Maneuvering in the Geopolitical Middle: South Korea’s Strategic Posture

By Byong Moo Hwang

As the ascent of China creates an emerging great power rivalry with the United States, South Korea finds itself unwittingly caught in the middle — with the US a key ally at a time when China has become Seoul’s biggest trading partner and likely its most important economic partner in the future.

Add to that Japan’s increasingly assertive foreign policy and the continuing challenges of dealing with North Korea, and South Korea faces daunting geopolitical challenges. Byong Moo Hwang explains the underlying dynamics.

IN THIS TIME of great power transition, relations between the United States and China are marked by a mix of conflict, competition and co-operation. A survey of “strategic elites” in 11 Asian countries conducted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in April 2014 found that respondents believed China will exert the greatest power in East Asia in 10 years, and most expected China to be their country’s most important economic partner. In particular, 79 percent considered China’s impact on regional economic development as either very or slightly positive, whereas 61 percent felt China is having a very or somewhat negative impact on regional security. The findings suggest, nevertheless, that US leadership will remain strong. On average, most respondents felt that continued US leadership would be in the best interests of their country, although only 11 percent of Chinese respondents felt that way.¹

The findings showed that territorial confrontations are felt to be the greatest obstacle to regional community-building, but respondents in South Korea and China were more concerned about historical issues than territorial ones. Most respondents in China, Taiwan and South Korea felt Japan’s impact on regional security was very or slightly negative. On average, 42 percent said that historical issues would remain diplomatic and not military problems, but 43 percent of Chinese felt historical differences could lead to military confrontation. The third greatest obstacle was uncertainty about a rising China, which was felt by a majority of respondents in Japan and Taiwan. When asked whether their country should resort to military force to reverse a hostile takeover of territory should diplomacy fail, over 80 percent of Chinese and Japanese respondents said yes.

THE US AND CHINA: TRAPPED IN RIVALRY?

Regarding the US strategic rebalancing or “pivot” toward Asia by the administration of President Barack Obama, 79 percent of respondents in the survey supported the move. When asked to evaluate the rebalancing, most respondents indicated that it is the right policy, but is being neither resourced nor implemented sufficiently; 21 percent felt the policy is reinforcing regional stability and prosperity. China was the only country where a majority of respondents believed the rebalancing is too confrontational toward China.

As the CSIS survey shows, the key factor affecting the security landscape in East Asia is whether the US and China will be trapped by their rivalry. The leadership in Beijing has been concerned that the US pivot is aimed at thwarting China’s rise and keeping it vulnerable. As evidence of malign American intent, the Chinese point to the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade talks scheme — to which China is not yet a party — as a tool to economically contain China’s rise.

In Beijing’s view, American efforts to enhance its strategic posture — such as expanded missile defense; new and augmented basing arrangements in Australia, Guam and Singapore; continued military exercises; reconnaissance conducted close to Chinese territory; and the persistence of Cold War-era security alliances — are all aimed at containing Chinese military action and creating the ability to intervene quickly in military crises in East Asia.

China has reacted to these developments by continuing to build up its naval, air and missile forces to create “anti-access/area denial” capabilities with regard to America’s military presence. Economically, China has backed the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a regional free-trade agreement (FTA) aimed at including 16 Asian nations by 2015. South Korea and Japan are participating in the negotiations, which also include the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. China also recently initiated two regional development banks. The New Development Bank (NDB) is being formed within the so-called BRICS group of nations, which includes Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. The other entity is the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which South Korea was asked to join as a founding member. The US has opposed Seoul’s participation in the AIIB.

In June, Chinese President Xi Jinping, marked the 60th anniversary of the original Declaration of Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence, stressing that the sovereignty, territorial integrity and core interests of all nations must be respected. In the Shanghai Declaration at the 4th summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CISCA) on May 20-21, Xi restated China’s position that security matters in Asia should be handled by and for Asians.

Xi’s remarks were widely viewed as being addressed at the US, mainly because Washington has intervened in East Asia’s territorial and maritime disputes. China disagrees with the US view that under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), coastal states have no right to regulate foreign military activities in their maritime exclusive economic zones (EEZ). China sees the US view as a pretext for carrying out surveillance missions to monitor the Chinese military and engaging in military exercises with allies such as Japan and South Korea. The issue has been at the heart of multiple incidents between Chinese and American ships and aircraft in international waters and airspace.

¹ Michael J. Green, Nicholas Szczepani, Power and Order in Asia: A Survey of Regional Expectations, CSIS, July 2014.
China is worried about the possibility of US intervention in territorial disputes — namely, those between China and Japan, China and Vietnam, and China and the Philippines. The US, for its part, does not take a position on the competing sovereignty claims, but opposes the use or threat of force by any claimant. At the same time, the US has officially affirmed that the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands — which are disputed by China and Japan — fall under the scope of the US-Japan Treaty of Mutual Co-operation and Security, presumably meaning that the US would assist Japan if the disputed territory came under attack. In response, Japan declared its intention to institutionalize the right of collective defense, opening the way for Japan to assist American military operations in East Asia. The South Korean government reacted with some sensitivity to Japan’s move, stating that Japanese forces must not enter South Korean airspace or territorial waters without its permission. South Korea compromised with the US, meanwhile, over the issue of whether US forces in South Korea might deploy, but not operate, from South Korea in an off-peninsula military contingency.

China has long sought to manage territorial disputes with rival claimants in the South China Sea on a bilateral basis, while Vietnam and the Philippines have sought to internationalize the issue. In the recent past, the US has signaled its intent to serve as a regional stabilizer by deploying naval task forces in the East China Sea and the South China Sea.

The prospect of resolving the territorial disputes through diplomatic means appears gloomy. None of the claimants have agreed to shelve their differences or reach consensus on a code of conduct to resolve the disputes by peaceful means and establish a mechanism for jointly exploring and developing resources in the disputed seas. Despite taking an increasingly assertive stance in territorial disputes, China has faced the dilemma of whether it should use its forces to occupy particular islands. If it were to do so, of course, China’s carefully crafted image of a “peaceful rise” would be damaged and that in turn could spoil both the favorable external environment conducive to economic development at home and Beijing’s long-term goal of establishing an Asian security architecture backed by China.

**PRESIDENT XI’S VISIT TO SEOUL**

South Korea is a close ally of the US, but China is its No. 1 trade partner. President Xi’s recent visit to Seoul had strategic implications for relations among South Korea, the US and Japan, as well as for China-North Korea relations. First of all, by taking an “economy first” approach toward Seoul, China was successful in concluding an agreement with South Korea on direct yuan-won transactions, which will help contribute to the internationalization of the yuan — a long-term goal for Beijing. In June, just before Xi visited Seoul, China succeeded for the first time in establishing a bank for direct yuan-pound transactions in London, which was a clear step toward reining in the dollar’s supremacy. However, the yuan still ranks fifth as a currency in use after the dollar, euro, pound and yen. During the Seoul summit, Xi also asked South Korean President Park Geun-hye to join the China-backed AIIB, and both agreed to conclude a China-South Korea FTA by the end of 2014.

A second major source of interest after the summit was speculation that China, tapping the historical antipathy both countries have against Japan, may have succeeded in creating a united front with South Korea to alienate Seoul from Tokyo, and gain an opportunity gradually to erode the US-backed alliance system. This speculation, however, ignores the strategic reality on the Korean Peninsula. Seoul’s alliance with Washington is solid. South Korea has severely criticized Japanese failure to acknowledge Korean suffering during the Second World War — such as “comfort women” — but it still recognizes Japan as an important political and security partner.

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to discuss any contingencies for the possible collapse of North Korea with concerned states, but it has recently revealed an intention to do so. Many specialists in China have reportedly said that the matter could be discussed on a multilateral basis, including in the United Nations.

SOUTH KOREA’S PEACE INITIATIVES

Since taking office in December 2012, President Park has faced the need to manage the growing threat of nuclear weapons development and missile launches while trying to normalize North-South relations, which have been marked by rising tension and conflict since 2008. Park has taken two peace initiatives. One is the Korean Peninsula Trust-building Process. The other is the Northeast Asia Peace and Co-operation Initiative. In Seoul’s view, peace and stability on the peninsula should be based on synchronized progress in North-South relations and in North Korea’s denuclearization. The initiatives also aim to manage the paradox of deepening economic interdependence and heightened conflicts over historical and territorial issues among regional states.3

In the German city of Dresden in March, Park unveiled a package of proposals based on humanitarian and cultural approaches to lay the groundwork for reunification. It includes extending aid to mothers and babies and building infrastructure in North Korea in return for rights to develop underground resources. On the Northeast Initiative, in August, Park proposed forming a three-nation nuclear safety body with China and Japan, leaving open the door for North Korea, Russia, Mongolia and the US to participate. Park also pressed Pyongyang to give up its nuclear weapons programs, suggesting that it should follow in the footsteps of Kazakhstan, which gave up the nuclear weapons it inherited after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and emulate Vietnam and Myanmar, which opted for reform and opening, noting that these countries are enjoying peace and prosperity.

It is worth noting that Park’s peace initiatives skirt the May 24 sanctions imposed on the North soon after the April 2010 sinking of the South Korean naval vessel Cheonan. These include restrictions on trade, investment and people-to-people exchanges between the North and the South. The Park administration has, in close collaboration with the US, maintained a “strategic patience” approach to North Korea’s denuclearization, which has been described as a passive-aggressive policy that contains North Korea’s nuclear proliferation rather than rolls back its nuclear program. One shortcoming of that approach is that it allows Pyongyang to control the day-to-day situation, while Washington and Seoul wait to react.4

To date, Pyongyang has repeatedly stressed its policy of nuclear deterrence, urging the US to change its strategic patience policy. North Korea has criticized Park’s proposals as trite and insincere and called on South Korea to lift sanctions. Meanwhile, North Korea has begun a dialogue with Japan, accompanied by Japan’s easing of some of its sanctions on North Korea. The dialogue may send Pyongyang the wrong signal that it may erode the joint actions of the US, South Korea and Japan on the North’s denuclearization.

The Park administration thus confronts two interrelated problems: how to reduce tension and normalize North-South relations with North Korea’s denuclearization. Many specialists in Seoul argue that the South Korean government has established a new formula, trustpolitik, in collaboration with the US to engage North Korea. But whether Park’s trustpolitik initiative will be successful depends upon the normalization of North-South relations, among other things.

PROACTIVE DETERRENCE DOCTRINE

South Korea’s deterrence posture is complicated by the requirement that Seoul closely co-ordinate with Washington. First, since the 2010 North Korean shelling of Yeonpyeong Island, the South Korean government has determined to counter any such actions in the future under a “sufficient engagement principle,” rather than a “proportional engagement” rule under the control of the United Nations Command. The Lee Myung-bak administration had adopted a doctrine of proactive deterrence, which meant that South Korea would respond to an attack not only at the origin of the provocation but also at the command leadership level. In March 2013, Park was quoted as warning that “provocations by the North will be met [with] a stronger counterattack.”

The US is reportedly worried that allowing South Korea too much self-defense flexibility could entrap the US in a war on the peninsula. The 2013 “Counter-provocation Plan” was formulated in close co-operation between South Korean and US military authorities to address the new threats envisioned from North Korea and Seoul’s new attitudes toward retaliation. To better deter North Korea’s nuclear and missile threats, South Korea was also allowed to increase the maximum range of its ballistic missiles from 300km to 800km and the payload limit from 500kg to 800kg. As for missile defense, South Korea has decided to develop its own Korean Air and Missile Defense (KAMD) system instead of integrating with the US regional missile defense network. The US has announced its intention to deploy part of its own Theater High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system at the US base in South Korea, which, in China’s view, should undermine the strategic balance in Northeast Asia. The issue comes up at a time when South Korea wants to negotiate a delay in the transfer of Operational Control of its troops in wartime from the US to South Korea. In 2010, the transfer was delayed until 2015. It is now expected to be delayed again until after 2020, the main reason being the need for South Korean forces to be adequately prepared to assume responsibility in the face of the growing threat of North Korea’s nuclear weapons and missiles.

In addition, while South Korea has determined not to develop its own nuclear weapons, it wants the right to reprocessing and enrichment technology for the peaceful use of nuclear energy. This will depend upon a new agreement on civilian nuclear co-operation to be revised through complicated negotiations between the US and South Korea.

HEALING THE VICTIM’S MENTALITY

Finally, as a middle power, South Korea needs to overcome its historical “victim mentality,” replete with painful memories of being a country that is like a shrimp among whales. Prospects for both rivalry and co-operation between the US and China, and between Japan and China, would allow greater space for South Korea to pursue its own national objectives, rather than put it in a position where it is forced to choose sides. South Korea should play a leading role on Korean issues to lay the groundwork for peace and unification. Even in the event of any sudden change in North Korea, South Korea should make sure and correct decisions over whether to stabilize it or contain it, be assertive in limiting the maneuvering of external powers, and gain the international support necessary to support Seoul’s objectives.

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3 Yun Byung-ik, “Park Geun-hye’s Trustpolitik: A New Framework for South Korea’s Foreign Policy,” Global Asia, Fall 2013, pp. 8-14.
4 Mark E. Manyin et al., U.S.-South Korea Relations, pp. 7-8.