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The Role of Domestic Political Constraints in Navigating Great Power Relations: The Case of South Korea

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Introduction

Is South Korea wavering? As the rivalry between China and the United States heats up, will Seoul be forced to rethink its strategic commitments as a U.S. ally? Are South Koreans more likely to accept Chinese influence, compared to recent instances of anti-American and anti-Japanese mobilizations? These questions – and similar queries about East Asian and Southeast Asian countries neighboring China – appear to motivate much of the current policy discussions, domestic political discourse, and scholarly debates on Asian security.

In this brief discussion paper, I illustrate the domestic political constraints – in addition to the external structural pressures – facing South Korean leaders in formulating their Great Power strategies. Drawing on my earlier work on historical patterns of contesting Great Power influence in Japan and Korea, I show that political leaders in South Korea must carefully navigate a "socially shared discourse" which "are themselves embedded within a historical and cultural context"[1] when discussing foreign policy agendas—in particular, alliance management issues. The rhetorical choices that leaders make are not theirs alone to freely create or manipulate. By invoking specific concepts and vocabulary, political leaders are either confirming or contesting preexisting frames used to mobilize specific stances on how to think about alliance relations with the United States.[2]

[1] Stefano Guzzini, "Which Puzzle? An Expected Return of Geopolitical Thought in Europe?" in Stefano Guzzini, ed., *The Return of Geopolitics in Europe? Social Mechanisms and Foreign Policy Identity Crises* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 15.
[2] Seo-Hyun Park, *Sovereignty and Status in East Asian International Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

Within these established scripts of alliance contestation, leaders have varying degrees of political maneuverability based on the strength of their rule. I argue that leaders operating under conditions of political strength have more freedom to sidestep or shift existing framing contests, while challenged leaders in positions of weakness become entrapped in polarizing rhetorical and physical mobilizations. In other words, strong regimes are frame-makers, while weak regimes are frame-takers.

The following sections discuss possible alternative interpretations of alliance tensions between South Korea and the U.S. and the importance of understanding the rhetorical choices of political leaders and the context in which they were used. I then demonstrate the effects of such domestic political constraints on South Korea's foreign policy outcomes by comparing two South Korean presidencies—that of Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008) and Moon Jae-in (2017-present).

The Role of Domestic Political Constraints in Navigating Great Power Relations

By some accounts, it is not surprising that we see greater pushback in South Korea against the idea of remaining strategically dependent on the U.S. While South Korean alignment choices during the Cold War were largely determined by the dictates of power asymmetry and the communist threat, in the post-Cold War period we may see increasing attempts at foreign policy autonomy, especially given the overall decline in threat perception toward North Korea.[3]

While decreasing perceptions of threat and military dependence on the United States may have generally increased the likelihood of questioning existing alliance relations, the empirical reality paints a mixed picture. Alliance cohesion between South Korea and the U.S. was at its height in the late 1990s and early 2000s, even as South Korean views of North Korea were undergoing dramatic change during South Korean President Kim Dae-jung's "Sunshine Policy" initiative. Although anti-Americanism on the part of South Koreans was commonly blamed for the tensions in South Korea-U.S. alliance relations in the mid-2000s, with some speculating that the alliance itself may be in jeopardy, alliance cooperation continued and overall bilateral relations appeared to strengthen since the second half of the 2000s. And, despite much domestic political tensions, and continued deterioration of relations with China, over the deployment of the U.S.'s missile defense system (THAAD: Theater High Altitude Area Defense) in South Korea in 2017, there was little spillover into South Korea-U.S. alliance relations. In sum, structural dependence or threat levels do not directly lead to South Korean attitudes or responses toward alliance cooperation.

Others look to domestic political factors to explain the vicissitudes of alignment behavior. The role of political leadership looms large here in that the political interests and preferences of specific leaders or coalitions can be critical for the state of alliance relations at a given time. Specifically, progressive or Left-leaning parties in South Korea, it is sometimes

[3] On the role of structural dependence and threat perceptions in shaping alignment behavior, see Victor D. Cha, *Alignment despite Antagonism: The US-Korea-Japan Security Triangle* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

argued, tend to be more nationalistic and have relied on anti-American or anti-foreign rallying calls to advocate for less dependence on Great Powers, more sovereign autonomy and democratic consolidation.[4]

Yet, it is worth noting that some of the strongest instances of bilateral coordination on North Korea policy and other forms of alliance cooperation occurred under governments representing the South Korean Left. For example, it was under the Kim Dae-jung government that collaboration ensued with the U.S. in curtailing North Korean development and testing of ballistic missiles. Additional positive externalities from this "Perry Process" included the U.S.-DPRK Joint Communique (October 12, 2000), in which Pyongyang agreed to a moratorium on launching "long-range missiles of any kind while talks on the missile issue continue,"[5] the creation for the first time of an official U.S.-Japan-South Korea consultative mechanism called the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG), and continued dialogue with China and Russia on North Korea-related issues which would help pave the way for the Six Party Talks format later. More recently, the Progressive Moon government finalized the deployment of THAAD, with President Moon maintaining close ties with the Trump administration, initiating and mediating dialogue between Washington and Pyongyang. Thus, it appears ideological orientation of the party or political leader is by itself not a reliable predictor of the nature of alliance cooperation we can expect to see.

I argue instead that South Korean alignment behavior results from the type and intensity of alliance contestation. The kinds of outcomes political leaders can deliver and the degree and duration of political backlash they face can affect both immediate and long-term alliance relations. A key intervening variable here is regime strength. Depending on the degree of external pressure and how much political (including intra-party and inter-party) competition they face, political leaders can become either entrapped in, or shield themselves from, alliance contestation based on preexisting political frames.

A Tale of Two Governments: Frame-Takers and Frame-Makers

Political struggles for legitimacy and political survival are largely a series of short-term-based decisions by competing elites—particularly in a democratic setting. In order to legitimate themselves, political leaders deploy certain resonant rhetorical frames based on "shared scripts" or cultural understandings.[6] These scripts, moreover, become remobilized and routinized over time. Tilly argues that repeated performances of political contention take on certain repertoires, where claims are often made on behalf of and against identifiable pairs: "bosses and workers, peasants and landlords, rival nationalist factions,

[4] Ho-ki Kim, "Ije Miguk un upda? Soongmi eseo banmi kkaji, Hanguk-in ui bokjap-han simri bunseok" [Is the United States No More Now? From Adulation to Anti-Americanism, An Analysis of the Complex Sentiments held by Koreans], *Sin Dong-a*, January 2003; Sook-Jong Lee, ""Allying with the United States: Changing South Korean Attitudes," *The Korea Journal of Defense Analysis* 17, 1 (2005): 93-95; Katharine H.S. Moon, "Korean Nationalism, Anti-Americanism and Democratic Consolidation," in Samuel S. Kim, ed., *Korea's Democratization* (New York: Cambridge University Pres, 2003), 135-158.

[5] U.S. Department of State, "U.S.-D.P.R.K. Joint Communique," available at https://1997-2001.state.gov/www/regions/eap/001012_usdprk_jointcom.html (accessed October 30, 2019).

[6] Charles Tilly, *Contentious Performances* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 14-15; Sidney Tarrow, *The Language of Contention: Revolutions in Words, 1688-2012* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 17.

and many more."[7] In South Korean political debates, the structural environment of the Cold War and the U.S.'s strategic/political/economic dominance in East Asia in the post-1945 period meant that the political legitimacy of any serious political contender hinged on their view of Korea-U.S. alliance relations, which would have a bearing on their stance on national security and ability to maintain economic growth and stability. Thus, most important postwar political debates readily organized themselves into a contest between the two alternatives: stability-maintaining vs. autonomy-promoting (or, described as pro-U.S. vs. anti-U.S.) frames of mobilization.

It is important to note that such framing of political debates is not easily manipulated by any one individual, even a member of the powerful political elite. As Tilly reminds us, political claims and contests occur along recurring repertoires of mobilization. Political leaders can participate in framing contests, but not necessarily on their own terms. But depending on the context, their entrance into a particular debate – on alliance relations for example – may have marginal effects on the intensity and duration of political mobilization. Leaders cannot completely create or control public opinion, but their rhetorical choices can restrain or amplify existing political frames.

Repeatedly, in South Korea, leaders must confront framing of their policies by the media, pundits, and the public as being sufficiently sensitive to alliance relations with the United States. South Korean leaders themselves will also often claim that they are undoing a past administration's set of policies that veered too "pro-" or "anti-" American. While it may be impossible to avoid these frames altogether, not all instances of these framing contests lead to contentious alliance management or cooperation problems. The vulnerability – and maneuverability – of leaders depends on the degree of challenge they face from both structural pressures and domestic political competition.

This can be illustrated through a comparison of two similarly-situated, Progressive governments in South Korea under Roh Moo-hyun in the mid-2000s and Moon Jae-in in the late-2010s. Both South Korean presidents faced newly-elected U.S. presidents (George W. Bush and Donald J. Trump respectively) who wanted to dramatically alter American policy on North Korea specifically and nonproliferation in general ("axis of evil" and Proliferation Security Initiative, or PSI; "fire and fury" and abrogation of JCPOA and other multilateral mechanisms). Both Roh and Moon were under pressure to satisfy new alliance commitments, such as dispatching combat troops to Iraq as part of the "coalition of the willing" and deploying the U.S.'s global missile defense system known as THAAD. While both presidents ultimately complied with U.S. demands, only Roh was plagued by sustained domestic contestation of alliance relations and tensions in relations with the U.S. until the end of his tenure. In contrast, the Moon administration appears to have largely weathered the THAAD storm, with no serious spillover effects on alliance relations.[8]

What explains these different outcomes in the degree of domestic contestation over alliance cooperation? The external challenges owing to North Korean provocations and U.S. policy changes were arguably comparable in both 2003 and 2017. The key difference was

[7] Tilly, *Contentious Performances*, 14.

[8] The recent series of political mobilizations in support of or opposition to the current government in South Korea are not directly related to THAAD or alliance relations with the U.S., although here too, we can argue that President Moon's weakened political position (compared to earlier in his tenure) is a crucial factor in explaining his inability to sidestep the pro-Japan vs. anti-Japan framing.

in the intensity of domestic political competition faced by Roh and Moon, which determined the strength of their rule and legitimacy as well—and by extension, their position as frame-takers or frame-makers. As a relative newcomer to party politics and underdog contender in the 2002 presidential race, Roh Moo-hyun mobilized his political base with a newly-enforced vision of foreign policy autonomy, distancing himself not only from the Grand National Party (GNP) conservatives but also more moderate candidates from his own Democratic Party. While his "autonomous defense" policy was initially popular, it also generated intensely polarizing debates about the future of South Korea-U.S. alliance cooperation. When Roh agreed to dispatch more combat troops to Iraq, at the request of the U.S., his political position was doubly weakened, with increasing attacks from the Left and the Right. Having engaged in the autonomy vs. alliance debate himself as a presidential candidate, Roh, as president, could not free himself from the further framing of his policy choices in those terms, even as he tried to use alternative language and adopt more "moderate" positions on alliance ties.[9]

Moon Jae-in was elected president in a special election held in May 2017, following the impeachment of former president Park Geun-hye. As a presidential candidate, he had largely opposed the full installation of THAAD on South Korean soil, but found himself in a bind as the decision to deploy the first artillery in Seongju was made prior to his coming to power. In September 2017, President Moon authorized the deployment of additional launchers and addressed the nation in a televised speech in response to critical public opinion and several protests, involving violent encounters between citizens and the police. Harsh retaliation followed from the Chinese government and its citizens, including cancelling of Chinese tour groups, suspension of diplomatic talks, and boycotts and bans of Korean products and businesses.[10] Despite these developments, frustration and anxiety on the part of Korean citizens have not snowballed into pro- or anti-alliance mobilizations on a grand scale.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

Along with fraught reports on climbing tensions in South Korea-U.S. relations, explicit or implicit assumptions are made about the fraying of the alliance and South Korea's turn toward China.[11] In fact, an increasingly common refrain from Asian and American experts is that they expect South Korea and other smaller states to be more deferential to Great Powers (formerly, the United States, and perhaps currently or in the near future, China) – either out of strategic necessity or ingrained cultural attitudes. While it is true that there is not yet a repertoire of mobilization frames for or against modern-day China, we should not lose sight of the fact that the language used to describe pro-U.S. attitudes, such as *sadae* (Revering the Great), was politically mobilized initially in the late nineteenth century by reformist elites who wanted to reduce dependence on and interference from Qing

[9] For an extended discussion of the domestic politics of alliance cooperation in East Asia, see Seo-Hyun Park, "Rhetorical Entrapment and the Politics of Alliance Cooperation: Explaining Divergent Outcomes in Japan and South Korea during the Iraq War," *International Relations* 31, 4 (2017): 484-510.
[10] Adam Taylor, "South Korea and China Move to Normalize Relations after THAAD Dispute," *The Washington Post*, October 31, 2017; Jin Kai, "Time for China to Rethink South Korea Relations?" *The Diplomat*, August 9, 2016.
[11] Others, however, have argued for the still-powerful and relevant role of the United States in East Asian order. See Evelyn Goh, "Contesting Hegemonic Order: China in East Asia," *Security Studies* 28, 3 (2019): 614-644; G. John Ikenberry, "Between the Eagle and the Dragon: America, China, and Middle State Strategies in East Asia," Political Science Quarterly 131, 1 (2016): 9-43.

China. It is also worth noting that the percentage of South Koreans, for example, who had favorable views of China fell from 66 percent in 2002 to 38% in 2018, according to the Pew Research Center. Perhaps more importantly, South Korea currently ranks second (60%), behind Japan (78%), in terms of highest percentage of respondents with an unfavorable view of China. (In 2002, 31% of South Koreans responded that they had an unfavorable view of China.)[12]

What this shows is that deference toward Great Powers is neither automatic nor obvious. We should not assume that acceptance of hierarchical relations is either culturally innate to the region or structurally determined by asymmetrical distributions of power. Hierarchy and political dominance, like any other form of power, has always been politically contested, even in cases we are most likely to uncritically accept as hierarchy-prone, such as the Sinocentric tributary system in premodern Asia or the U.S.-led hub-and-spokes system following the Asia-Pacific War.[13]

As I have argued here and elsewhere, alliance management occurs in a dense social environment – local and global – and that the type and degree of alliance cooperation depends on the specific rhetorical framing in that particular political context. For example, one of the reasons why conservatives (or “the establishment”) in South Korea are too often easily equated with harboring pro-U.S. and pro-Japan attitudes is because many conservative political leaders and parties in the past have heavily relied on American and Japanese political and economic support for their success and legitimacy. Some of the most notorious anti-democratic laws such as the Cold War-era National Security Law banned any kind of criticism against the U.S. or the military alliance, equating anti-American or anti-alliance sentiments with pro-communism and treason. It is safe to say then that current debates about the role of the U.S. in South Korean politics is part and parcel of the process of democratization and reckoning in South Korea, in an effort to contest past legacies of the national security state and developmental authoritarianism.

This particular domestic political context, however, does not necessarily travel outside of South Korean legitimacy politics. While leaders may find it politically beneficial to piggyback on public sentiments on perceptions of structural inequality, the politicization of history or alliance management issues must not be accompanied by a “use it and leave it” mentality. Policymakers may want to be even more cognizant of the unintended spillover effects of domestic political competition. Messages intended primarily for domestic audiences are not always carefully interpreted – or even considered at all – by outside observers. What is critical then is the creative reimagining or reorientation of past political frames, especially ones that have settled into divisive or polarizing routines or repertoires. For example, South Korean policy choices may be opened up further by avoiding essentialist anti- vs. pro-U.S. or anti- vs. pro-Japan frames in favor of broader debates about positioning itself as a secondary vs. middle power, regional vs. global power, a system-supporting role or an agent of change.

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[12] Pew Research Center, *Global Attitudes & Trends*, available at https://www.pewresearch.org/global/database/indicator/24/ (accessed October 30, 2019). In addition, a joint survey by EAI-ARI in October 2011 showed that over 59% of South Koreans believe that China holds a negative attitude towards Korean unification. See Suk-hee Han, “South Korea Seeks to Balance Relations with China and the United States,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, November 9, 2012.
[13] Park, *Sovereignty and Status in East Asian International Relations*, 10-11.