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Old Walled Politics or New Pandemic Peace? Lessons from South Korea's Fight against Covid-19

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Battling Covid-19

Cover Story

Cover Story

Lessons from Asia's Range of Responses

Following the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic early this year, the healthcare crisis in Asia is now centered on the policy responses being taken by individual governments, tailored to the different challenges each faces. Some have fared better than others.

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Old Walled Politics or New Pandemic Peace?

Lessons from South Korea

By Seung-Youn Oh

Among the global pandemic's effects is the way it has exposed the re-emergence of medieval-style walled politics, where countries reject international or regional co-operation and retreat into nationalist, go-it-alone approaches.

At the same time, the crisis has revealed unusual opportunities to forge common approaches to battling this invisible enemy. South Korea, as a middle power that stood out as an early success story in the pandemic fight, has played an important role in countering the politics of the past, writes Seung-Youn Oh.

THE WORLD is at an inflection point with the Covid-19 outbreak, which has unleashed the most challenging international public health crisis in living memory. The accompanying economic shutdowns induced a global economic contraction with an immediate and catastrophic impact on demand, supply and financial liquidity. National and global leaders have been dealt a serious stress test in the face of this invisible enemy. Non-traditional security issues like Covid-19 demand an unprecedented level of global collaboration among state and non-state actors.

Regrettably, what remains truly global is the virus itself, which does not respect any boundaries. With the return of intensified great power rivalries, multilateralism has given way to unilateralism. In the absence of global leadership, states have pursued their narrowly defined self-interest by adopting a number of trade and investment restrictions, and divergent policy approaches. Calls to roll back globalization and economic interdependence are growing stronger in developed countries. Exclusionary nationalist attitudes and beggar-thy-neighbor policies have returned to the global political stage with a vengeance.

The global pandemic has already altered the world as we know it, but the long-term consequences of unrestrained power competition and parochial nationalism will have further-reaching implications than the immediate responses by countries to the pandemic itself. The deepening US-China rivalry had led to particularly strong concerns for East Asia, with threats including the construction of trade barriers within the Asia-Pacific region and a new nuclear arms race.

Escalating tensions between the two titans will heighten the already severe dilemma among middle power countries such as South Korea, which sit uncomfortably between their most significant military patron in Washington and their largest economic partner in Beijing.

What impact will the pandemic have on relations among East Asian countries? How should South Korea navigate through this challenging time without sacrificing either economic growth or military security? And how can countries harness *nationalism* as a unifying force and a stepping stone toward *internationalism* rather than allowing it to serve as a divisive ideology?

RETURNING TO PAST POLITICS?

The pandemic arrived at a time when the world was already struggling to recover from US-China trade disputes, growing trade protectionism, falling commodity and energy prices, and economic uncertainties in Europe over Brexit. Instead of serving as a unifying force, the Covid crisis has disrupted the global order developed during the 20th century, reversed the process of globalization and brought international relations back to a system of walled cities similar to the medieval era.¹ The absence of national and global leadership has driven states and people toward a self-help approach.

The intensifying power competition between the US and China significantly complicates international efforts to respond to Covid-19. In the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis, the US and China worked together at the G-20 to ensure that governments did not worsen the crisis by engaging in competitive currency devaluation or increased protectionism. Yet the Trump administration has shown no interest in maintaining America's traditional role in leading global health initiatives, preferring instead to pursue "America First" or "American Only" policies.

¹ Henry Kissinger, "The Coronavirus Pandemic Will Forever Alter the World Order," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 3, 2020.

² Ian Bremmer and Nouriel Roubini, "A G-Zero World: The New Economic Club Will Produce Conflict, Not Co-operation," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90 No. 2 (2011): pp. 2-7. Accessed Aug. 2, 2020.

China's diplomacy, meanwhile, has been counterproductive at best, as Beijing has missed golden opportunities to prove its commitment to multilateralism. China not only suffered from a global trust deficit due to its lack of transparency around the initial outbreak of the virus in Wuhan. It also lost face with its "face-mask diplomacy" — when some of the medical equipment it shipped to foreign countries turned out to be defective. Beijing's "wolf warrior diplomacy" — a term describing Chinese diplomats' efforts to defend China's national interests — has backfired, because it has focused primarily on propagating the purported strength of the Chinese system rather than building greater multilateral trust.

Multilateralism is on the wane, embroiled in the diplomatic tussle between Washington and Beijing. Washington withdrew from the World Health Organization on the grounds of the organization's partiality to China and its slow-footed response to Covid-19. Beijing has not demonstrated any better leadership in coordinating a multilateral response to the pandemic. At the Coronavirus Global Response Summit in May, high-level officials from more than 50 countries pledged US\$8 billion for the joint development of coronavirus vaccines. Neither the US nor China showed leadership at the summit. Washington did not send a representative, and Beijing only sent its ambassador to the EU instead of Premier Li Keqiang. Neither country pledged any financial support to international Covid-19 relief efforts. Far from being the G-2 world that was promised at the beginning of the 21st century, with the US and China working together on issues of international importance, we now live in a G-Zero world marked by a global leadership vacuum.²

In the face of eroding global leadership, politicians of all stripes are spinning the pandemic to their own ends — to promote regime stabil-

3 Peter Hayes and Kiho Yi, Eds, *Complexity, Security and Civil Society in East Asia: Foreign Policies and the Korean Peninsula* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2015). Accessed Aug. 2, 2020.

ity in authoritarian countries or to win upcoming election battles in democratic ones. They play the nationalist card and scapegoat others to deflect blame about their own handling of the crisis. The public jumps on these nationalist bandwagons to channel their fears and anxieties, driven by racism, xenophobia or fear of economic loss. In the process, scientists are often sidelined; misinformation and fake news spread like wildfire, complicating the fight against the pandemic.

The domestic political considerations driving countries' foreign policy will make the road to post-Covid recovery in East Asia much rockier. US President Donald Trump will continue to bash China as he heads into a tough re-election campaign. The idea of the "great decoupling" — separating the American economy from China — has gained traction beyond the likes of Peter Navarro, the controversial China skeptic who serves as one of Trump's economic advisers. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo framed the US-China fight as the ultimate clash of civilizations in his July 23 address titled "Communist China and the Free World's Future."

China's President Xi Jinping, meanwhile, will not make concessions when the global economic shocks have hurt his country's already debt-laden economy and challenged a political system that derives its legitimacy from economic performance. His vision of a "China Dream" involves the achievement of *Xiaokang* — a "well-off society" that has doubled its per capita income between 2010 and 2020. *Xiaokang* requires an annual GDP growth rate of at least 5.6 percent, but China's economy shrank by 6.8 per cent in the first quarter of 2020. This year marks the first time Beijing has not set a GDP target since 1990. President Xi will be pressured to stabilize China's political and economic situation leading up to 2021, which marks the centenary of the Chinese Communist Party.

RISE OF A NEW PANDEMIC PEACE?

What kind of challenges and opportunities does the US-China great-power rivalry hold for East Asia? In the post-pandemic world, are we going to witness a fundamental readjustment in the region's geopolitical landscape? East Asia has been dubbed as "more of an anti-region than a community" — where varying political interests, stages of economic development and alliance politics have hampered regional co-operation.³ Yet the ongoing fight to save both lives and livelihoods calls for closer collaboration and greater collective action. As neighbors, China, Japan and the two Koreas share a common interest in both traditional and non-traditional security issues that transcend national boundaries.

First, North Korea's nuclear threat is a traditional security concern that requires a shared regional solution. In the early stages of the pandemic, Pyongyang marked its busiest month for missile launches in the country's history, with a total of eight short-range missile tests conducted in March. Kim Jong Un's three-week disappearance from public view — coupled with exchanges of gunfire across the Korean Peninsula's demilitarized zone in May — further complicate strategic uncertainties.

Second, in terms of the economy, the pandemic exposed the dangers of making China such an essential link in regional and global supply chains. The economic disruptions highlighted the national security implications of reshoring strategic industries and designing redundancy into supply chains. States and firms are bound to promote diversified supply chains as a result of Covid-19. Yet the most likely change will involve further localization and regionalization of production rather than *de*-globalization, full-scale reshoring or a great decoupling of the economic world between the Anglosphere and the Sinosphere.



Facial recognition: Members of the Environmental Health Citizens' Association of Korea wear coronavirus masks in a campaign to prevent the spread of Covid-19 in Seoul in late March. The campaign slogan is 'Healthy You, Healthy Me, Healthy Neighbor, Healthy Family, Healthy Country and Healthy Neighboring Country.' Photo: Jeon Heon-kyun/EPA

In fact, developments happening before the coronavirus outbreak had prompted South Korea to begin the process of economic realignment by strategically pursuing its "China plus one" and "Japan-free" strategies to redistribute the risks deriving from political tensions in East Asia. The "China plus one" strategy was adopted in response to Beijing's all-out economic retaliation against South Korean firms in 2017 following Seoul's decision to install the US-provided Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-missile system. The "Japan free" strategy was a byproduct of Tokyo's export ban on key

chemicals for the manufacture of advanced semiconductors following a 2019 Korean Supreme Court verdict in favor of the surviving Korean victims of forced labor during Japan's colonial rule of Korea from 1910 to 1945.

China and Japan's economic sanctions against South Korea ironically ended up demonstrating the tight-knit trade and investment ties among the three countries. When Beijing placed sanctions against South Korean final goods, it continued to import intermediate goods (such as microchips and electronic components), which represented 78 percent of all South Korean exports to

⁴ The concept first gained wide currency through the UN Development Program in its 1994 Human Development Report.

China. In fact, South Korea's overall exports to China increased by 12.4 percent in 2017 and its semiconductor exports increased by 30.4 percent. Japan's export restrictions on South Korea actually hurt Japanese companies more than Korean ones. Japanese companies lost 23 percent of their exports during the first 100 days of the dispute, while South Korean companies experienced a 13.9 percent decrease.

China, Japan and South Korea together represent around 24 percent of the entire world economy. With a combined yearly trading volume of more than US\$720 billion, they form one of the most integrated economic blocs in the world. Post-pandemic economic readjustments could provide a golden opportunity to develop tighter regional supply chains through near-shoring and to co-operate on establishing regional stockpiles of key medical supplies. The Japanese government rolled out a US\$2.2 billion repatriation package in April to help Japanese manufacturers move out of China, but that is a drop in the bucket compared to total Japanese investment in China. Thus, instead of taking an alarmist approach, strategic adjustment in trade and investment policies between Japan and China should be pursued as "positive-sum" regionalization encompassing Southeast Asia rather than "zero-sum" mercantilism.

The last area for co-operation is non-traditional security, where East Asian countries can work together to prepare for tomorrow's pandemics or other transnational threats through multilateral collaboration. In an address marking the third anniversary of his inauguration in May, South Korean President Moon Jae-in stressed "human security" that prioritizes people's lives and safety as one of South Korea's main priorities moving forward from the Covid-19 outbreak.⁴ Unlike a Clausewitzian concept of traditional security that emphasizes state actors

South Korea's domestic success in combating the Covid-19 pandemic has renewed its bona fides as a responsible middle power. The country earned global recognition not just for what it did but also for what it did *not* do.

First, it did not place a comprehensive travel ban on China and maintained close communication channels with Chinese leaders. Second, it did not impose aggressive lockdowns in the top-heavy way that China did. Third, it demonstrated its commitment to multilateralism by sharing its experiences widely.

⁵ "Tackling Covid-19 Health, Quarantine and Economic Measures: Korean Experience," South Korean government report, March 31, 2020, at english.moef.go.kr/pc/selectTbPressCenterDtl.do?boardCd=N0001&seq=4868; "Tracking and Tracing Covid: Protecting Privacy and Data while Using Apps and Biometrics," Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, Apr. 23, 2020, at

www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/tracking-and-tracing-covid-protecting-privacy-and-data-while-using-apps-and-biometrics-8f394636/; Flattening the Curve on Covid-19: How Korea Responded to a Pandemic Using ICT, South Korean government report, May 11, 2020, at www.undp.org/content/seoul_policy_center/en/home/presscenter/articles/2019/flattening-the-curve-on-Covid-19.html

and military threats, human security highlights the complex sources of insecurity that are transnational in scope and non-military in nature. As close neighbors, East Asian countries have experienced the debilitating transnational impact of infectious diseases and natural disasters together. The Korea-Japan-China Trilateral Summit, formed in 2008 as a venue to address such problems, can be expanded at various levels for comprehensive risk reduction and collaboration. The need to deal with traditional and non-traditional security issues in East Asia may help transform the concept of regional community-building from an elusive dream to an achievable reality in the post-pandemic world.

MIDDLE-POWER ACTIVISM

In moving away from the "walled politics" of the Covid-19 era, middle-power countries should do more to champion multilateralism and regionalism. Caught between China's state capitalism and America's unilateralism, South Korea is a middle power that understands the mounting dilemma coming from geopolitical competition. While great powers define the overall contours of the geopolitical landscape, middle powers are not passive spectators waiting for their fate to be determined by the system-level power game. They are weaker than the great powers, but powerful enough to play pivotal roles in establishing and maintaining the regional balance of power.

South Korea's domestic success in combating the Covid-19 pandemic has renewed its bona fides as a responsible middle power. The country earned global recognition not just for what it did — combating the virus based on the strong "3T system" of test, trace, and treat — but also for what it did *not* do. First, South Korea did not place a comprehensive travel ban on China and maintained close communication channels with Chi-

nese leaders in order to discuss necessary travel accommodations and restrictions. Second, South Korea did not impose aggressive lockdowns in the top-heavy way that China did, showcasing the importance of leadership, transparency and public-private partnerships. With Korea's Center for Disease and Prevention as the national command center, public and private actors worked together on the expedited development of test kits and drive-through test stations that set a standard that other countries have endeavored to follow. The authorities' commitment to clear crisis communication enabled the key actors to work together on controlling the epidemic and establishing public trust. Third, South Korea demonstrated its commitment to multilateralism by sharing its experiences widely with the World Bank, the United Nations Development Program and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.⁵

South Korea's internal success in reining in the outbreak provided the country's leaders with political space to cultivate a liberal and open version of nationalism instead of resorting to the nationalist rhetoric that is often used in a time of crisis to channel public fear and anger outwards. The South Korean people affirmed this approach by awarding the ruling party a historic landslide victory in the National Assembly elections in April, with the country's highest-reported voter turnout in 28 years. With such strong support at home, South Korea seized the opportunity to collaborate with regional and international actors on a range of diplomatic initiatives. President Moon called for international solidarity to combat the virus at the G-20 and WHO annual meetings, while exchanging phone calls with leaders of 29 countries. Seoul has opened new diplomatic channels with African countries through bilateral aid and collaboration among infectious disease organizations. President Moon and

⁶ Justin Trudeau, Sahle-Work Zewde, Moon Jae-in, Jacinda Ardern, Cyril Ramaphosa, Pedro Sánchez Pérez-Castejón, Stefan Lofven and Elyes Fakhfak, "The International Community Must Guarantee Equal Global Access to A Covid-19 Vaccine," *The Washington Post*, July 15, 2020.

seven other world leaders co-authored an opinion piece in *The Washington Post* to underscore their commitment to multilateralism and equitable global access to coronavirus vaccines.⁶ This middle power coalition is playing a proactive role in offsetting the crippling impacts of great power rivalry and pushing back against the rhetoric of "with us or against us."

As recent sour interactions between Seoul and Tokyo demonstrate, the ability to manage a sometimes testy relationship is an essential aspect of middle-power activism. South Korea and Japan's tit-for-tat halt on visa-free entry in March hinted at nationalism rearing its ugly head due to unresolved historical tensions between the two countries. When mutual distrust runs high at the state level, sub-national and private actors can generate a way to bridge differences. For example, the City of Gyeongju in South Korea provided medical gear to its Japanese sister cities, Nara and Kyoto, when the national governments in Seoul and Tokyo were slow to co-operate due to their history of tensions. This kind of public partnership below the state level can help take Covid-19 diplomacy to the next level — strengthening regional co-operation and providing a stepping stone away from inward-looking nationalism and toward greater internationalism.

CONCLUSION

We may be standing at the crossroads of a historically decisive make-or-break moment for today's global system of political and economic co-operation. History tells us that when countries pulled up their drawbridges and embraced economic nationalism, the result was war, devastation and destruction. The current pandemic did not stem from competition between states or shifts in the balance of power. Yet politicization of the virus and domestic insecurity have shaken faith in global economic integration and

political collaboration. Return to the old walled politics is a risky path for all because exclusionary nationalism in the region will further widen the cracks that already existed due to unresolved historical memories, different regime types and alliance politics.

Nationalism is not always a divisive ideology. It can be a force for solidarity during a crisis and instill a sense of community that is much needed in the war against Covid-19. Each nation's approach to the pandemic within its own boundaries will largely determine whether a nation turns inward or outward after the recovery. Governments that do the best job defeating the pandemic will earn political capital in international relations; those that fail will take an adverse turn toward protectionism.

The world needs foresight and united action against an invisible and debilitating threat, not reactive blame-shifting and myopia. This fight is too critical to be subsumed by geopolitical power games. It is also bigger than the G2 relationship between China and the US. With global leadership in limbo, it is time for middle power countries to help build a road toward peace.

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