Korea is now at a crossroads—a crossroads between peaceful coexistence of North and South Korea on a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula on the one hand, and war-prone confrontation on the other. In less than a year, the mood on the Korean Peninsula has made a dramatic shift from the verge of war to diplomatic dialogue for peace through a series of historic summits between South Korean President Moon Jae-in and North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un, and between US President Donald Trump and Kim. Diplomatic momentum has picked up since the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics in February 2018, and along the way, Moon has fostered the diplomatic process through adroit communication between Pyongyang and Washington. There is now even talk of a second Trump-Kim summit.

There is a long and rocky road ahead, however. No one knows where these talks will eventually lead to. In the meantime, the United States upholds the principle that inter-Korean reconciliation should keep pace with the advancement of North Korea’s denuclearization. Concerns are arising in Washington that Seoul is going too fast and ahead of any substantial implementation in North Korean denuclearization. How will the current diplomatic process unfold? How will Seoul and Washington keep the diplomatic momentum moving forward, while maintaining solidarity when they pursue parallel diplomacy with Pyongyang?

These recent developments render South Korea at the Crossroads by Scott A. Snyder, a long-time Korea watcher at the Council on Foreign Relations, remarkably timely. His book, which relies on official documents and secondary resources, assesses past differences, as well as accords, between the allies on North Korea policies and their effects. This book, however, is by no means a mere addition to historical chronology of the Republic of Korea’s (ROK) foreign policy. Snyder adopts a sophisticated framework of South Korea’s desire for autonomy and need for alliance as the essential tension underlying near every major foreign policy decision since the Korean War. Under this continued tension, he posits that three drivers in particular have shaped South Korea’s foreign policy choices: the geopolitical environment, South Korea’s growing capacity, and the rise of South Korean domestic politics. Snyder forcefully argues that among the three drivers, external factors have exerted the most important influences on Seoul’s foreign policy choice, whereas its domestic political divide between conservatives and progressives influences the direction of its foreign policy primarily when the country’s
strategic environment is comparatively benign. This argument leads us to contemplate on how Northeast Asian geopolitical structure infiltrates into South Korea.

Korea has historically long been mired in Northeast Asian geopolitics. While geopolitics is generally understood as the struggle between states for control and influence over space and place, it is also, in view of critical geopolitics, about geographical spatialization of the world that “provides the geographical framing within which political elites and mass publics act in the world in pursuit of their own identities and interests.”[1] This critical view focuses on how certain geopolitical representations, or imagination, underwrite specific policies and practices that are then interpreted in terms of these representations.

Seen from this critical understanding of geopolitics, there are two conduits through which the post-World War II geopolitical environment penetrates into, and is represented in, the Korean Peninsula: one is the division of the peninsula into the two confronting Koreas as a source of its entrapment to regional geopolitics, and the other is the ROK-US alliance as an institution to deter threats from North Korea in particular, and expansion of communism more broadly. The end of the Cold War did not bring an end to ideological geopolitics on the Korean Peninsula because of the continued inter-Korean confrontation. Ideological geopolitics has simply morphed itself into classical geopolitics marked by great power rivalry not necessarily based on ideological contentions. Inter-Korean confrontation entraps South Korea to geopolitical competition in the region, making its dependence on the alliance with the United States necessary since the end of the Korean War.

Geopolitical structure does matter. Actors respond and react to the environment, but they do so by “framing” their policies largely in terms of bigger geopolitical pictures. The articulation of Cold War geopolitics helped to secure and reinforce a set of geographical identities in South Korea, while serving to discipline domestic social and cultural differences within the country. Thus, South Korean authoritarian administrations under Rhee Syngman, Park Chung-hee, and Chun Doo-hwan enthusiastically used the confrontational geopolitical structure as a frame through which to consolidate and justify their authoritarian rule and suppress political opposition and dissent, while heavily relying on and emphasizing the importance of the alliance with the United States to deter against North Korea. South Korean authoritarian administrations set anti-communism and national security atop their national agenda, together with economic growth, at the presence of a more powerful and aggressive North Korea.

Under authoritarianism, South Korea’s fear of abandonment by the United States prevailed over its desire for autonomy. Rhee’s advocacy to reunify the peninsula by force, inherently limited by Seoul’s lack of real capacities, was vehemently opposed by the United States, and “the U.S.-ROK security alliance originated both as a product of American mistrust and as an instrument by which the United States imposed restraint on Rhee” (p. 24). Park’s fear of abandonment amid the US retraction in Asia during the 1970s was uttered in the dispatches of South Korean troops to Vietnam and his self-help effort to build nuclear weapons. Chun’s effort to ensure security assurance, as well as political support, by the Ronald Reagan administration made the United States the country of his first foreign visit upon becoming president, which eventually turned out to be successful.

Efforts at inter-Korean reconciliation throughout the South Korean administrations demonstrate that South Korea has used benign environment as observed by Snyder, but Seoul’s proactive initiatives also mattered. South Korean President Roh Tae-woo’s Northern Policy, or Nord-
politik, was “an autonomous initiative,” taking “advantage of circumstances created by a relaxed international political environment and the reputational effects of South Korea’s increasing economic capacity to expand South Korean diplomacy, with full support from the United States” (p. 58). The late 1980s and early 1990s was indeed a golden period of a new opening of diplomatic space for Seoul, in which all three drivers of South Korea’s foreign policy Snyder designates were radically changing.

But South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung’s launching of a proactive engagement policy toward Pyongyang, the Sunshine Policy, amid the grave Asian financial crisis, was more of an outcome of his long-held political vision and conviction than a mere response to the benign environment.[2] As Snyder recognizes, “Among all of South Korea’s presidents since Syngman Rhee, Kim Dae-Jung was the leader who had thought the most deeply prior to becoming president about South Korean foreign policy and who brought with him a clearly defined philosophy to the Blue House” (p. 85). The spirit and principles of the Sunshine Policy were inherited to Roh Moo-hyun’s Peace and Prosperity Policy and later to Moon Jae-in’s current peace approach to North Korea. Both the Sunshine Policy and Peace and Prosperity Policy tumbled, however, by external and domestic constraints. What made these efforts at inter-Korean reconciliation futile?

Snyder convincingly posits a “bedeviling paradox,” which says that South Korea’s improved hard power capabilities that render the country to play unprecedented constructive roles as a leader in international affairs have not translated into the equivalent ones in managing the complex regional security environment in Northeast Asia (p. 192). “South Korea finds that its flexibility to act as a middle power is inversely proportional to its priorities: it faces the greatest limits on its capacity to act on existential security issues that involve hard power” (p. 192).

His keen observation suggests that Seoul’s growing capacity is only remotely related to the autonomy-alliance dynamic as long as ROK is entrapped in the middle-power trap, and unless South Korea attains a great power status in hard power terms. Simply put, South Korea’s growing capacity has not necessarily led to more autonomy either within or from the alliance with the United States. Seoul’s autonomy is rather a function of policy discord or accord between two incumbent administrations in Seoul and Washington.

When Seoul and Washington are aligned in the same direction, Seoul’s North Korea policy finds strong support from Washington. This was the case of the Kim Dae-Jung and Bill Clinton administrations, under which Kim took the “driver’s seat” while Clinton was willing to take the seat beside to help him (p. 95). But, when the two are divergent in their approaches to North Korea, Washington turns into a hindrance to Seoul’s engagement of Pyongyang. Kim’s Sunshine Policy was interrupted when George W. Bush, inaugurated as US president in January 2001, adopted a hardline policy toward Pyongyang, beginning with including it in his “Axis of Evil,” whereupon Pyongyang pushed back and inter-Korean relations were essentially frozen.

South Korea’s domestic constraints were no less crucial, however, than the American ones in disrupting inter-Korean reconciliation. The process of engagement in the Roh Moo-hyun administration was stymied, this time on the South Korean side by the election of Lee Myung-Bak as president in December 2007. Calling the Sunshine Policy a failed appeasement policy, Lee undertook an assertive hardline policy on North Korea and refused to honor either the June 15 or October 4 joint declarations. Inter-Korean relations during his and Park Geun-hye’s administrations fell to some of their lowest levels in contemporary Korean history.[3]
The conservative administrations of Lee Myung-Bak and Park Geun-hye found in the Bush and Barack Obama administrations concurrence in North Korea policy. Lee pledged to restore the loss of trust in the ROK-US alliance, while refusing to treat North Korea as a special priority. Snyder explains how Lee’s exclusive and conditional focus on North Korean denuclearization, as embodied in his “Denuclearization and Opening 3000” and “Grand Bargain” approaches, had the effect of greatly reducing prospects for inter-Korean cooperation. Snyder then demonstrates how Park’s strategy, based on a strong alliance with the United States and prioritizing North Korea’s denuclearization as a prerequisite for the achievement of a trust-based inter-Korean relationship, “adopted essentially the same template that had been used by Lee Myung-Bak” (p. 171). In both administrations, policy accordance between Seoul and Washington was an outcome of Seoul’s voluntary concurrence due fundamentally to their political dispositions. The progressive administrations of Kim Dae-Jung and Roh Moo-hyun, and the incumbent Moon Jae-in as well, vehemently put priority on inter-Korean reconciliation, whereas under the conservative administrations of Lee Myung-Bak and Park Geun-hye, priority was on the ROK-US alliance even at the expense of inter-Korean reconciliation. Snyder examines this difference in commitment to inter-Korean reconciliation and the ROK-US alliance, and looks at how their policy choices were a function of their own policy preferences premised on particular political dispositions.

What then determines political dispositions of South Korean administrations that shape its foreign policy choices? On this regard, Snyder observes that the rise of domestic politics—deep and long-standing ideological polarization between progressive and conservative camps with distinctly different orientations, priorities, and preferences—does matter particularly since South Korea’s democratization, but has been a secondary factor in shaping foreign policy choices compared to the geopolitical environment and South Korea’s own capacity. However, the South-South divide, or nam-nam kalteung, firmly founded on Korean identity politics and contending political constructions of Korean national identity, may have had deeper and enduring effects on succeeding administrations shaping their foreign policy than Snyder argues. No doubt that a country’s foreign policy reflects its historical experience, culture, norms, and values that constitute its national identity. Constructivists in particular believe that self-defining identity becomes a basis for choosing foreign policy goals and strategies, thereby shaping national interest.[4] They pay keen analytical attention to identities, in the belief that norms and values firmly embedded in actors’ identities affect their policymaking choices.

In authoritarian South Korea, national identity construction had long been suppressed and imposed from above with such prevalent elements as anti-communism and national security. Competitive identity construction only began with democratization in the late 1980s and intensified especially since the 2000 inter-Korean summit. Anti-Americanism built on perceived US support for authoritarianism appealed to the minds of the younger generation, as well as progressives of the Korean society. Progressives and conservatives have competitively constructed contending views on North Korea as a crucial element—the significant other—of national identity, which have been reproduced and amplified by scholars, experts, policymakers, and media.[5]

A series of surveys conducted in 2005, 2010, and 2015 by the East Asia Institute and Asiatic Research Institute of Korea University clearly reveals South Koreans’ contrasting views on North Korea.[6] During the ten-year period of 2005-15, positive views that see North Korea as brother, us, and/or neighbor decreased, while negative views that see it as enemy (10 to 16.1 percent) or other (8 to 13.5 percent) increased.[7] The surveys also show that during the same decade, the South Ko-
rean political society at large has leaned toward conservatism, and this is due particularly to conservatives moving further in the rightist direction, thereby enlarging the gap from progressives. Despite the increase in negative perceptions on North Korea, however, the 2015 survey still exposes that positive, or at least neutral, views on North Korea as brother, us, and/or neighbor (65.3 percent) prevail over negative views of it as enemy or other (29.6 percent).[8]

Growing polarization in South Korean identity politics has indeed played a crucial role in shaping South Korea’s policy toward the North. Different administrations have taken different approaches to North Korea, appealing to their respective political constituency. Ideological divide, together with regional divide, has now become a crucial electoral platform for garnering South Koreans’ votes. The respective continuity in North Korea policy of progressive administrations (Kim Dae-Jung, Roh Moo-hyun, and Moon Jae-in) and conservative administrations (Lee Myung-Bak and Park Geun-hye) certainly demonstrates the enduring effect of South Korean identity politics on its North Korea policy choice.

The story of Korea has historically been a story of the curse of geography, one of survival and resilience in the face of external threats from great power neighbors. Its geographic location has indeed pushed the country into the vortex of geopolitical rivalry between great powers. Firmly standing on realist logic, Snyder strongly suggests that South Korea’s only viable strategic option for the foreseeable future, given its relative weakness compared to its major power neighbors, is “continued cultivation and strengthening of the alliance with the United States” (p. 15). He further maintains that despite China’s rising economic and political influence in East Asia, “the United States remains more powerful than China and continues to guarantee an open and liberal global order under which South Korea as a leading exporter has thrived” (p. 264). The ROK-US alliance still remains a constant for both conservatives and progressives. A 2018 survey, for example, found that a staggering 96 percent of South Koreans felt the alliance was necessary.[9]

Many South Korean progressives, let alone conservatives, would concur with Snyder. But some of them are at the same time imagining a future in which the current alliance system transforms into some form of a multilateral security cooperation regime in Northeast Asia. If this were the case, Moon Chung-in, professor and special adviser for foreign affairs and national security to President Moon Jae-in, contends that Seoul does not have to take sides either with Beijing or with Washington, maintaining friendly relationships with both great nations. If a shift away from the alliance system were to occur, “the Korean peninsula can be freed from the geopolitical yoke, the geopolitical trap.”[10]

Notes
[3]. Ibid., 3.


[8]. Ibid., 214.


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