HAS THE GHOST THAT RUINED THE COUNTRY BEEN RESURRECTED? THE PUZZLE OF SOUTH KOREA’S DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN POLICIES

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Abstract
Under changing dynamics such as US-China relations, the domestic and foreign policies of South Korea’s new government under President Moon Jae-in have shown favor to China and North Korea, which is somewhat contrary to previous administrations that maintained pro-American policies. This situation is very similar to the geopolitical circumstances of the Joseon Dynasty during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries before Korea was occupied by Japan. This article analyzes and compares the geopolitical situations and Korea’s domestic and foreign policies of the two periods. By doing so, this article argues that policy makers should be more prudent when deliberating what should be achieved in order to enhance the future of Korea, rather than how to ensure their own personal legacy or ambition for political power.

Keywords: Inter-Korean relations, Korean Peninsula, reunification, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Taft–Katsura agreement

Título en Castellano: Ha resucitado el fantasma que arruinó el país? El rompecabezas de la política interna y la política exterior de Corea del Sur

Resumen
En medio de dinámicas cambiantes como es el caso de las relaciones entre Estados Unidos y China, las políticas interna y exterior del nuevo gobierno de Corea del Sur bajo el presidente Moon Jae-in se han mostrado favorables a China y Corea del Norte, de forma algo contraria a las políticas mantenidas por las administraciones anteriores que fueron políticas pro-americanas. Esta situación es muy similar a las circunstancias geopolíticas de la dinastía Joseon durante finales del siglo XIX y principios del XX antes de que Corea fuera ocupada por Japón. Este artículo analiza y compara las situaciones geopolíticas y las políticas internas y exteriores de Corea en los dos períodos y sostiene que los responsables políticos deberían ser más prudentes al deliberar sobre lo que debería conseguirse para mejorar el futuro de Corea, en lugar de tratar de garantizar su propio legado personal o su ambición por el poder político.

Palabras Clave: Relaciones intercoreanas, Península de Corea, reunificación, iniciativa una franja una ruta, acuerdo Taft–Katsura agreement

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1. Introduction

Faced with a dramatically changing geopolitical landscape around the Korean Peninsula, Seoul and Pyongyang have embarked upon an unprecedented level of economic and political engagement since 2018. A significant number of the South Korean public believe that this is the right path for the two Koreas in order to achieve the dream of reunification. Fulfilling this goal has long been a desire since the division of Korea following its liberation from Japan in 1945. However, reunification of the Korean Peninsula is not simply about the two Koreas coming together, it is far more complicated than that. This is because of the interlacing interests of “the four strong powers” in the region, specifically China, Japan, Russia, and the United States. This signifies that the two Koreas should adopt cautious strategic approaches to these big countries.

Due to the different political systems between the two Koreas, official bilateral relations have been dichotomized since liberation in 1945. South Korea has formed strong partnerships with Japan and the United States; although the relationship with Japan was more indirect and predominantly part of the strategic alliance between Japan and the United States. At the same time, North Korea has maintained close relations with China and Russia (formerly the Soviet Union) due to shared ideological concerns. As a result, the traditional axes have been South Korea-Japan-United States vs. North Korea-China-Russia.

In recent times though, several dissonances have occurred in these axes due to some key events. First, the supreme leader of North Korea Kim Jong-un had his uncle Jang Song-thaek executed in 2013. This was notable because Jang was the most pro-China figure in the North Korean leadership and it left Beijing in a very delicate position when dealing with Pyongyang. This relationship came under further strain following North Korea’s nuclear tests despite China’s private warnings not to do so. South Korea has also displayed similar changes. With the inauguration of the Moon Jae-in administration in 2017, its approach to China has been more favorable while it has drifted apart from Japan and the United States. For example, Moon is in favor of China’s ambitious international economic development plan known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and has expressed a willingness to join this initiative in the expectation of gaining economic benefits from it. Alongside this development, South Korea has decided to scrap its intelligence-sharing agreement with Japan on August 22, 2019 despite opposition from the US government; although the Moon’s administration has made the decision on November 23, 2019 to delay its termination.

Will these diametrically different approaches contribute to regional peace in East Asia and even to the reunification of the two Koreas? In particular, this question becomes more

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2 The basis of this article is derived from a number of presentations by Jung-min Kim, the International Strategy Institute. This article has been further developed and expanded.


salient in the face of the recent US-China trade war. Several scholars have even considered this as a new power struggle for global hegemony. In this regard, the current situation around the Korean Peninsula is very similar to that during the late nineteenth century where China, Japan, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States competed over the future of Korea. In examining this historical case study, important implications for the two Koreas, particularly the South Korean government, can be extracted.

This article addresses this issue by examining the diplomatic relations of Korea (Joseon or the Korean Empire at that time) with regard to its neighboring countries in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. The first section briefly describes the situation around Korea during this time. The second section analyzes the power struggles within Korea during the course of the hegemonic conflict in the region and their consequences. The third section compares the situations of both the past and present around Korea in order to extract important implications. Lastly, the conclusion summarizes the findings of this article and suggests areas for possible further studies.

2. A Brief History of Relations between Korea and Its Neighbors in the Late Nineteenth Century

In the early nineteenth century, Korea experienced a number of unprecedented events following its first contacts with Western powers. In 1801, Catholicism was officially prohibited by the Joseon government unleashing a wave of persecutions against practicing Christians and foreign missionaries. In 1832, British diplomat Lord Amherst arrived in Korea to seek the opening of the country to international trade. In 1845, the British warship HMS Samarang led by Edward Belcher surveyed the south and west coasts of Korea. Coming so soon after the First Opium War (1839-1842) which revealed the true weakness of China’s Qing Dynasty, these incursions created much fear within the Korean royal household. At that time, Joseon considered Qing as the most powerful country in the world and such developments came as a great shock.

As the British surveyed the Korean coast, the French who were in competition with Britain for hegemony in the region also made their appearance. In 1846, French admiral Jean-Baptiste Cécille led three warships to Korea in order to protest against the Joseon government for its persecution of Catholic missionaries. In 1847, Admiral Augustin de LaPierre visited Joseon with two warships, but had to cut short the voyage and return due to an incoming typhoon. In 1856, French warships patrolled the Han River which leads into Seoul as they considered invading the capital. In 1866, Admiral Pierre-Gustave Roze led three French warships to Joseon and occupied Kanghwa Island which was in a strategic location for transport and logistics.

During and after the Second Opium War (1856-1860), Joseon was very much aware that Britain and France had fought together against the Qing and even occupied Beijing. In addition, Russia intervened during this war as an arbiter and was successful in acquiring large swathes of Chinese territory which became known as the Maritime Province. Crucially, this meant that Joseon now had a direct border with Russia in 1860. Initially, Russia’s image in Joseon was not as positive as that of other Western countries such as France and Britain.

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In 1873, Joseon’s King Kojong began to establish his rule after taking over from his father, Heungseon Daewongun who had been regent for the junior king. This marked a shift from the conservative isolationist policies of the Daewongun to more open policies. The 1876 Treaty of Kanghwa signaled the first step in opening up relations with its neighbor Japan. However, this agreement would not just be for Japan, but also for other countries as well. In particular, as China and Japan meddled in Korea’s domestic affairs, Joseon sought to balance against this by establishing diplomatic relations with Western countries. For example, as the Qing authorities began to intervene more directly in Korea’s affairs, some argued the need for the Joseon government to forge closer ties with Russia in response. By contrast, others advocated closer diplomatic ties with the United States in order to protect Joseon from Japan and Russia. It was not long before Joseon established diplomatic relations with the United States (1882) and Britain (1883).

Among the many Western countries, Russia was seen as a friendly country when King Kojong began his rule. First, in contrast to France and the United States, Russia showed little interest in propagating Christianity in Korea. Second, although Russian ships came to Joseon, their presence was limited to the Tumen River which straddles the border between Russia and Korea in the remote and sparsely populated northeastern part of the Korean Peninsula. As a result, these two factors contributed to the image of Russia as a patient and prudent partner. Such a perception made diplomatic relations with its northern neighbor more favorable when compared with other countries.

Qing and Japan were concerned about Russia’s expansion into Korea, a fact that Kojong and his senior government officials were very much aware of through various sources. For example, the Qing official Huang Zunxian published a report entitled Korea Strategy which revealed Russia’s interests in expanding its territory to Joseon. As a policy solution, this book recommended Kojong establish ties with the United States in order to contain Russia’s expansionist efforts into the Korean Peninsula. More directly, in the section of The Annals of the Joseon Dynasty related to King Kojong, it is described that Qing and Japan had advised him to be careful in his dealings with Russia.

Contrary to Qing and Japan’s wishes though, King Kojong eagerly appealed to the Russian ambassador in Japan Alexandre P. Davydow in order to establish diplomatic ties between his country and Russia. Kojong even personally sent a high-ranking governor to Novokievsk as part of efforts to establish diplomatic relations. After these gestures, Joseon managed to open up formal ties with Russia in 1884, which covered not only economic cooperation but also established a military alliance to be utilized in times of an emergency. These facts demonstrated that Joseon did not consider Russia as a threat.

Such a positive view within Joseon toward Russia led to secret bilateral negotiations between the two governments. This development provoked the Port Hamilton Incident in which the British Royal Navy occupied Geomun Island in Korea from 1885 to 1887. Even much later, Joseon’s attitude toward Russia became more favorable after King Kojong sought refuge at the Russian legation following the assassination of his wife Queen Min by Japanese officials.

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10 Ibid., p. 208.
11 Moonjong, Choi (1984): “Han-rôslugyo ū baegyông gwa kyônggui” [The sequence and background of Korea-Russia diplomatic relations], Hanrôgwangje'100nyônsa [One hundred years of Korea-Russia diplomacy], Seoul, Hhanguksayônguhuyöpulhoi.
and the emergence of widespread turmoil in 1896. However, this pro-Russian movement put Joseon in an unexpected situation which is covered in the next section.

3. Korea’s Stance during the “Great Game”

As Korea began to approach Russia with the aim of seeking a close relationship, the global order was experiencing great change. The mid to late nineteenth century marked a period when the efforts of European countries, notably by Britain, to hold Russia’s southward expansion was very evident. In Europe, Russia was in conflict over Crimea with an alliance made up of the Ottoman Empire, Britain, and France from 1853 to 1856. In the Central Asia, the Anglo-Afghan Wars were part of Britain’s efforts to block Russia’s southward expansion into the continent. Amidst this conflict, Britain was engaged in covert actions against Russia across the world which came to be known as the Great Game.

Initially, this conflict was limited to Europe and Central Asia. However, with the 1858 Treaty of Aigun, Russia acquired 600,000 square kilometers of Chinese land located north of the Amur River. With the Second Opium War, it also gained the large port city of Vladivostok in 1860. As Russia expanded its territory and interests to East Asia, the front line of the Great Game shifted to this region. Notably, the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway in 1890 confirmed Russia’s ambition to settle in the region. Although concerned by these developments, Britain was pre-occupied in managing its large-sized colonies and settling various conflicts in different parts of the world. Therefore, instead of becoming directly involved, Britain sought to establish alliances with Joseon and Japan in order to block Russia’s southern advance into East Asia, a region that was far from its home country.

Despite these overtures, Joseon and Japan responded in completely different ways to what Britain expected. Japan invaded Taiwan in 1874 and then sought to push Joseon to open up its market by signing the Kanghwa Treaty in 1876. To Britain, this proactive stance by Japan made it clear that it would make for a reliable partner in East Asia as it was taking the Russia threat seriously. By contrast, the relationship between Joseon and Russia was strengthened following their bilateral treaty of 1884, which came soon after the Joseon-Britain Treaty of 1883. Of particular concern were the rumors that Joseon and Russia had reached a secret agreement in 1885 which sought to minimize or eliminate Qing’s interference in Korea’s domestic affairs. This was the motivation behind the Port Hamilton Incident which was Britain’s way of signaling to Joseon its opposition to friendly approaches toward Russia. Despite all this opposition to the 1885 agreement, further rumors emerged that Joseon and Russia had again reached another secret agreement in the following year.

The tension over the Port Hamilton Incident was alleviated following an agreement reached between Britain and Russia. However, Queen Min (later Empress Myeongseong) and her family were very much pro-Russia and occupied important official posts in Joseon. Therefore, from the viewpoint of Britain, Joseon would have been still perceived as uncooperative or even as an ally of Russia in the region. Under these circumstances, Japan became Britain’s faithful partner to block Russia’s southern advance which led to the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in 1902 and its subsequent renewal in 1905. It was British support during

the Russo-Japanese War of 1905 that helped Japan to achieve victory. After the war, Japan was considered to be one of the major global powers alongside a few other western countries.

As Japan’s influence on Joseon was more visible after the Russo-Japanese War, the United States used this state of affairs as a quid pro quo in exchange for recognition of US authority over the Philippines through a confidential agreement known as the Taft-Katsura Memorandum (1905). The view on Joseon among other countries was not much different from that of Britain or the United States. Facing the growing power of the German Empire, France found mutual interest with Russia to establish an alliance in 1891. Although France was on Russia’s side, the country was consumed with its affairs in Indochina and had little interest in Joseon at that time. Furthermore, as it was not Britain that had directly initiated a war against Russia or that had occupied Joseon, there was little appetite in France to intervene in events far from its own interests in Southeast Asia.

From Germany’s viewpoint, Russia’s advance in Manchuria and Joseon had been perceived positively as it meant that one of its great rivals would become more embroiled in East Asia instead of Europe. As a result, Germany encouraged Russia to engage more in the affairs of the region. While hoping that Russia would commit more of its power and resources toward other countries like Joseon, Germany sought to occupy parts of China. As a result, during the Great Game, Joseon had lost its strategic value as it was seen as a Russian partner. In particular, as Japan defeated Russia during the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), Britain’s belief that Japan was the only country that could effectively defend the region from further Russian encroachment was solidified. Consequently, this contributed to Japan’s annexation of Korea in 1910.

It is often said that there is no “if” in history. However, it is still meaningful to think of the current position of Korea if Joseon had joined the British side and engaged more actively in blocking Russia. Would Korea have been able to be as strong as Japan today? Would Korea have been divided into two? And would it have been able to achieve its economic development much earlier? What would have happened if Joseon’s royal family thought more on the future of the kingdom, not on its own dynastic succession? It is still worthy to think of such events in order to extract meaningful messages.

4. Resurrected Ghost: Comparison between the Past and Today

After almost one hundred years, a new version of the Great Game has emerged with China and the United States, instead of Russia and Britain. As China has gained its economic power, it has sought to expand its influence by establishing the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and launching the BRI. In response, the United States has stood in opposition and has lobbied its allies not to join these bodies. Furthermore, a number of Chinese companies such

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21 During the Sino-Japanese War, Japan took over the Liaodong Peninsula. In response, France, Germany, and Russia applied diplomatic pressure on Japan to return the territory back to China which they then occupied in order to meet their colonial ambitions. In fact, Germany controlled other concessions in Shandong Province in China.
as Huawei have been labeled as national security threats by the United States. Although President Donald Trump has provoked a number of sensitive issues which has made various countries uncomfortable, the United States still enjoys more global support than China.

South Korea launched the world’s first national 5G network, however behind this achievement exists the use of Huawei’s technology which the United States has opposed. This has subsequently created a hot issue among the Korean public.\(^{23}\) It is interesting that a strikingly similar case happened in Joseon during the late nineteenth century. In 1883, Joseon and Japan signed a secret agreement for the installation of telegram lines, which can be considered as the cutting-edge technology of its time like 5G today. The agreement guaranteed that all telegrams sent out of Korea would go via the Pusan-Nagasaki submarine cable line for the next two decades. At the same time though, Korea secretly allowed the Chinese to construct and operate a telegram line from Seoul to Pusan as an extension of Shanghai-Tianjin line.\(^{24}\) Consequently, China controlled Korea’s communication with the outside world until the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1894.\(^{25}\) Will such a turn of events occur again with the 5G network even though Korea has its own 5G technology?

Despite these challenges, South Korea seems to be repeating the mistakes that King Kojong and Joseon made. When the United States urged South Korea to reject Huawei’s 5G products due to security concerns, the South Korean government expressed reluctance. Such an outcome has been surprising for Washington which has considered Seoul to be a reliable partner.\(^{26}\) The Moon administration does not seem to clearly understand how the world order functions as it focuses on superficial aspects of its relationships with China, Japan, and the United States. Furthermore, he and his party have expressed positive sounds on the potential economic benefits from the BRI and reunification with North Korea while they have taken a tough stance on Japan’s historical role during the occupation of Korea as a way to boost their legitimacy or to stay in power.\(^{27}\)

Recently, South Korea has considered allowing Chinese police officers to conduct joint patrols on Jeju Island.\(^{28}\) It is noteworthy here that the Eighth United States Army has been stationed in Korea since the Korean War. This is all reminiscent of the series of events following the Gapsin Coup (1884) which provided Japan with the justification to bring their troops back to Korea and facilitated the process toward its annexation. More recently, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has sought to amend the country’s constitution to allow the Self-Defense

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Forces to participate in military operations outside of Japan.\(^{29}\) The great fear is that with the deployment of Chinese police to Korea, there exists the possibility for the situation to spiral out of control with military interventions from other countries. This would be very much the case if Korea is not at the center and unable to manage issues carefully.

The economic importance of China in the East Asian region has become very important as both Japan and Korea have sought to access the Chinese market. One interesting point is that both have also suffered from China’s use of economic pressure during critical national security decision-making processes. When Tokyo faced a ban on rare earth exports during its clash with Beijing over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in 2010, it responded by reducing the amount of rare earth imports from China while diversifying the sources for these materials. In addition, Japanese regional governors came out and challenged China for its actions. Between 2016 and 2017, South Korea had to contend with direct economic pressure over its decision to deploy the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD), known as the THAAD Crisis. In the end, the Moon administration gave up appealing this case with the World Trade Organization (WTO) as it sought peace through a less confrontational posture.\(^{30}\) At the same time, Korea’s regional governors remained silent on the issue despite the impact on their local economies. Who is adopting the right approach to China, Japan or South Korea?

Although the international setting is changing, it seems that the ghost that ruined the country has been resurrected. There seems to less consideration for the welfare of Korea, and more interest in the ruling party and holding power. In this respect, it is clear that the Moon administration has not fully grasped the multi-layered nature of changes taking place in the region. As such, the approach adopted by South Korea should be clearer when considering its strategic interests in the current global order. Which country is currently the dominant power and has more supporting parties? Who will remain as the global hegemonic power? And which country has shared political beliefs with the Republic of Korea and offers more benefits? A rigorous analysis and a more detailed strategic plan are required in order to strengthen a better future for Korea.

5. Conclusion

Currently the Korean Peninsula is facing considerable challenges regarding diplomatic and economic issues. As the central axis on the Korean Peninsula, Seoul has the accountability to manage this situation wisely. To deal with this unprecedented situation, political leaders, government officials, and the public need to adopt a realistic and pragmatic perspective, instead of approaching complex issues through ideologically-biased viewpoints. Unfortunately, this is far from the reality that is prevailing in South Korea today.

Reunification of the Korean Peninsula is a long-term goal that Seoul has long sought to achieve. Despite many efforts to this end through inter-Korean engagement, such an achievement will always require co-operation among neighboring countries coupled with an environment of geopolitical stability. In recent years, it has proven to be particularly difficult given the changing power dynamics in US-China relations. Under these circumstances, the domestic and foreign policies of South Korea’s current government under President Moon Jae-in has edged relatively toward China and North Korea, which stands in contrast to precedent administrations that maintained pro-US policies.


This situation is very similar to the geopolitical environment of the late Joseon Dynasty during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century where Korea had to make difficult decisions on which foreign power they should seek support from in the face of increasing Chinese and Japanese encroachment. This article analyzes the geopolitical environment together with Korea’s domestic and foreign policies during this period. By doing so, it draws meaningful implications for policies that can help foster a more favorable environment for the peaceful settlement and reunification of the Korean Peninsula today.

In conclusion, this article sees that the current tensions between the United States and China is a new version of the Great Game which is a hegemonic struggle between these two countries. Under such conditions, Seoul should carefully analyze the global order comprehensively, instead of focusing solely on Korea and its immediate neighbors. Here it would be prudent to avoid an ideologically-biased viewpoint. Based on this, it would be more effective for South Korea to adopt soft but stern diplomatic efforts that can adapt to changes in the global order. Such approaches can also help achieve a better future for Korea.

The public, the media, and various scholars have highlighted the victimized aspects of Korea that is sandwiched between stronger powers. However, this view should be revised and a better understanding is required on how Japan has enhanced its international influence by taking concerted action with the hegemonic powers before World War I. This signifies that by establishing proper diplomacy, Korea can also enjoy its improved global reputation. The global setting is not inherited, but created. In this regard, politicians should be prudent to deliberate what should be achieved in order to enhance the future of Korea, rather than how to ensure their own personal legacy.

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