

The Two Koreas after U.S. Unipolarity: In Search of a New North Korea Policy*

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The global and East Asian orders of power are now represented by China's economic, military, and diplomatic rise and America's decline. While U.S.-China relations represent a set of the most important variables in world politics, the meaning of China's rise is much greater on the Korean Peninsula. Given the recurring balance of power shift from the U.S. preponderance of power for the last two decades, it is necessary to rethink the security environment in the region. In this vein, South Korea may need to examine the meaning of the rise of China for the Korean Peninsula, especially with regard to the North Korean issue. In reality, China's rise has presented South Korea with a complex and difficult challenge in dealing with North Korea.

As a result of the rise of China and changes in Chinese-North Korean relations, the North Korean problem can no longer be seen from the post-Cold War framework of the 1990s. North Korea is now a nation strongly dependent on and supported by a rising China. Thus, it is high time for South Korea to think again about its North Korea policy. The South Korean government needs to reassess the changing balance of power on the Korean Peninsula and seek a new North Korea policy that can increase its influence on North Korea.

Keywords: *Balance of Power, U.S. Unipolarity, the Rise of China, North Korea, South Korea*

1. INTRODUCTION

The global and East Asian orders of power are now represented by China's economic, military, and diplomatic rise and America's decline (Martin, 2009; Ross and Zhu, 2008; Layne, 2012). The result is often called Chimerica or G2, leading to U.S.-China competition in every aspect of the international agenda (Ferguson, 2010). After the Bush administration's foreign policy in the first years of the millennium, when many scholars and policy makers focused on U.S. unipolarity or at least its preponderance of power after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the current state of affairs is a great change.¹ While U.S.-China relations represent a set of the most important variables in world politics, the meaning of China's rise is much greater in the East Asian regional order (Kang, 2007). The Korean Peninsula, of course, cannot escape from the influence of its neighbors (Hwang, 2011).

Although the world order of the 1990s saw the unprecedented economic prosperity and overwhelming military power of the United States, the recent order has been characterized

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¹ For America's unipolarity, see Ikenberry et al. (2011). For U.S. leadership despite its relative decline, see Brooks et al. (2012/13). For an argument for U.S. retrenchment, see Macdonald and Parent (2011).

by the relative decline of the United States and the fast and strong rise of China. The Chinese economy has grown more than 10 percent per year for the last thirty years and is now the world's second-largest economy, which again supports the fast and strong military buildup of China.

In this sense, this paper recognizes the end of U.S. unipolarity in international relations and tries to find out the meaning of the global changes on the Korean peninsula. First of all, this paper traces the changing balance of power between the U.S. and China in terms of those two great powers' military and capability. Second, it discusses South Korea's North Korea policies for the last 20 years after the end of the Cold War and tries to examine whether those policies based on the post-Cold War security framework during U.S. unipolarity are still relevant for the current Korean peninsula. Finally, this paper argues that it is necessary for the South Korean government to produce a new North Korea policy given the changing balance of power, which is one that can increase South Korea's leverage on North Korea while decreasing China's influence on the Korean peninsula.

2. CHANGING BALANCE OF POWER AFTER U.S. UNIPOLARITY

The Chinese GDP is still half that of the United States, as Table 1 shows, but it is not at all unheard of to say that China may economically catch up with the superpower by 2030 (National Intelligence Council, 2012). Moreover, China's trade with Northeast Asian countries is much larger than that of the United States.

As Table 2 shows, China's exports and imports with South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan are twice as large in most numbers when compared with those of the United States. Given America's economic recession and China's continued growth, the gap between the two is likely to get much larger. China's increasing economic interdependence with regional powers will have a great effect on the changing balance of power in the region, and will have a much greater effect on the Korean Peninsula (Snyder, 2009).

Table 1. GDPs in Northeast Asia, 2012 (trillion U.S. Dollars)

Country	U.S.	China	Japan	S. Korea
Amount	15.68	8.23	5.96	1.16

Source: International Monetary Fund (IMF)

Table 2. The United States and China's Trade in Northeast Asia, 2012 (billion U.S. dollars)

	Exports			Imports		
	S. Korea	Japan	Taiwan	S. Korea	Japan	Taiwan
U.S.	42	70	24	59	146	39
China	87	152	37	167	178	132

Source: Korean International Trade Association (KITA)

Table 3. Military Spending in Northeast Asia, 2011 (billion U.S. dollars)

Country	U.S.	China	Japan	S. Korea
Amount	711	143	59.3	27.6

Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)

On the other hand, China has also made every effort to build up its military capability (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2013). Supported by its strong economic growth, Chinese military spending has been hugely increased, at more than 10 percent per year on average. China spent 40 billion U.S. dollars in 2001, but it spent 143 billion in 2011, an increase of more than three times in ten years (SIPRI, 2012). Table 3 indicates that Chinese military spending is still less than one fifth compared to the American figure, but one must recognize that while the United States plans to cut its military spending in the next decade due to its budget deficit (U.S. Department of Defense, 2012a), China is certain to keep increasing its, unless its economy falls into deep trouble in the near future.

Furthermore, the military spending between the two countries cannot be compared just in nominal figures. While U.S. military power has been involved all over the world, including Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia, China has focused mainly on East Asia. The military rise of China therefore means that it exercises a much stronger influence on the Korean Peninsula than the figure shows. The United States has also been recently more concerned about China's military and security developments (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2011). With regard to their military and security policies, China has sought to improve its power projection and possess the capability of conducting a range of military operations in Asia well beyond that of Taiwan, as clearly shown in its aircraft carrier program.² In contrast, the United States, due to its economic difficulties, appears to be coping with the situation by strengthening its alliances with South Korea and Japan, encouraging its allies to increase their contribution to global and regional security.³

3. THE TWO KOREAS IN THE POST-COLD WAR SECURITY FRAMEWORK

Given the recurring balance of power shift from the U.S. preponderance of power for the last two decades, it is necessary to rethink the security environment in the region. In this vein, South Korea may need to examine the meaning of the rise of China for the Korean Peninsula, especially with regard to the North Korean issue. In reality, China's rise has presented South Korea with a complex and difficult challenge in dealing with North Korea, although China still appears to show its peaceful intention and behavior as a status quo power (Johnston, 2013).⁴ Most of all, South Korea's approach toward North Korea has so far been based on the post-Cold War regional security framework, which I call America's 'preponderance of

² For the possibility of crisis instability between the U.S. and China, irrespective of China's intention, see Goldstein (2013).

³ For the Obama administration's East Asia policy as a response of the rise of China, especially its so-called "Pivot," or "Rebalancing," see Bader (2012). For a critical argument on Obama's pivot, see Ross (2012).

⁴ See also Zheng (2005) and Wang (2005).

power' or 'unipolarity,'⁵ given that North Korea has lost its two Cold War patrons, the Soviet Union and China, and has been isolated and surrounded by an unfavorable security environment.⁶ The South Korean government has so far made good use of this favorable security environment and has pursued a strong and determined policy toward North Korea.

Since the end of the global Cold War in the early 1990s, every South Korean government has tried to persuade North Korea to change the nature of its regime by either engaging with it or punishing it. The Nordpolitik under the Rho Tae-woo government was the first active effort to bring about the collapse of the Cold War order on the Korean Peninsula and resolve the issues regarding the divided Korea (Sanford, 1993). The Kim Young-sam government had driven North Korea into a corner, hoping to see the collapse of the regime in the mid-1990s and reunify the two Koreas under South Korean leadership, especially after Kim Il-sung's death in 1994 (Wit et al., 2004). The Kim Dae-jung and Rho Moo-hyun governments sought to engage North Korea (Moon, 2012). This period is often called the Sunshine Policy era, but the two were not much different in that they intended to change the nature of the regime by a South Korean initiative. The Lee Myung-bak government had also pursued a further tough and determined North Korea policy supported by a strong Korea-U.S. alliance and has sought to force the North Korean regime to accept international norms and change its course of action (Kim, 2012).

On the other hand, North Korean leaders have recognized since the late 1980s that as the global Cold War is over, the balance of power on the Korean Peninsula has been moving against North Korea (Kim, 1992). Kim Il-sung reassessed North Korea's security environment in the process of the Soviet collapse and China's shift. He could choose to face the changing balance of power, in international relations terms, with internal balancing and bandwagoning (Morrow, 1993). The former involved a domestic arms build-up, while the latter was approaches to Cold War enemies like the United States, Japan, and South Korea. North Korea could not rely on external balancing because it could not find a new ally comparable to its former allies, who were no longer very active in guaranteeing extended deterrence. For internal balancing, North Korea concentrated on the development of a nuclear weapons program because it could not afford to carry out a conventional arms race (Sigal, 1998). For bandwagoning, North Korea made contact with the United States and Japan in the late 1980s and the early 1990s in an effort to get out of its unfavorable post-Cold War security framework by establishing diplomatic relations with its former enemies, but this effort failed due to lack of interest and trust.⁷ North Korea also sought to improve relations with South Korea and produced the Inter-Korean Basic Agreement and the Joint Declaration of Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in 1991, but they could not guarantee the peace and stability of the Korean Peninsula.⁸

North Korea's dual approach of pursuing both internal balancing and bandwagoning could not be accepted in international society due to the evident conflict of interest. If North Korea really wanted to get along with the United States and South Korea, it had to give up its

⁵ For the usage of the word, 'preponderance of power', see Leffler (1992). For the meaning of 'unipolarity', see Ikenberry et al. (2011).

⁶ For a detailed account of the security environment on the Korean peninsula after the end of the Cold War and two Koreas' policy, see Oberdorfer (2001).

⁷ For a detailed account of North Korea's efforts to reach out to the U.S. see Sigal (1998) and Oberdorfer (2001).

⁸ See also Sigal (1998) and Oberdorfer (2001).

nuclear weapons program, but it could not do so because it perceived that its nuclear weapons program was its last resort for regime survival. What North Korea learned from Iraq was that Saddam Hussein could not secure his regime when he gave up his nuclear weapons program. As a matter of fact, Pyongyang stated that “the Iraq war taught us that it is inevitable that we will possess strong material deterrence in order to prevent war and defend the country’s security and national sovereignty” (Rodong Sinmun, 2003). However, the problem remains that if the North Korean regime keeps its nuclear program going, it will have no chance of approaching the United States and South Korea and getting out of the security dilemma on the Korean Peninsula (Hwang, 2011a). In short, North Korea’s mindset and perception after the Cold War has been quite defensive and passive under the unfavorable balance of power on the peninsula (Kang, 1995; Kang, 2003).

4. THE RISE OF CHINA AND NORTH KOREA’S GROWING DEPENDENCE

As a result of the rise of China and changes in Chinese-North Korean relations, the North Korean problem can no longer be seen from the post-Cold War framework of the 1990s. Although the recent East Asian security framework is not a new Cold War rivalry with the United States, Japan, and South Korea on the one side, and China, Russia, and North Korea on the other side, North Korea is not an isolated nation any longer. It is now a nation strongly dependent on and supported by a rising China.⁹ Of course, China perceives North Korea neither as it did during the Cold War nor as North Korea now wants China to perceive it (Oh, 2011). Rather, China seeks to take advantage of North Korean issues strategically in facing its challenges, especially its relations with the United States (Lankov, 2012). North Korea also appears to make use of the Chinese position and tries to use it to get out of its internal and external dilemmas.

What embarrasses South Korea most is that as North Korea’s dependence on China gets bigger, its dependence on South Korea gets smaller.¹⁰ North Korea’s increasing dependence on China is in part a natural result of China’s rise in East Asia, but it is also because North Korea is getting less dependent on South Korea. This situation must mean that while China’s influence on North Korea is growing, South Korea’s influence is getting weaker. As Keohane and Nye explain,¹¹ asymmetric interdependence can be the origin of power. It implies that as North Korea’s sensitivity and vulnerability to China are getting larger, so is China’s influence on North Korea. In order to balance against China’s growing influence on North Korea, South Korea should also seek to lead North Korea to depend more on South Korea, but the reality is exactly the opposite.

Table 4 and Table 5 indicate that North Korea’s economic dependence on South Korea has recently been decreasing. While North Korea’s trade with South Korea has been increasing overall, the rate of the rise has stagnated since 2008. South Korea’s economic aid to North Korea has been recently cut in one twentieth for the last five years of the Lee Myung-bak government. These data clearly mean that North Korea has become economically less dependent on South Korea than before, which implies that South Korea’s

⁹ Regarding a change in Sino-North Korean relations, see Snyder (2009) Ch. 4 “China’s Evolving Economic and Political Relations with North Korea”.

¹⁰ See Hwang (2011b).

¹¹ See Keohane and Nye (1977).

Table 4. North Korea's Trade with South Korea (million U.S. dollars)

Year	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Exports	340	520	765	932	934	1,044	914
Imports	715	830	1,032	888	745	868	800
Total	1,055	1,350	1,798	1,820	1,679	1,912	1,714

Source: Ministry of Unification (2013a)

Table 5. South Korea's Economic Aid to North Korea (billion Korean won)

Year	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Governmental	315	227	349	44	29	20	7
Non-governmental	78	71	91	73	38	20	13
Total	393	298	440	117	67	40	20

Source: Ministry of Unification (2013b)

Table 6. North Korea's Trade with China (million U.S. dollars)

Year	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Exports	496	467	581	754	1,887	1,187	2,464
Imports	1,084	1,231	1,392	2,033	793	2,277	3,165
Total	1,580	1,699	1,973	2,787	2,680	3,465	5,629

Source: Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA)

economic influence on North Korea is weakening.

Conversely, Table 6 shows that North Korea's economic dependence on China is growing quickly. North Korea's trade with China has more than doubled during the Lee Myung-bak government,¹² and is likely to be increasing continuously. In reality, North Korea has recently made up for the decrement from South Korea with an increment from China. North Korea is thus now economically much more dependent on China than on South Korea, which will lead to a difference in economic influence on North Korea.

Of course, the growing Chinese influence but weakening South Korean influence on North Korea has not just occurred in the economic area. The Chinese influence is also much stronger in diplomatic and military areas. If South Korea wants to have a strong initiative on the Korean Peninsula in an era of a changing balance of power as it has had for the last two decades, South Korea itself should make every effort to enlarge its influence over North Korea. The security environment favorable to South Korea on the Korean Peninsula after the end of the Cold War resulted from the U.S. preponderance of power in East Asia, but the balance of power in the region appears to have become less advantageous for South Korea.

¹² North Korea's import from China in 2009 was cut in half, but it is presumed to be a temporary one that resulted from China's economic sanction against North Korea's second nuclear test in May 2009. Its import from China was restored in 2010.

Thus, it is high time for South Korea to think again about its North Korea policy (Ha and Jo, 2010). The South Korean government needs to reassess the changing balance of power on the Korean Peninsula and seek a new North Korea policy that can increase its influence on North Korea.

5. SEEKING A NEW NORTH KOREA POLICY AFTER U.S. UNIPOLARITY

After Kim Jong-il's sudden death in December 2011, North Korea has been more dependent on China as the new leadership cannot help but seek China's support in order to stabilize the North Korean society. However, it is not in the South Korean interest to let North Korea keep increasing its dependence on China and let China keep increasing its influence over North Korea. China's growing influence over North Korea will inevitably lead to its leverage on the whole Korean Peninsula and also affect South Korea-China relations, not only with regard to the North Korean issue but also with regard to South Korea's strategic choice between the United States and China. Some may argue that even the changing balance of power between the United States and China does not challenge South Korea's strategic choice of the post-Cold War security environment in East Asia because the Obama administration has declared that the U.S. is the Asia-Pacific country and pursue the 'pivot to Asia' or 'rebalancing' in East Asia (Clinton, 2011).¹³ It is not true because the changes in balance of power in East Asia results not only from the relative decline of the U.S, but also from China's fast rise in military and economic areas. Thus, if South Korea wants to keep its initiative on the Korean Peninsula in spite of the changing balance of power in East Asia, it needs to balance against China's influence over North Korea. In order to balance against China's influence, South Korea should seek to enlarge its influence over North Korea by encouraging the North to depend more and more on the South Korean side.

However, North Korea will be very reluctant to increase its dependence on South Korea under such a changing balance of power. Because the rise of China and the decline of the United States in East Asia is a less unfavorable security environment for North Korea compared with the post-Cold War framework, it is more likely to avoid the further increase of South Korean and U.S. influence. North Korea, of course, would not want China to have a strong influence on it either, but it will seek to make use of China to confront South Korea and the United States. In short, North Korea will build up its negotiating capability by taking advantage of the new balance of power in East Asia. For example, as shown in the cases of the sinking of the South Korean corvette *Cheonan* and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in 2010, North Korea will try to escalate the tension between the United States and China regarding the issues of the Korean Peninsula. If the Six-Party Talks resume in the future after their long period of suspension since December 2008, North Korea is more likely to insist on its demands and stand firm by highlighting the conflict of positions between the United States and China.

In order to cope with the changing balance of power in East Asia and North Korea's new balancing behavior, South Korea must make every effort to enlarge its common perspective with China. South Korea should be ready to talk with China on the future of North Korea and the Korean Peninsula. It will be significant to plan how to persuade China to share its perceptions and policies with South Korea. If China perceives South Korea to be a more

¹³ See also U.S. Department of Defense (2012b).

important player than North Korea in East Asia, it will be easier to persuade China to rethink the denuclearization and reunification of the Korean Peninsula, which will serve Chinese interests in the long run. Given the meaning of asymmetric interdependence as a source of power, the South Korean government should seek to upgrade Korean-Chinese relations and lead China to depend more on South Korea not only economically but also strategically, because the Chinese influence on the South as well as on the North will grow if North Korea's dependence on China increases asymmetrically.

On the other hand, it is necessary for South Korea to lead North Korea to depend more on South Korea than on China. If North Korea is getting more dependent on South Korea, South Korea will have more leverage on the issues of the Korean Peninsula and it will be easier to persuade China to agree to South Korean initiatives. Increasing South Korea's influence on North Korea while decreasing China's influence is how South Korea should respond to the rise of China in East Asia.

This is the impact of the changing East Asian balance of power on the Korean Peninsula and on South Korea's North Korea policy. Whatever the South Korean government's North Korea policy is, either engagement or sanctions, it is the issue of how to respond to the rise of China on the Korean Peninsula that will determine the success or failure of the South Korean government's North Korea policy (Park, 2011).¹⁴ Because the favorable balance of power for the South Korean side is finished, the South Korean government cannot enjoy the initiative any longer on the Korean Peninsula that was provided by the U.S. preponderance of power after the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s. Although the South Korea-U.S. alliance is still the bottom line of South Korea's North Korea policy, the changing balance of power represents a serious challenge to the South with regard to how to deal with the rise of China on the Korean Peninsula.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The North Korean issue may not be one which can be solved simply by changing the international community or the South Korean government's North Korea policy. One of the most serious problems with the previous North Korea policies, however, is that they lack programs that would transform the North Korean regime given the changing balance of power in international relations.

Meanwhile, the possibility of the problem's being successfully resolved by the North Korean leadership by promoting a different autonomous reform program in the Chinese or Vietnamese style is rather low due to the North Korean domestic situation and the security environment on the Korean Peninsula. Even if North Korean leaders try to reform their system, there would be heightened socioeconomic instability in the beginning stages of reform, due to the loosened grip on internal politics, so the leaders would feel increasingly threatened by their relative weakness compared to the strong South Korean society. Therefore for the successful resolution of the North Korean issue, there must be a linked strategy in and out of North Korea that consists of North Korea's giving up its nuclear

¹⁴ Interestingly, the South Korean president Geun-hye Park, when she was a presidential candidate, raised the need to produce a new kind of North Korea policy that emphasizes more balanced position. However, she does not seem to think enough of the impact of the rise of China on the Korean peninsula and South Korea's North Korea policy.

weapons and promoting an autonomous reform program, while South Korea and international society simultaneously ensure and support its safety.¹⁵ This is why the South Korean government should pay much attention to the changing balance of power on the Korean peninsula and come up with a new North Korea policy that increase the South's leverage on the North's perception and decision making procedure.

It is not a completely new approach. Despite certain defects, former President Kim Dae-jung's 'Sunshine Policy' and Lee Myung-bak's 'Vision 3,000' both aim for internal change in North Korea and simultaneous support from the international community. The current Korean President Park Geun-hye's Trustpolitik also follows suit. Those approaches are, however, based on the post-Cold War security framework on the Korean Peninsula, on the premise that the United States still enjoys the unipolarity in global arena. Of course, the balance of power on the Korean peninsula is not unfavorable to the South Korean part yet, but it is clearly changing and is expected to be less favorable than before.

The discussions on the peace regime on the Korean Peninsula during the Six-Party Talks follow the same context, because it has reflected more and more the changing balance of power between the U.S. and China. The discussion on the peace regime is bound to take on a limited form unless the changes in international relations are considered. With the absence of mutual trust between the two great powers around the Korean Peninsula, a more fundamental strategy that satisfies both sides is not possible.

Advocating a new North Korea policy of both engaging the U.S. and China may seem reckless and unrealistic, but the current environment surrounding the Korean Peninsula is actually quite favorable for implementing such a new policy and resolving the North Korean issue despite the seemingly unfavorable situation. It becomes clearer if we understand that North Korea is facing a three-fold problem of nuclear, economic, and leadership crisis, while its external behavior puts more burdens on China's North Korea policy. Of course, to resolve the North Korean problem requires a fundamental reform in all sectors including politics, international relations, the economy, and the socio-cultural realm as well as the nuclear issue (Chun, 2009). In order to produce a new North Korea policy, the South Korean government should find out how to lead North Korea to achieve fundamental reform and abandon its military-first policy. South Korea cannot depend on China's influence on North Korea to achieve this task. Given North Korea's political situation, unless change in the political structure comes first, there is a very low chance that nuclear weapons will be given up and economic reforms will be carried out. However, China is less likely to seek to change the North Korea political structure because it is seen to be a sovereignty issue.

In this context, it is necessary that the South Korean government aims to make North Korea decide its strategy regarding nuclear weapons and economic reforms during its process of achieving the regime stability. Such a strategy aims for an eventual shift from a 'military-first policy' to an 'economy-first policy.' This can be done not by Chinese but by Korean influence on North Korea. It is why the Korean government should pursue the North Korea policy that strengthens its leverage on North Korea.

Given the changing balance of power on the Korean peninsula, it is also necessary to resolve the problem of 'excess security' caused by the military tension between the two Koreas. In order to achieve this difficult task, the South Korean government should come up with a new North Korean policy that would increase the North's dependence on the South. The first step for this is to rethink the changes in the balance of power after the end of U.S.

¹⁵ See Hwang (2011a).

unipolarity in world politics and seek to use the changing relations between the U.S. and China in the future.

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