another security threat. The asymmetric trading relationship gives China tremendous bargaining power. Its punitive economic measures against Seoul over the THAAD disagreement led to new revelations: that the principle of separation between security and economy is no longer valid, and that China is willing to violate South Korea’s sovereign right by hosting the THAAD system.

2.2. Korean Peninsula Reductionism

Seoul's Korean peninsula reductionism has long held sway in strategic thinking over its China policy. The North Korea issue has always been a primary concern in Seoul's security policy toward China, and is a primary catalyst for friction, and cooperation, in the ROK-China bilateral relationship. Lee (2016: 23) explains that the bilateral relations have been affected more by factors such as the North Korean nuclear development, ROK-US alliance, Japan, and the THAAD issue than core bilateral disputes. Kang (2019: 72) adds, "The focus of South Korea instantly turned inwards, to the peninsula, rather than beyond. Every external relationship was viewed through the lens of how it would affect North-South relations."

Seoul's North Korea policy coordination with Beijing has witnessed roughly three stages since early 2013. Faced with escalating regional tensions over North Korea's third nuclear test in February 2013, ROK President Park Geun-hye showed an unprecedented pro-Chinese attitude, placing policy priority on cultivating close personal ties with Xi Jinping.³ She held numerous summits and ceaselessly expressed her strong hopes for Beijing to exercise greater leverage over Pyongyang's military provocations. The Park-Xi joint communique on June 28, 2013 resulted in fruitful outcomes, with shared goals over the Korean Peninsula denuclearization, the implementation of UNSC resolutions, and resumption of the Six-Party Talks. Park's collaboration with Xi peaked in 2015 when she decided to join the controversial China-led AIIB in March, signed the ROK-China Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in June, and in September, participated in China's 70th-anniversary celebrations of the end of WWII. The animated exchanges seemed to have airbrushed Pyongyang out of the picture (Snyder & Byun, 2015: 101).

However, a rapid breakdown of the camaraderie began in early 2016, when Pyongyang increased tensions with the fourth nuclear and intense missile tests. It resulted in the toughest UN sanctions resolution, and Park's partnership shifted from Beijing to Washington due to the stronger anti-Pyongyang ROK-US coordination, including formal talks on THAAD and large-scale military exercises. The THAAD issue gravely undermined ROK-China relations, and despite North Korea's fifth nuclear test in September, Beijing pursued fierce economic retaliation against Seoul. Bilateral relations gradually improved after spring 2017, when new administrations in Seoul and Washington were established and provocations by Pyongyang's military escalated. Newly elected ROK President Moon Jae-in focused on coordinating with President Trump and urged China to play a positive role.⁴ An unexpected prospect for a "breakthrough on the peninsula" became the central focus for ROK-China relations in the Spring of 2018 (Snyder & Byun, 2018, 85). With the beginning of the PyeongChang Winter Olympics in February, Moon had a historic meeting with Kim on April 27 and agreed on the Panmunjom Declaration, stipulating that both sides pursue the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, and initiate peace talks to officially end the Korean War.⁵

Park overestimated China's role and willingness to resolve the North Korean conundrum (Chung, 2018: 85). This kind of over-optimism regarding Seoul's upper-hand over their relations to Beijing vis-a-vis Pyongyang came from a "befriending distant states and of antagonizing neighbors" approach. Moon took a different route to promote inter-Korean reconciliation, by boosting a direct Kim-Trump deal and expressing his support for Kim-Xi summits. The new driving force of a top-down approach between Kim, Trump, and Moon reduced the need for ROK-China coordination over the North Korea issue. To build a peaceful regime on the Korean peninsula, however, Moon's

government had to fine-tune the highly complicated coordination between both Kim and Trump, and among Kim, Trump, and Xi, who also wanted to join the Panmunjom declaration. The more Beijing returns to its traditional thinking, the more South Koreans believe a Seoul-led unification process will be out of sight (Snyder & Byun, 2018: 89).

2.3. Muddling Through Two Giants

With the regional power transition, East Asian states have increasingly encountered the evolution of the so-called “dual hierarchy;” a security hierarchy dominated by the US, and an economic one by China (Ikenberry, 2016: 10). They have every reason to want the economic benefits from China and security benefits from the US, while not having to choose between the two. However, year after year, the intense competition between the two has forced a “proxy competition,” in which Washington and Beijing keep asking regional states the same question on exclusivity: “are you with us or against us?” (Chung, 2018). Nowhere has this proxy competition been more evident than in South Korea in recent years.

Seoul has been muddling through security issues, including THAAD, the South China Sea, and the Indo-Pacific Strategy. Park’s government responded negatively to Washington’s demand to participate in the US-led missile defense system, similar to the past Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun governments. By announcing that “there had been no request, and hence no consultation and no decision,” in February 2016, Seoul failed to satisfy Washington’s formal requests to deploy THAAD. Chinese officials voiced their fierce opposition to the deployment by saying that it can only damage the strategic stability of the region. Park’s government announced its decision to move ahead with deployment in July 2016, demonstrating a shift from the earlier

“muddling through” strategy toward a pro-American balancing strategy⁶ (Moon & Boo, 2016: 11).

China’s economic pressures on Seoul continued during and after the South Korean presidential election. Moon agreed to finalize the deployment in September, despite his opposition during his campaign. Seoul made its “three no’s” announcement in November 2017 that helped assuage China’s security concerns and restore bilateral relations. It promised that there would be: (1) no additional THAAD deployment, (2) no participation in the US-led missile defense system, and (3) no participation in a ROK-US-Japan trilateral military alliance. The announcement indicated Seoul’s persistent desire to not directly join a US-led military containment against China (Abrahamian & Son, 2017).

Seoul’s position on the territorial disputes surrounding the South China Sea has been neutral. Despite Obama’s pressures to explicitly criticize China, Seoul has maintained the stance that a peaceful resolution of the disputes and the freedom of navigation and flight should be guaranteed. The US-led Indo-Pacific strategy imposed another challenge for Seoul to regain its balance. Park’s response to Obama’s rebalancing strategy was a deviation from the strategic alliance declaration between Lee Myung-bak and Obama in 2008, which underscored common universal values (Moon, 2012). Her reluctance was mainly due to its continued geographical emphasis on Northeast Asia, China’s concern over the expansion of the ROK-US alliance, its emphasis on China at the expense of Japan, and diverging strategic visions between Seoul and Tokyo (Synder & Woo, 2015).

Moon’s reluctance to express explicit support for the Trump-initiated 2017 Indo-Pacific strategy continued for over one and a half years. In a joint press conference after the summit with Trump on June 30, 2019, Moon barely acknowledged the strategy. This appears to be a decisive turning point, but Seoul’s full-throated commitment remains

evasive. Judgments may best be reserved since Moon's description of this "harmonious cooperation" came after Abe's pronouncements of the complementary nature between the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) and Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in early 2018.

ROK consistently professed "strategic ambiguity" on the US-China military competition and maintained harmonious relationships with the US and China. Seoul's story has not been very different from those of ASEAN countries.⁷ The worst scenario for Seoul must be the military conflict between the two giants over the Taiwan contingency. It explains why the former president Roh announced in early 2005 that the US Forces Korea (USFK) could not participate in the contingencies without Seoul's consent.⁸ If the situation worsened, South Korea would be inclined to comply with US demands akin to their THAAD and FOIP reactions. There are lingering concerns about the progressive governments' sympathetic attitude toward China. Roh finally agreed to the flexible use of USFK and decided to dispatch 3,600 troops to Iraq following the US and Britain (Yoo, 2012, 338). Moon has followed the suit of Roh by accepting the revision of the ROK-US FTA, purchasing a tremendous amount of US military equipment, providing payment for 90% of the US's biggest overseas base at Pyeongtaek, and with the agreement on FOIP.

There are indisputable, internal balancing behaviors in ROK's defense and military strategy, indirectly aimed at China. As Gong (2012: 316-327) says, China is an implicit and long-term target for the alliance, and the US military presence in South Korea would be intimidating and unbearable to Beijing. Particularly remarkable was Moon's hiking of its defense budget by 8.2% in 2019, and by 9.3% in 2020 (USD 58 billion). On a Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) basis, Seoul already spends more on defense than Tokyo and may rank as the sixth-highest spender in the world on its defense by 2022 (GlobalSecurity.org). Its midterm defense

plan between 2020 and 2024 represents KRW 290.5 trillion (USD 238.8 billion), a 7% increase over the previous plan. Attention should be paid to ROK's substantial investments in power projection capabilities—naval, air, missile development programs—for extra peninsula operations. If international environments surrounding the Peninsula worsen, these may provide a sort of anti-access area denial (A2/AD) framework against possible aggressions from China and Japan (CSIS, 2018; *Military Watch*, 2018).

2.4. Geo-Economics at the Center

At the Seoul summit in July 2014, Park and Xi talked about the direct trading of RMB-KRW currencies, RMB trading on the Korean Stock Exchange, South Korea's invitation to the AIIB, and completing FTA negotiations. They officially signed the bilateral FTA in June 2015, which was the largest in trade terms among all the FTAs concluded by both sides (Li *et al.*, 2016). The FTA revealed the correlation of economy and security between countries, reflected in Seoul's China policy. The primary determinants of the Korean FTA policy have been geopolitical security and economic concerns. FTAs have constituted not only Seoul's core strategy for pursuing long-run economic growth but also her reliable way of hedging against the growing strategic uncertainties in the region (Hwang 2019, 306). Seoul showed an unusual commitment to FTAs with mega economies such as the US in 2009 and the EU in 2010, labeled as "expanding its economic territory." Under the FTA with China, Seoul became the only country signed with three major economies in the world. Kriekhaus (2017: 61-65) mentions, "South Korea's FTA strategies vis-a-vis both the US and China constitute a form of active hedging in which Seoul actively engages the Chinese economy but hedges politically with a strong US security alliance."⁹

The deepened ROK-China economic relationship through the FTA was expected to contribute to stabilizing the diplomatic and geopolitical relationship between the nations. Seoul could gain leverage in seeking Chinese support for its broader regional economic initiatives, which ultimately link to North Korea's reform and denuclearization. Park's three regional initiatives—Trust-Building Policy on the Korean Peninsula (“Trustpolitik”), the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative, and the Eurasia Initiative—intended to improve the chances of a Korean unification (Sejong Institute, 2016).

However, Seoul's economic strategy faced backlashes, first from the US, and then from China. One of the core assumptions of the plan was the ROK's linchpin role of integrating the East Asian and the Pan-Pacific markets.¹⁰ Muddling through the narrow pathway was not easy. The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) was the centerpiece of Obama's rebalancing strategy, a strategic counterweight to China's growing economic influence in the region by bolstering US leadership and strengthening its economic alliance. Park's government refrained from making a formal decision on joining the TPP, however, mainly because of China-relations. Seoul prioritized concluding a bilateral FTA with China and simultaneously engaged in talks on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) initiated by China as a response to the US-led TPP. Washington publicly opposed the establishment of the China-based AIIB and its allies' participation in it, calling it a counterbalance to the US and Japan-led financial order. South Korea deferred its responsibility to choose sides and risk alienation, while also buying time to upgrade the governance structure of the AIIB. Seoul's considerable ambiguity was an effort to ease the tension between the two as a middle power balancer (Lee, 2016).

The THAAD retaliation exposed a negative aspect of the deepened economic relationship. Amid the ROK-China THAAD tensions, the US-

China strategic and economic competition, and an increasing “protectionist” attitude, Moon unveiled the “New Southern Policy” as an advanced version of independent, and balanced diplomacy, aimed at elevating strategic ties with India and ASEAN—similar to that with its four major partners: the US, China, Japan and Russia—and diversifying its foreign policy. It is a novel attempt to go beyond the traditional diplomatic paradigm, disproportionately focused on the Korean Peninsula and the four powers. Strategic ties with those who share geographic proximity and substantial cooperation are highly prized qualities, enabling Seoul to manage the contradictory pressures from the two major powers, decrease tension surrounding the Peninsula, and expand its strategic autonomy (Lee, 2019: 8 & 15). Although both Seoul and its southern partners still lack common security threats, security cooperation, and structural power, it might be a meaningful venture in overcoming its strategic dilemma as a middle power.¹¹

2.5. Anti-Japanese History Coalition with China

South Koreans perceive North Korea-related issues within the context of inter-Korean relations, following a broadly held belief that the peninsula will be [re]unified someday (Shin, 2008: 299). They see the US as a significant partner, shaping South Korea’s national identity in the post-1945 era (Shin 2012, 295-296). As for Japan, a collective identity has been formed through historical experiences, which is ever strengthened by the related controversies that remain a formidable hindrance (Moon & Suh, 2005: 594). South Koreans’ attitude toward China is less likely to be affected by a perceived threat from American unilateralism or Japan’s remilitarization, but more by the existing bilateral relationship (Jung & Jeong, 2016: 261). Given Korea’s previous status as a vassal state, with disputed historical legacies and economic conflicts, China’s rise may boost anti-Chinese sentiments (Porteux, 2016: 13). However,

Seoul's identity politics on China is still less potent than that of the US and Japan, which are easily subject to domestic political contestation.

The first three years of Park's government witnessed nationalist identity politics thrive in terms of ROK-China-Japan trilateral relations. In the past, three former ROK presidents, Kim Young-Sam, Kim Dae-jung, and Roh Moo-hyun had consistently rejected China's proposals to form a united front against Japan's distortion of history. However, Park boldly accepted Xi's plan, and the ROK-China anti-Japanese history alignment was formed. The trigger was the Abe Cabinet's historically revisionist words and deeds, including their willingness to recant the 1993 *Kono* statement as well as the 1995 *Murayama* statement. These were apologies to former "comfort women" (Military Sexual Slavery) and to Asian neighbors for the damage and suffering caused during World War II. Abe also made a surprise visit to *Yasukuni Shrine*, a controversial symbol of Japan's wartime militarism, in December 2013.

Arase (2016: 12-13) analyzes the Park-Xi relationship in detail, starting with Xi's offer of a bilateral FTA to Park as a lure to China's market. Xi also agreed to pressurize North Korea to denuclearize (that is, satisfy Seoul's request for security coordination regarding North Korea), and talked about the future of the Korean peninsula. In return, Xi requested Park to refuse US employment of the THAAD system, join China in denouncing Abe's efforts toward the right of collective self-defense, and criticize Japan over historical and territorial issues. Arase concludes that Xi's attempt to woo Seoul ended in failure; it damaged China's reputation as an effective manager of regional stability and worsened relations with both Koreas. Although Park propelled the anti-Japanese alignment forward, this was limited to historical issues, such as the establishment of Korean independence activist Ahn Jung Geun's memorial and the shared appeal to international public opinion. Park refused Xi's anti-Japan proposal that linked history, collective self-

defense, and territorial disputes. Seoul only expressed its concern over the issue of Japan's collective self-defense in light of domestic opinions. Seoul made no move to link the *Dokdo/Takeshima* and the *Senkaku/Diaoyu* issues.

The main battleground for Park, particularly over the “comfort women” issue, was not with Beijing, but with Washington. South Korean officials strongly criticized Abe's behaviors and urged their US counterparts to press Tokyo to take positive steps. The US intervened at pivotal points over nearly two years of disagreements to foster an environment that made it possible for the two countries to settle their grievances over the “comfort women” issue (Eilperin, 2016). Some of the results were the “Statement of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe” on August 14, 2015, and the ROK-Japan Comfort Women Deal on December 28, 2015.¹² Seoul made the best use of the ROK-US-Japan alliance to draw Abe's concessions in historical matters. Consequently, Park's identity politics against Japan played a considerable role in delaying the ROK-Japan security cooperation, strongly backed by Obama. Seoul-Tokyo relations could be repaired to help counterbalance China's growing influence and keep North Korea's aggressive behaviors in check.¹³

2.6. Middle-Power Strategy and Domestic Politics

The idiom, “a shrimp amongst whales” accurately depicts South Korean's perception of its unfortunate geographical destiny and its deep-rooted fatalism as a small-state. Since the mid-2000s, however, South Korea has had greater ambitions in playing a more prominent role in regional and international relations as well as moving beyond the small-state identity largely preoccupied with the peninsula question and the alliance with the US (Shim, 2009: 6; Sohn, 2016: 44). Seoul's ongoing drive for a middle-power strategy has had several versions, such as Roh

Moo-hyun's balanced diplomacy, Lee Myung-bak's Global Korea, Park Geun-hye's responsible middle-power diplomacy, and Moon Jae-in's New Northern and New Southern Diplomacy. Although they lack clearly defined goals, roadmaps, and consistent use of terminology between governments, it is unthinkable for Seoul to stop pursuing a strategy that helps shape the country's desired international environment (Chung, 2018: 85; Kim, 2016: 1; Ayhan, 2019: 17).

The middle-power strategy has imposed significant challenges, not only from structural constraints such as the US-China rivalry but also from various domestic restrictions. The THAAD dispute gave rise to serious domestic political debates on South Korea's China policy. *Shindonga*, a conservative monthly magazine, published a special issue titled, "Is China an Enemy or a Friend?" during a whirling vortex of THAAD disputes in September 2016.¹⁴ An article in the issue implied that the existing domestic political divide regarding inter-Korean relations could spread into ROK-China relations. Conservatives remain anti-North Korean and pro-American, whereas progressives hold a pro-North Korean, anti-American, and anti-Japanese stance (Choo, 2019). Accordingly, conservatives should have taken a pro-American/anti-Chinese position and progressives, an anti-American/pro-Chinese stance under the increasing regional rivalry between the two giants. However, the conservative Park government deviated from the tradition by tilting toward China. The progressive Moon government simultaneously remained staunchly pro-American and pro-engagement with the North, and simultaneously tried to arrive at a compromise with Beijing over the THAAD issue (Kang, 2019: 69; Milani *et al.*, 2019: 145). Domestic oppositions, primarily from a conservative camp composed of right-wing politicians, opinion leaders, and newspapers, began to launch a counterattack. They argued that China cannot replace the US; South Korea has to side with developed maritime powers; and the South

Korean grand strategy should be pro-US and independence. They regard the THAAD deployment as indispensable proof of reaffirming the alliance's commitment, which strengthens the partnership further (Choi, 2017). They criticize Moon's "three no's," claiming that it amounts to bowing to China's pressure and forfeiting Seoul's security and sovereignty.

Historical events are sometimes more important than the geographical location to understand the appeal of a specific geopolitical vision (Mamadouh & Dijkink, 2006: 358). The absolutization of the alliance has been agreeable with South Koreans' small-state identity, and this continuously feeds the so-called "destiny of the peninsula" concept. It depicts Korea as a convenient buffer zone or scapegoat, frequently invaded because of its location; therefore Korea's destiny is determined by the rise and fall of land and sea powers (Chi, 2013: 291). Here, we call on history to interpret today's events. The US-China rivalry appears analogous to the Japanese invasion of Korea in 1592, the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), the Korean War (1950-1953), and the Cold War led by the US and the Soviet Union (Cho, 2012). Seoul fears that if the North Korean nuclear crisis escalates, it could find itself locked in a new Cold War between the ROK-US-Japan and DPRK-China-Russia camps.

Seoul has been very cautious about criticizing China and less vocal than the US and Japan in expressing concerns about Beijing's assertive behaviors (Reverse, 2016). Although there were some attempts at "othering" or "demonizing" China among conservatives, South Korean governments were not likely to resort to threat inflation for domestic political gains. Considering its economic dependency on China, the necessity of China's cooperation over the North Korean issue, and the expectation of a positive contribution to the Korea Unification under Beijing's aegis, Seoul must be very cautious.

Nevertheless, we cannot deny the possible rise of anti-Chinese nationalism in the future. As Mo (2016: 602-603) points out, strong nationalism in the region challenges Seoul's advancement in middle power diplomacy. He bases this on (1) the lack of trust in its neighbors, emphasizing the need for stability, balance of power, and hard power; (2) the security vulnerability that promotes great power aspirations; (3) the narrow definition of national interest, which focuses on short-term gains and hard power; (4) and ethnic orientation as a barrier in the pursuit of inclusive and universal values. According to Cha (2017: 70-75), the perception of the progressives reflects foremost their aspirations for national independence, which shook during the THAAD disputes. In compliance with the emergence of national independence and issues of sovereignty, the progressives' existing notion of a "pro-Chinese" stance equivalent to an "anti-American and independence" one has shifted to "independence vs. pro-Chinese." This implies that the majority of the progressives could change to anti-Chinese and anti-American perceptions as well.

3. Japan: Abe Geopolitics in Flux

3.1. Broader and Deeper Threat Perceptions

Japanese perceptions of China have like the South Korean perceptions did. According to public opinion polls by Japan's Cabinet Office, Japan's friendly feelings toward China peaked in the 1980s, and were more intense than those felt toward the US. After the *Tiananmen* Incident in June 1989, this favorable opinion was damaged, and instead, a 'no affinity' feeling began to predominate through the 1990s, well into the 21st century (Kotler *et al.*, 2008: 95-96). It deteriorated even further when a Chinese fishing vessel collided with Japanese coast guard patrol

boats in September 2010, and Tokyo decided to nationalize the disputed *Senkaku/Diaoyu* Islands in 2012 (Genron NPO, 2016: 9).

Japanese threat perceptions of China are deeper and broader than South Korean ones. China formally usurped its role as the world's second-largest economy in 2010, marking the end of an era for Japan, which had enjoyed leadership status representing Asia since over a century ago. This event created cognitive dissonance and alarm for Japan over its power and status, and its reaction manifested in the form of its "China threat" thesis (Moon & Suh, 2015: 445). They are likely to believe that China's rapid economic growth will quickly translate into military buildup and that its increased military capability can have negative effects not only on its national interests but also on regional security. Hardy-Chartrand (2016: 5) depicts typical threats of this kind: threats to territory, maritime and airspace; domination, hegemony, threat to regional/international order or status quo; aggressiveness, use of force; dangerous, reckless or irresponsible behavior; generic threat. Particularly worrisome is that China seems to have an actual will to exercise its military power in contingencies relating to *Senkaku/Diaoyu* islands or Taiwan Strait.

Chinese nationalism, particularly anti-Japanese feelings, have grown much stronger as we saw in the 2005 and 2012 demonstrations, which were sparked by the history textbook controversy and the nationalization of *Senkaku/Diaoyu* islands. Tokyo's hardliners criticized Beijing for allowing anti-Japanese protests to turn violent, only to carry out their domestic political goals. The Japanese are more sensitive to China's political system than South Koreans. They are more likely to identify an underlying culprit behind all of China's misconduct, to be her authoritarian socialist political system, as depicted by Hardy-Chartrand. There is fear that China will collapse because of its domestic contradictions. It will therefore result in territorial fragmentation, civil

war, vast refugee populations, and regional catastrophe (Amako, 1997: 10-12).

3.2. China Reductionism and the Revival of Geopolitical Games

Kokubun (2013: 206) said, the “Japanese are weak in strategic thinking with a global perspective, and highly disposed to see only China if something happen[ed] in its bilateral relations with Beijing.” The Abe Cabinet fell into a “China reductionism” at least during its first five years. China has become a prime talking point in Japan’s overall foreign policy, and its China policy has become increasingly security-oriented. Worse still, an unprecedented chicken game surrounding the disputed islands has unfolded since both Abe and Xi took office. Some experts even speculated the possibility of war between them during their clashes (Holms, 2012; Hagstrom, 2012; Drifte, 2013).

Abe’s so-called “deterring China” slogan as part of a defense plan to Beijing’s offensives, contradicted his agreement on “A Mutually Beneficial Relationship Based on Common Strategic Interests” with Hu Jintao, in September 2006. Abe’s plans for deterrence began with his firm determination to take a hard stance over the territorial issues. His policy speech at the Diet read like the opening ceremonies for a war against China. He said, “I am determined to stand at the fore of these men and women, fully defending the lives and assets of our nationals as well as our territory, territorial waters, and territorial airspace in a resolute manner. (...) The crisis over security is not someone else’s problem. It is a crisis of the here and now!” (Abe, 2013).

While aggressively broadcasting the crisis from China, Abe pursued the extraordinary transformation of Japan’s national security policy, which can be classified as “internal balancing” measures. In the latter half of 2013, he introduced Japan’s first National Security Council (NSC), a State Secrecy Law, the first National Security Strategy (NSS),

a revised National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG), the Three Principles of Defense Equipment Transfers, and an increased defense budget. The NSS expressed explicit concerns about China's intensified maritime activities. Both the NDPG and a new Mid-Term Defense Program also showed its new "China-focused" defense posture being strongly aware of the *Nansei* (southwestern) Islands. The most ambitious effort was the blue streak move toward collective self-defense.¹⁵ Despite large protests from Japanese citizens, Abe took the lead of cabinet resolution to reinterpret the Constitution, allowing Japan to exercise the right of collective self-defense in July 2014, and further pushed a package of security-related laws in July 2015 (Suh, 2015).

Abe's external balancing behaviors demand a closer examination. His cabinet appears to have revived a classical kind of geopolitics game from nearly 70 years prior, which aims to establish a geopolitical line of defense. The Japanese archipelago provides the core of national defense, especially the *Nansei* Islands, including *Senkaku/Diaoyu*. As a result of a several years-long efforts of Tokyo, both Obama and Trump reaffirmed that Article 5 of the US-Japan security treaty would cover the disputed islands as being administered by Japan. At the same time, Abe Cabinet tried to strengthen the trilateral security ties of ROK-US-Japan, US-Japan-Australia, and US-Japan-India, keeping pace with Obama's rebalancing strategy. Abe's surge of activity was spurred on by the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (The QSD or Quad) between the US, Japan, Australia, and India aimed at strengthening a free and secure Indo-Pacific to counter China's assertive behaviors. This framework was supposed to establish a so-called "Asian Arc of Democracy," intended to include virtually all the countries on China's peripheral coastal area. It was initiated as the "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity" in 2007 and further elaborated as Asia's "Democratic Security Diamond" in 2012, and revived once again as FOIP in 2017 by the QSD.¹⁶

Abe's vision to encircle China seems to be a hybrid of various traditional and IR concepts (Suh, 2017). Abe, the originator of the FOIP concept allying maritime democracies, has frequently portrayed China as a continental authoritarian state, and justified democratic peace theory. This kind of political system determinism concludes that China is thus more belligerent and expansionist. It also includes the American neo-conservative thinking that authoritarianism has reemerged as the greatest threat to the liberal democratic world (Kagan, 2019). Abe's vision exemplifies traditional maritime geopolitical thinking, too. Tokyo tends to base its interpretation of China's assertive maritime strategy (like the first and second island chains) on Alfred Mahan's Sea Power concept and respond to it similarly. Nicholas Spykman's "Rimland" concept is applied to China's periphery, including the Korean Peninsula, the East China Sea, the South China Sea, and the Indian Ocean.¹⁷ Mahan's theory is applied to necessitate the maintenance of naval superiority by the US and Japan-centered alliance (Yachi, 2011: 396-397).

3.3. US-Japan-China Equilateral Triangle

The concept of a dual-hierarchy has failed to capture Tokyo's heart (Reeves, 2017: 1). Funabashi (2013: 179; 2016) said, "I don't endorse those concepts of either bigemony or G2 at all, and it's not feasible too. (...) Tokyo would welcome an approach that precludes a US-China G2 special relationship." Instead, the Japanese are conscious of the trilateral US-Japan-China relationship. In light of Dittmer's (1981: 489) strategic triangle, Japan's China policy, produced under the mainstream LDP conservatives during the Cold War and the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), was referred to as a "romantic triangle." In this scenario, Japan acts as a mediator amid the deteriorated US-China relations by maintaining cordial terms between the two.¹⁸ Similar to South Korea, postwar Japanese diplomacy had suffered from prolonged disputes over

its position between the US-Japan alliance and Japan-China cooperative relations. Its desire for diplomatic independence motivated the emphasis on the latter, to achieve greater equality in its bilateral relations with the US.

Japan's role in this relationship is that of a stabilizer, where it seeks to strengthen its alliance with the US when the US-China and China-Japan relations are in conflict. Abe's Cabinet was eager to commit to the "US-Japan vs. China" formula in the early stages of the relationship. This role first played out in the Anglo-Japanese alliance in which both countries were working in concert to oppose Russia's southward expansion in the early 20th century. We see strong parallels between the then Anglo-Japanese alliance vis-à-vis Russia and the current US-Japan alliance vis-à-vis China. The alliance with the US had to be upgraded to the equivalent of the Anglo-American level through the right of collective self-defense (Abe, 2006: 109-144; Okazaki, 2007: 202-207).

Alliances are seen as part of the set of incentive structures affecting foreign policy decision making, and, as a central mechanism permitting decisionmakers to overcome the geopolitical constraints of the system (Starr, 2013: 73). The strengthened alliance was thought to bring about several benefits to Japan. The aggregation of military capability for one, and in realizing a more seamless and global joint military operation with the revision of the 2015 Guideline for US-Japan Defense Cooperation. Tokyo exercises the right of collective self-defense as a realistic response to China's increased military threat against the territory.¹⁹ It was also expected to fulfill a deterrent function, that is, the full spectrum of both countries' military capabilities discourages the instigation of armed conflict by others, and reinforces the credibility of their readiness and willingness to do so on each other's behalf (Schoff & Takahashi, 2018). Currently, Abe has attempted to bolster the alliance to keep the existing political and security order resilient, or "the hub-and-spoke

alliance system,” which is now being challenged.

Abe’s Cabinet had taken the approach of befriending distant states (the US) and of antagonizing neighbors (China). Tokyo was not pleased with Obama’s first term, as he had seen China as a responsible stakeholder and had taken a conciliatory approach. In his second term, Obama criticized the provocative Chinese behavior and emphasized the freedom of navigation in the East China and the South China Seas (Christensen, 2015: 32-33). Abe’s unconditional support for Obama’s rebalancing strategy and TPP was based on Tokyo’s recognition that Washington had, at last, touched upon Tokyo’s hardline approach toward China. However, Trump forced Tokyo to face a similar but tougher challenge than before in persuading their new counterparts. Being anxious about America’s weakening interest in the region, Abe began pushing the strategic idea of FOIP on Washington and dispatched envoys with close ties to the US military establishment to promote the concept (Roissiter, 2018: 120-121). As a result of Abe’s efforts, Trump confirmed the common strategic priorities toward a shared vision of the FOIP and reaffirmed its commitment to Japan’s defense at their Tokyo summit in November 2017.

Abe’s turn toward a more pragmatic posture to China around the same period needs attention. Although Tokyo never officially presented the FOIP as an attempt to counter China, it had China’s expanding maritime influence in mind. Suddenly, however, Abe’s Cabinet began to make assertions that the FOIP was complimentary to Beijing’s BRI. In his policy speech before the Diet in January 2018, Abe said that “we will promote the FOIP strategy. Based on this overall direction, we will also work with China to meet the growing infrastructure demand in Asia” (Abe, 2018). Then, two blue-riband, China-Japan bilateral events occurred: the Chinese Premier Li Keqiang visited Tokyo in May 2018, and Abe visited Beijing in October 2018. At the latter summit, Abe and

Xi agreed to realign their bilateral relationship under three key principles: (1) shifting from competition to cooperation, (2) forging a relationship as partners and not as threats, and (3) developing a free and fair trade regime. Sahashi (2019: 6-7) speculated that Abe and Xi had decided to re-normalize the bilateral relations to hedge against uncertainties in the international environment stemming from Trump's "America First" agenda, and unpredictability in its foreign policy. Trump's tough stance both on China and Japan forced Beijing to recalculate its approach to Japan (Miller, 2019). Trump's withdrawal from the TPP, which claimed to reduce American commitment to international affairs, tackle the US-Japan trade deficit, and address Japan's unfulfilled alliance duty, left Japan scrambling to adjust, and emboldened internal voices that called for more independent policies in the process (Le & Midford, 2017; Sun, 2018).²⁰

3.4. Securitizing Economy in Retreat

The link between politics and economics in China-Japan relations appears very diverse and dynamic. The recent bilateral relations have veered between the so-called 'cold politics, hot economics' and 'hot politics, cold economics' (Newland & Govella, 2010; Dreyer, 2014; Yijaya & Osaki, 2019). It represents the ironic coexistence of rapidly increasing economic linkages and the political tensions stemming from historical and territorial disputes. Through these debates, however, it is easy to lose sight of the rise of geo-economic competition between the two. During a standoff over Japan's detention of a Chinese fishing trawler captain after colliding with Japanese coast guard vessels in 2010, Beijing responded with weaponized trade, placing a ban on rare earth. In retrospect, Japan also played their Official Development Assistance (ODA) trump card in a timely fashion in its China policy, not only to encourage China's desirable behaviors including modernization, but also

to discourage undesirable ones such as the *Tiananmen* incident, the underground nuclear tests, and the missile test at the Taiwan Strait (Suh, 2012).

In 2015, two mega-regional economic initiatives—the TPP and the AIIB—began to compete with each other. In contrast to South Korea’s relatively cautious attitudes, Tokyo decided early on to join the TPP and stay out of the AIIB, as far as possible. Abe’s Cabinet was surely keen on the TPP for economic reasons. It could revitalize its economy through “Abenomics,” gain market access in the member countries, and weaken China’s leading role in the regional economy (Katada, 2016: 3-4); security considerations hold primacy over Tokyo’s position. Fukagawa (2019) said, “Japan’s participation in the TPP agreement, the US-Japan FTA which is now being negotiated, and the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), have an integrative nature among allies in terms of both the American Pacific Strategy and the balancing China strategy.”

By analyzing the policymaking process and discourse on the TPP under Abe’s Cabinet, Mulgan (2016: 202-219) discovered calculated strategic gains from the TPP in geopolitical and security terms as well as in economic and trade terms. First, Tokyo expected that the TPP would support the strengthening of the US-Japan alliance through collective defense, and in combination with the peace and security legislation, would enable the two countries to deal with China together, henceforth. Second, the TPP would be a useful tool to establish a connection between the Asian and American continents, and preserve the US regional involvement in the Asia Pacific. Third, the TPP would become an instrument of Japan’s efforts in building the regional order, and a policy that aims to keep a check on China through diplomacy-based shared values. Fourth, the TPP would help create a rule-based order in the Asia Pacific in which China could not act as the dominant, hegemonic power.

Trump's administration brought a new set of circumstances and a shift in relationships when the TPP was formally abandoned in January 2017, dealing a severe blow to Japan's strategic paradigm. At first, Abe's Cabinet continued to uphold the trade pact without the US by modifying it to become the Comprehensive and Progressive TPP (or CPTPP) and to compete against the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) led by China. Suddenly, the Abe Cabinet made a dramatic policy shift to the China-led AIIB.²¹ In Spring 2017, Toshihiro Nikai, the pro-China Secretary-General of LDP, surprisingly participated in China's Belt and Road Forum, delivered Abe's personal letter to Xi Jinping, and publicly suggested that Japan would consider joining the AIIB. Abe publicly announced his intention to cooperate with the BRI in June of the same year. There was a significant shift in 2018, which highlighted their thawing ties: an agreement to cooperate in the third countries, such as those involved with China's BRI project and the AIIB (Olsen, 2019). It is little early to judge whether Abe's Cabinet will decide to move toward China in the economic realm against the "Trump risk," and Tokyo appears to be decoupling security and economic affairs for the time being (Sahashi, 2017).

3.5. Nationalist Identity Politics for Multiple Goals

The historical revisionism of Abe's Cabinet aroused the ire of Beijing and Seoul. The worst was Abe's official visit to the *Yasukuni Shrine*. Immediately after the visit, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi summoned Japan's ambassador to China and strongly condemned the act, saying, "If Japan continues to deliberately challenge the bottom line of China-Japan relations and heighten the tension between the two countries, China will take it on till the end" (Wang, 2013). Beijing carried out massive global anti-Japanese propaganda and sought an

alignment of anti-Japanese history with Seoul. Tensions between Beijing and Tokyo over historical issues had become increasingly acute by 2015, when Abe's Cabinet had to take a rather conciliatory stance, including the Abe Statement.

Although Abe and Xi finally agreed to shift the bilateral relations from competitors and threats to cooperative partners during the October 2018 summit, Tokyo's identity politics toward China prior to the summit requires consideration. First, Abe made many efforts to counter China's criticisms over the history issue. His interview with the *Washington Post* in February 2013, just before a meeting with Obama clearly showed his basic reasoning, that is, the problem lies entirely with the dictatorial CCP and not his behavior. He said, "China is a country under the one-party rule of the Communist Party, but it has introduced market economy. (...) But as a result of introducing the market economy, China has dropped one of its pillars of legitimacy, which was equal results for all. This has led them to require some different pillars (...) As part of their effort to seek natural resources needed for their high economic growth, I believe they are moving into the sea. And the other pillar they are seeking is teaching patriotism in their education. What is unfortunate, however, is that in the case of China, teaching patriotism is also teaching anti-Japanese sentiment" (Abe, 2013).

Second, the well-advertised "value-oriented diplomacy" was considered a useful tool in forging an anti-Chinese coalition. In a strict sense, the historical revisionism seems to challenge existing international law and norms because it focuses on overturning the reforms imposed by the Occupation, the judgments of Tokyo War tribunals, and Japan's previous statements on history (Huges, 2015: 3). Tokyo, however, asserted that as a leading country, Japan will promote universal liberal values to maintain international order. In contrast, China is determined to upset the status quo. Abe himself introduced

FOIP, which aimed to constrain China's hegemonic ambitions to the south (Rozman, 2019: 2). Tokyo advanced the logic of confrontation in an international community between the authoritarian continental and the democratic maritime countries. This dichotomous approach seemed to skillfully achieve the desired result: the champion of universal values by diverting attention away from the antipathy against Tokyo's historical revisionism.

Third, domestic politics matter a lot for Abe's identity politics, too. Suzuki (2015: 112-113) clearly stated that the bilateral relationship was likely politicized in Japanese domestic politics. Whenever there is a dispute between the two countries, domestic constituents raise their voices for Tokyo to be resolute and push back against China. The most talked-about statements by the right wing involved Tokyo's departure from the previous subservient or kowtow diplomacy vis-à-vis Beijing, and China should be dealt with in a resolute manner. By depicting China as a coercive, immoral and abnormal state that bullies weak, coerced, moral Japan, Tokyo succeeded in persuading the US to reaffirm its commitment to defend the disputed territory from attack, and also domestically managed to propagate the security-related bills as a means of reconstruction of Japan as a normal state (Kolmas, 2015).

3.6. Great Power Politics Again

Pyle (2018: 71) argued that Abe's Cabinet is engineering a foreign policy revolution, that is, "Abe Restoration," which follows in the tradition of the 1868 Meiji Restoration aimed at strengthening Japan, restoring its independence, and bringing Japan into the company of the great powers again. Abe reportedly told the LDP leaders in 2014 that his cabinet's approval of the right to collective self-defense was as significant as the Meiji Restoration. Japan's conservative nationalists, as Tamamoto (2018: 179 & 197) argued, are fixated on the definition of the

Meiji state, and have the passion for restoring sovereignty by rewriting the foreign constitution aimed at preventing Japan from ever rising again as a great power. Inoguchi (2014, 31-36) named it “Abegeopolitics” which has four major goals: (1) making up for America’s isolationist mood by pursuing proactive diplomacy, (2) keeping Abegeopolitics at center stage and filling the media with his pictures (3) enhancing Japan’s exports and investment in world markets, and (4) coping with China and South Korea, which make negative noises about Japan.

How has it been possible, then, for Abe to get into a meaningful stride with domestic politics? The unprecedented weakness of opposition parties has given Abe’s Cabinet a free hand to move throughout the geopolitical game. Since two decades ago, a new domestic political geography has emerged, in which “doves” have gradually lost their power and influence, while “hawks” have taken a commanding height (Wakamiya, 2004; Curtis, 2013). Such a realignment has negative implications for regional cooperation since doves have traditionally valued close ties with China and South Korea as well as the idea of regionalism. Meanwhile, hawks have favored a confrontational foreign policy toward its neighbors, and have successfully exploited it for domestic political gains (Sasaki, 2005). They have criticized the doves’ China policy for its low-profile, submissive, and humiliating diplomacy. Doves have been criticized for their overall economic cooperation with China since the 1980s, which they believe ultimately led to China’s rise. Abe’s drive has been so overwhelming that the role of the pro-Chinese New Komeito Party, an important ruling coalition partner, was largely limited to impose a couple of conditions on Abe’s plans; for example, the permitting of the right to collective self-defense on a limited basis.

Tokyo has frequently used historical analogies in formulating or justifying its decisions. Political leaders, as May (1973: 51 & 116) suggested, are likely to test issues against history that is narrowly

selected and subjected to no deliberate scrutiny. Their historical reasoning entering into decisions is superficial at best. China has often been compared to Germany. At the Davos World Economic Forum in January 2014, Abe compared the China-Japan relationship to that of Wilhelm II's Germany and Britain before WWI. While citing the Munich Agreement as a failed act of appeasement against expansionist Nazi Germany, hawks in Tokyo asserted that Japan should not succumb to China's pressures. Shinichi Kitaoka, an advisor to Abe and the former Japanese ambassador to the UN, even said that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of China currently played almost the same role as the Japanese Kwantung Army in the 1930s. They took independent action, often defiant of directives from above, which had the potential to cause accidental military clashes and eventual full-scale armed conflicts (Moon & Suh, 2015: 434-435).

This kind of threat inflation to China was thought to be very effective in securing wide support in election campaigns. Hardy-Chartrand (2016: 8) defined threat inflation as a deliberate attempt to increase public fears on current and future threats to pursue a particular agenda. It generally takes three forms: (1) drumbeating which raises public awareness of the threat, thereby increasing public support; (2) moral condemnation that heightens public fears; and (3) lying and misleading to convince the public that the adversary is stronger, dangerous, and has evil intentions (Rousseau *et al.*, 2012: 358-359). Japanese official sources tend to describe China as a threat more frequently than do non-official ones, and much of their concerns have to do with the difficulty in assessing China's future intentions with regard to its military and geostrategic ambitions (Hardy-Chartrand 2016, 6). Banno and Yamaguchi (2016, 127-128) made a loud statement on Japan's self-examination:

Professor Mitani Taiichiro (...) criticized the acceptance of collective self-defense as “targeting China as a potential enemy.” (...) [T]he Army supported the Imperial Defense Plan that identified Russia as a potential enemy, but after the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, it came to be China that was the antagonist. When the Japan-China War broke out in July 1937, China was already relatively strong. (...) Ishii Itaro wrote in his diary: “China, which has been thought of as a dog, has become a wolf. The Army has miscalculated this. (...) Today’s China is not a wolf, but a lion. It is essential to re-establish Japan-China relations on a realist basis.

4. Conclusion

The findings here disapprove of the widespread rhetoric mentioned above. It may be myths in general or temporal phenomena at best. Seoul’s emphasis on China’s role in North Korea was eventually replaced with a focus on the US. On the contrary, Tokyo has begun to address its intention to get close to China while pulling itself out of the exclusively pro-American attitude. Behind the scenes, there may be buried disappointments over their inflated expectations. Seoul had high expectations of Beijing’s crucial role in changing Pyongyang’s behaviors, and; Tokyo firmly believed in Washington’s unwavering commitment to the alliance. We cannot fully agree with the theory that both nations have diverging policy behaviors vis-à-vis China. We *have* seen many differences in their policy measures. We can also see, however, a few significant similarities in their policy reasoning. They include the rough path to recognizing China as a threat, a strong tendency to focus exclusively on specific issues, the cognitive framework relied on in trilateral relations, the various combinations of

multiple policy options, and the intimate association with domestic politics.

Our central point is the contrasting nature of the basic strategic reasoning between both political leaders. Seoul has made vigorous attempts to implement a middle-power strategy. Much of this is reflected in her China policy. South Korea has a deep-rooted antipathy toward geopolitical competition with a preference for geo-economics. It pursues a bridge state between maritime and continental powers, with expanding strategic horizons beyond Northeast Asia, and an ongoing shift toward a multipolar system. There are limitations, too. The core reasoning behind Seoul's de-geo-politicization still has the essence of small-state diplomacy that depends on great powers, while being free from a realistic balance of power paradigm and the continental vs. maritime dichotomy mode of thinking. Baker (2018) insightfully explained that Seoul is trying to reclaim some control over her own fates, but she remains reliant on, and thus constrained by, her primary economic and military partners. On the other hand, Tokyo has sought to return to great power politics and play a sort of classical geopolitical game. Beijing's assertiveness has provided Tokyo with a golden opportunity to play the game, which inevitably aggravated the geopolitical rivalry between the two giants. However, Abe's plan had been almost frustrated by Trump, who paid little attention to the bilateral alliance. Pyle (2018: 80-90) asserted that Japan has historically experienced rapid swings in its geopolitical positions in times of transition and that Japan is undergoing a seismic shift in its political trajectory. It is a typical pattern particularly for Japanese conservatives armed with pragmatic and a non-doctrinaire tendency to swim with the tide.

Most discourses on East Asian geopolitics are inclined to focus on US-China competition, often neglecting other countries as significant players in the geopolitical playing field. The findings reveal nuanced

perspectives that explain the complex nature of the stances taken by various governments across the two countries. Recent moves by Seoul and Tokyo particularly demonstrate the increasing breadth of their influence on geopolitics. Kaplan (2019) argues; Spykman's Asian order—a postwar alliance between the US and Japan against China—is now starting to crumble. However, we need not be too pessimistic about the beginning of a broader period of flux. Though the current bilateral relations between Seoul and Tokyo has deteriorated significantly, it is comforting to see the two distinct strategies converging into a common middle-power strategy. We believe that this paper will allow the reader to reassess long-held beliefs of the region's geopolitical dynamics through these perspectives and historical references.

Notes

+ This work was supported by Fiscal 2017 Grant for Japan-Related Research Projects from the Sumitomo Foundation (Grant No. 178331). We would like to thank Editage (www.editage.co.kr) for English language editing.

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1. Pew Research Center survey shows that South Koreans rate China's power and influence as the top threat facing their country (major threat - 83%; minor threat - 13%; and not a threat - 3%) (Silver, 2017). ASAN public opinion poll demonstrates similar results: 52.5% of respondents think China poses the biggest obstacle to Korean unification, followed by the US (18.9%), North Korea (10.2%) and Japan (4.2%) (ASAN, 2016: 11).
2. It includes: (a) rapid economic growth and its translation into increased military power; (b) an authoritarian socialist political system; (c) increasing military capability and its impact on regional security; (d) fear of political and economic collapse and plausible aftermath on the region; and (e) rising nationalism such as anti-American feelings.
3. A series of nuclear provocation by Kim Jong-un, who succeeded his father Kim Jong-il in December 2011, affected Park's inclination to China. It shows the importance of North Korea factor on ROK-China relations. The element of North Korea, such as diplomatic isolation and dependence on China, domestic hardship, and impetuous foreign policy behaviors as a result has consistently affected ROK-China relations since the ROK-Sino diplomatic normalization (Kim, 1999). These influences of North Korea factor reflect its unique political system. For North Korea, foreign policy is effective means to overcome a domestic hardship and can contribute to self-preservation of regime without any fundamental change within its system (Kim, 2002: 163).
4. ROK and China agreed to recover the relationship following a year-long dispute over THAAD in late October 2017, immediately after Pyongyang's sixth and most powerful nuclear test in September, and fierce exchanges of war rhetoric between Kim and Trump.

5. On the sidelines of the Moon-Kim reconciliation process, three summits between Kim-Xi were held from March to June as preparation and evaluation for the Kim-Trump Singapore Summit on June 12. Subsequently, the September 2018 inter-Korean summit in Pyongyang, the February 2019 North Korea-US summit in Hanoi, and the June 2019 North Korea-US summit at DMZ took place.
6. Park's decision had several reasons, such as more importance of security interests than appeasing China, American lobbying, and public opinion in favor of deploying the THAAD (Moon & Boo, 2016: 11). There have been also reports that Park was shocked when she could not hold prompt phone consultation immediately after the fourth nuclear test.
7. At the Shangri-La Dialogue conference in Singapore on June 1, 2019, Malaysian Defense Minister Mohamad Sabu said, "If anything happens in the South China Sea, the world will also suffer. We have to increase our defense diplomacy. We love America, we also love China" (*Malay Mail*, 2019).
8. After September 11 attacks in 2001, George W. Bush administration pursued the transformation of the USFK in line with Strategic Flexibility initiative, restructuring the US military's global posture to become agile and readily deployable. China has been suspicious about this initiative because it believed that the flexible use of USFK was the extension of China containment policy, which could aggravate the situation surrounding Taiwan. Seoul was concerned that this change might drag her into regional contingencies involving US forces (Choi, 2006: 88).
9. Sohn and Koo (2011: 447) regard the Korea-US (KORUS) FTA as a useful hedging strategy. They say, Seoul's policymakers "not only wanted to hedge against US abandonment by courting economic binding, but it simultaneously wanted to hedge against Chinese predation by courting US entrapment."

10. For example, Roh's Northeast Asian Cooperation Initiative highlighted a "bridge-building" state by linking continental and maritime powers to create a new order of cooperation and integration (Moon, 2012: 13).
11. ASEAN is Seoul's second-largest trading partner with a two-way trade volume of USD 160 billion in 2018. At the 2019 ASEAN-ROK Summit at Busan in November 2019, South Korean Foreign Minister Kyung-wha Kang said that it would be the biggest diplomatic event under the Moon administration and a historic milestone for both sides to draw a blueprint for an unwavering political and economic alliance (*The Korea Times*, November 23, 2019).
12. Rozman (2019: 6) comments that Americans were mostly satisfied with the Abe Statement, Chinese found few grounds for renewed anger, and Koreans thought that there were few signs of concessions.
13. The General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) was another scapegoat in the identity politics between Seoul and Tokyo. Similar to the comfort women issue, Washington intervened in December 2014 after a failed agreement signing in June 2012. On November 2016, the GSOMIA was finally signed by both sides. In August 2019, Moon's government announced that it would leave GSOMIA in response to Tokyo's export restrictions, which allegedly went against the South Korean Supreme Court's order on the wartime forced labor issue.
14. In February 1974, *Shindonga* published a similar issue of "What is China for South Korea?" It was influenced by major historical events including the US-China reconciliation and Sino-Japanese diplomatic normalization, which suddenly made Communist China into a friend's friend, not an enemy's friend.
15. Under the Constitution drafted by the US military after the WWII, Japan interpreted that it could not exercise the right of collective self-defense when the regional contingencies occurred outside its territory. This interpretation of the Constitution continued until Abe administration's

- decision despite small adjustments made after the Cold War (Kim, 2014: 305).
16. In his elucidation of the diamond, Abe said that the South China Sea seems set to become a ‘Lake Beijing’ and countries including Britain and France need to join together to shoulder more responsibility as guardians of navigational freedom across the Pacific and Indian oceans (Abe, 2012).
 17. Mahan’s “Sea Power” concept is based on the superiority of maritime power, saying that “Whoever rules the waves rules the world,” and emphasizes the significance of naval power for defending merchant fleet. Meanwhile, Spykman described “Rimland” as a maritime fringe of continents, in particular the edges of Eurasian continent, and emphasized its importance, saying that “Who controls the rimland rules Eurasia, who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world” (Bae, 2018). These geopolitical concepts are reinterpreted for the purpose in Japan’s geopolitical thinking.
 18. Dittmer conceives three different patterns: the “menage a trois,” consisting of symmetrical amities among all three players; the “romantic triangle,” consisting of amity between one pivot player and two wing players, but enmity between each of the latter; and the “stable marriage,” consisting of amity between two of the players and enmity between each and the third.
 19. For example, Hughes (2016: 116) notes, “Abe’s balancing behavior is characterized by heightened Japanese concerns vis-a-vis not just China but also the robustness of US security guarantees, and especially entrapment and abandonment concerns.”
 20. Kawashima (2018: 48) predicts that even though the credibility of the American security commitment to Japan is increasingly questioned by Japan, the likelihood of a joint China-Japan push-back against the US is very small.
 21. It requires further consideration to answer why Abe administration changed its stance. It is noteworthy, however, that Tokyo did not

compromise on international norms and principles such as openness, transparency, and financial soundness while attempting a “cautious engagement with China” (Basu, 2018).

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