



Explaining Korea's Positioning in the US–China Strategic Competition

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INTRODUCTION

South Korea (formally the Republic of Korea) is a focal point in the US–China rivalry. The country, which historically perceives itself as a victim of foreign powers (Kang 2010; Kondoch 2010), today is more and more being squeezed in the great-power conflict, involving its main security partner, the US, and its main economic partner, China. The US increasingly sees its bilateral alliances in Asia, including the one with South Korea, as instruments to manage the China challenge (see Ford and Goldgeier 2021; Overhaus and Sakaki 2021). Washington wants Seoul to join new security cooperation formats that it promotes with allies and partners in the region, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) or the US-led Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP) (Pacheco Pardo 2021; Li 2021). It is continuously increasing the pressure on Seoul to align its security and foreign policies in the region with its own.

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China warns South Korea against such closer, expanded security cooperation with the US and US allies (see, for example, Park 2021; Mai 2021; Zhang and Mai 2021). As the world's second-largest economy since 2010 and South Korea's most important trading partner since 2004, Beijing has shown itself to be both capable of and willing to use its growing economic clout over Seoul to coerce it to change its behavior in Beijing's interest. To oppose the installation of a US anti-missile system on South Korean territory,¹ China in 2016 launched a massive, year-long economic boycott campaign. The dispute ended with South Korea under President Moon Jae-in (2017–2022) agreeing to commit to military constraints to end China's unofficial sanctions against important segments of its economy (Lee 2017).² China is closely watching South Korea after its 2022 presidential election. The Beijing-Seoul relationship might turn more confrontational under the new, "pro-US" president Yoon Suk-yeol, whose key electoral promises included another purchase of the US anti-missile system and steps toward Quad membership.

Given South Korea's pivotal role in the security order of Northeast Asia, the US and China are expected to keep raising pressure on South Korea to distinctively position itself in their rivalry. This chapter examines factors at three levels of analysis to understand the country's positioning: (1) the international political context, which defines the country's broad strategic options, (2) national political leadership and changes therein, which exert important influence when international conditions permit, and (3) public opinion, which has had a growing impact on South Korea's foreign policymaking ever since the country democratized in the late 1980s. An understanding of these factors and levels allows us in a further step to analyze South Korea's past and present strategic positioning between the US and China.

As the rivalry intensified over the past years, South Korea's strategy has been to accommodate both great powers and to avoid taking sides. The analysis of this chapter shows that this is consistent with the country's positioning since the end of the Cold War. While the strategy of accommodation and "dual hedging" has been successful in the past, it is likely to

¹ The Terminal High Altitude Area Defense anti-missile system (THAAD) is designed to protect against security threats from the North, but China argued that its powerful radar could be used to spy on mainland China.

² Chinese sanctions targeted the entertainment, tourism, car, and cosmetics industries.

come under pressure in future. Policymakers in South Korea face an international environment that increasingly constrains their strategic options. At the same time, they are confronted with shifts in domestic perceptions, turning increasingly critical of China. Combined, these factors suggest that South Korea is likely to adopt more critical positions toward China in future. The 2022 election of a new South Korean president, who had distinguished himself with anti-Chinese rhetoric, might be an early indication of this. However, chances remain low that the country will abandon its current hedging strategy and join the US in actively balancing against China.

South Korea's Strategic Choices: Perspectives in the Literature

The Role of the International Context: The Dominant View in Literature

Explanations focusing on large geostrategic forces dominate the literature on South Korea's strategic positioning. The country's strategic options were in a historical perspective very limited and by large defined by the international political context. Of particular relevance in this regard was the country's immediate geopolitical environment. Its "geographic location at the vortex of great-power rivalry in Northeast Asia" made the country "a victim of the tragedy of great-power politics" (Snyder 2018: 1). Surrounded by much more powerful neighbors, Korean rulers, in the past, had few means to influence their strategic environment. Illustrations of this are abundant. They include the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895, the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905, and the resulting imposition of Japanese colonial rule on the Korean Peninsula (1910–1945)—as well as the liberation of the Peninsula at the end of World War II (WWII), its division, and the Korean War (1950–1953). In the latter case, the US and the Soviet Union, along with China, confronted each other.

With US engagement in Northeast Asia at the end of WWII and during the Cold War, new strategic options opened up for South Korea (Snyder 2018). As an external actor to the region, the US not only guaranteed South Korea's military security, and thereby its existence in a hostile regional environment, but also helped the poor country develop economically through investments and access to the US market. South Korea has not only benefitted from its direct bilateral ties with the US, but more generally from its integration into what is commonly referred to as the rules-based, liberal international order that emerged after WWII under

US leadership. While military and economic dependence on the US was strong in this initial period, this changed in the following decades with the country's growing military and economic capabilities. In the late 1980s, South Korea also made its political transition to a democracy (Kim 2000).

With the end of the Cold War and China's economic rise, strategic options for South Korea and other small and middle powers in the region expanded further. Most of the 1990s and 2000s marked an era of strategic equilibrium in East Asia, with a stable US–China relationship at its core (Liow 2020: 217). The countries in the region benefited from the co-presence of the two great powers, allowing their economies to prosper. As the dominant military power, the US has continued to provide peace and stability to the region and, therefore, relied on its bilateral alliance system, put in place in the early 1950s. The US–South Korean mutual defense treaty, for example, has been effective since 1954. At the same time, China's spectacular economic growth and its fast-developing market have offered new opportunities to neighboring economies. China has become the growth engine of the region and increasingly the center of trade and investment flows. Over the last two decades, China overtook the US to become the main trading partner of South Korea, Japan, and most Southeast Asian countries.

Starting in the 2010s, US–China relations in East Asia have become more strained, political, and confrontational, once again narrowing strategic options for countries in the region. China's growing economic power and its rising political and military ambitions, particularly manifest under Xi Jinping's political leadership since 2012, constitute a direct challenge to the US-led post-WWII order in East Asia (Maduz 2021). Beijing has managed to establish China-centered infrastructures and hierarchies in East Asia, including formats, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (2013) or the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (2015). Washington actively pushes to strengthen security ties with allies and partners in the region and seeks support for its regional and global initiatives aimed at managing China's rise, also affecting trade and technology policy. An example is the US 5G Clean Network initiative under US President Donald Trump (2017–2021) that sought to ban Huawei equipment from countries' telecommunications networks.

As the US and China openly compete for leadership and influence in the region today, countries in East Asia face new trade-offs. The confrontational regional environment makes it difficult for countries like South Korea to pursue good relations with both great powers as they

successfully did in the past. For South Korea, however, relations with both great powers are vital. For the past 70 years, South Korea's security ties with the US have guaranteed its existence and survival against the military threat, including the nuclear threat, from the North. Today still, 28,500 US troops are stationed in South Korea, constituting the third-largest military presence outside the US (Shin and Lee 2021). Furthermore, the US remains a key partner of South Korea in economic and international affairs. At the same time, China has become an indispensable economic and strategic partner, too. Over the past 30 years, Seoul has significantly deepened its economic ties with Beijing with a quarter of its exports going to China today (Lee 2020a; Kim 2016: 710–712).

South Korea is not the only East Asian state being caught between the two great powers, but it faces an additional dilemma, namely the North Korea dilemma (Kim and Cha 2016; Cha 2019). South Korea needs good relations with China as it seeks to eventually reunite with North Korea—a constitutional goal that it cannot achieve without China's support. This further complicates relations. South Korea-China relations are already complex and challenging due to China's sheer size, its fast-growing economic and military power, its geographical proximity, and the two countries' close historical ties, with South Korea having been part of a China-centered regional order for centuries (Kondoch 2010; Kang 2010). Despite the doubts raised by the new president Yoon as to China's ability to restrain North Korea's missile and nuclear programs, Beijing remains a central actor in the Korean conflict and its resolution.³ Few doubts exist that the US–China competition will further aggravate South Korea's strategic dilemmas, including worsening prospects for a peaceful solution of the Korean conflict.

The Role of Political Leadership Changes: A Competing View

Another important strand in the literature emphasizes the relevance of domestic political drivers of South Korea's foreign policymaking and more specifically the ideological competition between political parties and the role of individual political leaders. Parties and leaders from the two large political camps promote foreign policies that are quite distinctive from each other (Kim 2021: 8–11 or Lee 2020b: 88–90). This seems in their interest since governments in South Korea are elected

³ China has substantial interests in Korean Peninsula security and arguably has the most leverage on the North Korean regime (Albert 2019).

only for a single, five-year term. Conservatives are the political heirs of the authoritarian, anti-Communist Park Chung-hee dictatorship (1963–1978). Representing elite interests, they have dominated South Korean politics and military affairs for decades. Traditionally, they promote a strong alliance with the US, favor a hardline policy toward North Korea, and use Japan as a reference state.⁴ By contrast, key progressive leaders were part of the democratization movement, of which left-leaning students formed an important part.

Progressives are typically more favorably disposed to a conciliatory approach toward the North and comprehensive cooperation with China, and at the same time more critical of South Korea's alliance with the US as well as of the former colonial power Japan. At the turn of the twentieth century, the first progressive presidents, Kim Dae-jung and his successor Roh Moo-hyun, launched new foreign policy strategies, such as reconciliation with North Korea (the “Sunshine policy”; see, for example, Paik 2002) and more autonomy within and from the US alliance. Structuralists (such as Snyder 2018) would argue that the international context during this period was particularly conducive to such endeavors.

Recent efforts by South Korea to position itself vis-à-vis China and the US can roughly be divided into three phases—with the fourth phase about to start with the 2022 election of President Yoon Suk-yeol. A first substantive debate on South Korea's strategic choice between the US and China was triggered when progressive President Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2008) proposed the “balancer” concept in 2005 (Snyder 2018: 217–244). His idea was that South Korea could serve as a balancer in Northeast Asia—against the backdrop of rising tensions between China and Japan. When introduced, the South Korean public thought the concept aimed “to express an independent voice and to act on it” (35%), “to keep at bay the supremacy of China and Japan” (32%), and “to collaborate better with China by breaking away from the intensifying Washington-Tokyo influence” (26%) (*The Korea Herald* 2010). The “balancer” concept sought a more autonomous role for South Korea, but also an active and constructive role in Sino-Japanese, and beyond that in US–China relations.

The Roh Moo-hyun presidency brought South Korea strengthened ties with China, but tense relations with the US, with some analysts even

⁴ Such a “reference role” is related to Japan's rapid, successful and, by Asian standards, early modernization and industrialization.

predicting the end of the security alliance—a result of strongly diverging security threat assessments (see, for example, Hwang 2005; Kang 2007). Under Roh, South Korea was generally skeptical of the US forces' presence and engagement in South Korea and Northeast Asia more broadly and opposed a hardline policy against North Korea. Anti-Americanism flourished at the time when Roh was elected and during his first years in the presidency (Kim 2010). South Korea's strive for autonomy from and within its alliance with the US peaked under his administration. Strengthening ties with China was part of the strategy. At the same time, the growing economic dependence on China was a concern. The negotiation of a bilateral free trade agreement with the US was also an attempt to counterbalance a loss of autonomy in relations with China.

A second phase encompasses the subsequent conservative governments, which continued the balancing and counterbalancing efforts in relations with China and the US, respectively, but clearly set different priorities. Lee Myung-bak (2008–2013) reprioritized the US-South Korea alliance, also in an effort to hedge against China's growing dominance in the regional order. He earned a reputation as “America's free trade champion” (Snyder 2011), pushing for the ratification of the bilateral FTA. Under Lee, South Korea temporarily improved its relations with Japan and boosted a trilateral cooperation format also including China. The latter engagement was driven by economic interests and the motivation to find joint responses to the global financial crisis 2008–2009 (Sakaki and Wacker 2017).

As a representative from the conservative camp, Park Geun-hye (2013–2017) remained committed to a strong alliance with the US and a hardline policy against North Korea, which seemed important against the backdrop of North Korea's ever growing nuclear and missile capabilities. At the same time, she set herself apart with individual initiatives, not strictly following the traditional party line. She boosted relations with China, which had stagnated under her predecessor, and met Chinese President Xi Jinping on multiple occasions. She became known as the president who explicitly pointed to and sought political solutions to two related policy problems: South Korea's increasingly difficult position in the US–China rivalry and “Asia's Paradox” (Pollack 2016). The latter refers to the phenomenon that economic cooperation in Northeast Asia had been thriving for decades, while political and security cooperation remained minimal. Under Park, South Korea launched the Northeast Asian Peace and Cooperation Initiative aimed at promoting cooperation

within Northeast Asia— and improving cooperation between China and the US (Snyder 2018: 178–180).

A third phase started with the coming into power of progressive President Moon Jae-in (2017–2022) in May 2017. He took up office in turbulent times. His predecessor had been impeached after a political scandal, and relations with neighboring countries were tense. China had launched its economic coercion campaign in reaction to the decision to deploy the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense anti-missile system on South Korean territory (the THAAD dispute). Furthermore, the conflict between North Korea, which had continuously pushed its nuclear and missile testing, and the US administration under Trump, escalated rapidly. Lastly, problems existed in South Korea’s relations with Japan. At the end of the Lee Myung-bak presidency, the “ice age” (2012–2015) between the two countries had begun, during which no high-level meetings were taking place (Sakaki and Wacker 2017: 13).

Like his progressive predecessors, Moon invested his political capital in improved relations with North Korea. He made the goal of establishing a lasting peace regime on the Korean Peninsula his top foreign policy priority. At the same time, and based on previous experience, the Moon administration recognized the importance of continuously investing in South Korea’s military alliance with the US, defense cooperation with regional partners, its own military capabilities, as well as trying to adopt a more principled approach toward the North (Frank 2017; Harold et al. 2019; Minegishi 2021). At least in an early phase, the strategy was successful. The efforts of the Moon administration made crucial contributions to the de-escalation of the North Korea-US conflict and helped reach a *détente* in South Korea-China relations toward the end of 2017.

However, critics—among them his successor Yoon Suk-yeol—would argue that former president Moon prioritized inter-Korean relations to the detriment of relations with all other countries (see, for example, Green 2020), not keeping pace with the fast-changing geopolitical environment. Substantial questions regarding the alliance with the US remained unresolved under Moon, including the issues of defense cost-sharing and the transfer of wartime operational control authority to South Korea. While relations with China improved again, relations with Japan hit a new low, hindering a closer trilateral security and defense policy cooperation between the US, Japan, and South Korea (Overhaus and Sakaki 2021). In the 2022 presidential election campaign, Yoon’s conservative camp promoted foreign policy views that were diametrically opposed to the

ones held by Moon's progressive camp, whereas their political programs regarding critical *domestic* issues looked much more similar.⁵ Yoon criticized Moon for what he saw as a shrinking role of South Korea in regional and international politics due to its narrow foreign policy focus on North Korea (Yoon 2022). In office since May 2022, President Yoon Suk-yeol wants now to strengthen South Korea's global role (as a "global pivotal state"), deepen its alliance with the US, normalize its ties with Japan, and take a more critical stance on China and North Korea. Keeping with the tradition of conservatives, Yoon's foreign policy initiatives will be firmly centered around South Korea's institutional cooperation with the US, including a more passive, deterrence-based posture toward North Korea. Especially with regard to North Korea, continuity is expected from the era of the conservative Lee Myung-bak presidency (2008–2013), also due to some continuity in terms of personnel. According to the conservative rationale, closer alignment and cooperation with the US and its alliance partners, including with Japan and with the Quad group, will strengthen South Korea's position and increase its (otherwise shrinking) room for maneuver (see, Ballbach 2022; Ernst et al. 2022; Terry and Orta 2022).

Influence of Public Opinion: An Increasingly Relevant View

Also relevant in the study of South Korea's strategic positioning are public opinion and perceptions (Chung 2001). This level of analysis generally remains under-researched and is often lumped together with the previous levels of analysis. Attitudes in society matter, however, as they feed into people's electoral choices. Additionally, they influence policy-making through public opinion polls. A handful of companies conduct daily opinion polls in South Korea and publish them twice a week. The level of political competition in South Korea is high. For example, half of the members of parliament change after elections that are held every four years. Policymakers are, therefore, very sensitive to changes in public opinion which are known to occur quickly in South Korea; weekly changes of 5–6 percentage points are not unusual. Daily opinion polls have, thus, become important tools of government-citizens interaction.⁶

⁵ Domestic issues, such as exploding housing prices, youth unemployment, and increasing socioeconomic inequality, dominated the political debate in the run-up to the 2022 presidential election (Sang-Hun 2022).

⁶ Source: Interviews conducted with South Korean public opinion polling experts in 2020.

The impact of public opinion on South Korea's foreign policymaking has been growing with the democratization of the country. South Korea held its first democratic elections in 1987 and underwent further democratic reforms in the subsequent decade. When the first progressive president came into power in 1998, this "coincided with the empowerment of public opinion in South Korean politics" (Chung 2012a, b: 9). During this period, people started to change their view of China, which became much more favorable, while at the same time views of the US turned more negative. In the early 2000s, anti-American sentiment peaked with hundreds of thousands of people participating in anti-US protests (Kim 2010).⁷ This significantly contributed to the election of the next progressive president, Roh Moo-hyun, who took office in 2003. In 2008, Roh was succeeded by Lee Myung-bak, a conservative president who promised a turn away from his predecessor's policies, including his foreign policies. At least in part, this was reflective of people's desire for a more effective handling of North Korea, nuclear-armed since 2006, as well as for a re-strengthening of the weakened ties with the US.

South Korean perceptions of the country's foreign relations constitute an important part in general population and elite surveys. Questions concern, for example, how favorably people think about South Korea's relations with the US, China, Japan, and North Korea. In the early 2000s, a new zero-sum thinking among South Korean elites started to emerge with regard to their country's relations with China and the US; such a thinking in trade-offs did previously not exist and is believed to be, at least in part, a side effect of the growing role of such public opinion polls (see Chung 2012a, b: 10). Under progressive President Roh Moo-hyun in 2004, favorability rates for China and the US were at similar levels (close to 60 points out of a possible 100 points) while rates for Japan and North Korea were clearly lower (at around 45) (East Asia Institute 2004, as cited in SisaIN 2021).

When the conservative President Lee Myung-bak came into office in 2008, favorability rates for the US were still at around 60 while rates for China had plummeted and were at the same level as rates for Japan and North Korea (namely at around 50). During Lee's term, the clearest shifts occurred in people's feelings regarding Japan and North Korea, with

⁷ Tens and hundreds of thousands of people participated in candlelight rallies to protest the US military presence. They had been triggered by an accident in 2002, in which a US army vehicle killed two schoolgirls.

favorability rates for both countries dropping to 30 in 2012. Under the next conservative president, Park Geun-hye, relations with the US, China, and Japan generally improved, reaching in 2016 favorability rates among the public of 73, 60, and 43, respectively. Rates for North Korea remained low, though (28) (East Asia Institute 2016, as cited in SisaIN 2021).

Under the progressive President Moon Jae-in (2017–2022), things started to look quite differently again from 2018 onwards—2017 having been an eventful year. Favorability rates for the US were lower (at around 55 in 2018) than before and declining during the Trump presidency, but still clearly the highest among the four countries. After Joe Biden became US president in early 2021, South Korean favorability rates for the US went up again to 57. North Korea was the second-most favorably rated country during this period. Favorability rates were as high as 49 in late 2018, which was during inter-Korean rapprochement, and strongly declining afterward when relations became strained once again (29 in 2021). Favorability rates for Japan were the lowest—compared to the other countries as well as to previous periods—hitting a low in the second half of 2019 when anti-Japanese sentiment was peaking (21) (SisaIN 2021).⁸

When explicitly asked about the US–China competition and its impact on South Korea’s interests, a third of South Koreans believed in 2020 that the US–China competition constituted a “threat to South Korea’s national interest” and a majority expected it to get worse (Kim and Lee 2020). A large majority of the public thinks that “the balance of power is tilted in favor of the U.S. ... but they also acknowledge that this may change in the future” (Kim and Kang 2020: 1). When presented with a binary choice, 7 out of 10 people chose the US over China. This preference has been established in several studies. A recent study also suggests, though, that a majority of the South Korean public would prefer a more “balanced approach” (Kim and Lee 2020).

A recent phenomenon in South Korean public opinion is the open anti-China sentiment (Chan and Choi 2021; Shin 2021). In early 2021, China was the least favorably rated among the four countries (at only 26). Recent surveys reveal the strong impact that individual events can have on people’s perceptions of other countries. The South Korean

⁸ Like his progressive and conservative predecessors before him, Moon turned to anti-Japanese sentiment when facing declining approval ratings. Source: Shin (2019).

public considers China's actions in the THAAD dispute in 2016–2017 as “infringements on South Korean sovereignty and national security” (Kim and Kang 2017). In the aftermath, China ranked even behind North Korea (SisaIN 2021). Other such critical events include China's crushing of the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong in 2019, Beijing's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and attempts at “cultural imperialism” in 2020. The latter included Chinese claiming Korean traditional clothing, food, and writers to be originally “Chinese” (Chan and Choi 2021),⁹ resuscitated by the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics opening show where a performer appeared in a traditional Korean dress.

Attitudes toward the US, China, and North Korea have been found to differ according to age groups. Within the respective age group, attitudes show high consistency over time. Recent findings show that people in their 20s and 30s are the most critical of China. Having grown up in a democratic system, they are particularly skeptical of China's repressive behavior in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet, as well as its threats against Taiwan (Shin 2021). Previously, separately conducted surveys have established that young South Koreans form a group of newly emerging security conservatives (Kim et al. 2018; Lee et al. 2021): They share similar threat perceptions with traditional security conservatives meaning the majority of people in their 60s and over, fearing, for example, that a war between the two Koreas could break out. In contrast to the latter, many of the young South Koreans see North Korea as an “enemy” or a “stranger” and are indifferent to unification, seeing its benefit in lowering the risk of a war on the Korean Peninsula (not in restoring national identity and unity).

The new president Yoon Suk-yeol from the People Power Party successfully capitalized on the anti-Chinese sentiment of younger generations: His support from young men in their 20s and 30s was a key factor in tipping the 2022 presidential election in his favor (Terry and Orta 2022). How the anti-Chinese sentiment observable among the younger South Korean public will affect South Korean strategic positioning in

⁹ Previous events that negatively affected South Koreans' perceptions of China include two armed provocations conducted by North Korea in 2010 and Beijing's (lack of) reaction to them, namely the sinking of a South Korean warship, the Cheonan, and the artillery shelling of Yeonpyeong island. In the latter case, Beijing even blocked international efforts to censure North Korea. Sources: Chung (2012a, b), Snyder and Byun (2011).

the long run and how sustainable it will be remains to be seen (for an early discussion, see, for example, Shin 2021). Yoon's election victory is also a reflection of the progressive camp's failure to successfully mobilize their main voter base, i.e., people in their 30s, 40s, and 50s—the most populous and progressively thinking age groups.¹⁰ This strong political force had been supportive of former president Moon's (2017–2022) foreign policy, including South Korea's positioning regarding China. From today's perspective, it looks like the new (security) conservatism of the younger generations benefits the conservative camp and its president.

South Korea's Past and Present Strategies in the US–China Rivalry

Analysts describe South Korea's position in the US–China competition under President Moon (2017–2022) as “choice avoidance,” “equivocation,” “strategic nondecision” (Lee 2020b) or “strategic ambiguity” (Nilsson-Wright and Jie 2021). Moon's presidency was generally seen as a period during which South Korea prioritized its economic interests over longer-term strategic interests—and thereby relations with China over its relations with the US. South Korea withstood urgent US calls to join their 5G Clean Network initiative and to ban Huawei equipment from its telecommunications networks. Furthermore, the Moon administration did not give official support to the 2017-US FOIP Strategy and resisted joining the Quad (see Kim 2021). During the same period, South Korea showed continued interest in and support for China-led economic governance structures: it indicated its openness to join the Belt and Road Initiative, and it joined the recent regional free trade agreement (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership 2020) (Petri and Plummer 2020).

Reflective of the changed geopolitical situation, the new Yoon government will give new and heightened priority to South Korea's positioning in the US–China strategic competition. He wants to reorient the country's foreign policy and make the deeper alliance with the US its central axis (Yoon 2022). Some of this appears new and sharply departing from the approach under former president Moon, which had been criticized as hesitant, passive, and China-leaning. However, many analysts consider it unlikely that Yoon will deviate from the previous pattern, since “an

¹⁰ Source: Interviews conducted with South Korean public opinion polling experts in 2020. On the impact of the US-China competition on South Korea's presidential election campaign, see, for example, Shin and Smith (2021).

overtly adversarial posture” against China and North Korea, for example, would “simply not [be] in the cards” (Park 2022). The toning down of Yoon’s sharp anti-Chinese campaign rhetoric right after his election may be indicative of this (Nam 2022). A historical analysis shows that the position pursued under his predecessor, much criticized by him, has very much been consistent with South Korea’s approach toward China since the end of the Cold War.

South Korea’s Strategic Positioning Toward China in a Historical Perspective

The end of the Cold War marked a turning point in South Korea’s foreign policy orientation toward China and the US (see Kang 2010). In its relations with China, South Korea adopted henceforth strategies that can be defined as hedging or accommodating behavior (see Fig. 10.1). From a theoretical viewpoint, these are “middle strategies” that countries can choose when facing stronger powers. “Middle strategies” are situated in a middle area and need less substantial commitment than strategies at the ends of the strategic spectrum, meaning bandwagoning or balancing (Kang 2009; Goh 2006). Bandwagoning refers to strategies of aligning with the adversary power, including “allied alignment”, “dependence”, or even “capitulation” (Bloomfield 2015); the aim here being to neutralize the threat or attempting to benefit from the situation. By contrast, (military) balancing against an adversary comprises strategies such as “hard balancing,” “containment,” and even “outright war” (Bloomfield 2015). During the Korean War and large parts of the Cold War, South Korea fully aligned with the US and engaged in balancing toward the adversary, Communist China.

Starting with the normalization of diplomatic ties in 1992, South Korea has adopted an accommodating approach toward China. It invested in good economic relations and refrained from criticizing China when it started a more assertive foreign policy in the 2010s, creating tensions in the neighborhood. This includes China’s strides in the East and South China seas, the unilateral announcement of an Air Defense Identification Zone in the East China Sea, as well as illegal fishing activities in foreign territorial waters (Maduz 2021). In the THAAD dispute with China, South Korea accommodated its economic partner by committing to “three nos”—“no additional deployment of THAAD batteries, no South Korean integration into a U.S. led regional missile defense system, and no trilateral alliance with the United States and Japan” (Stangarone

	Roh MH govt (2003-2008)	Kim DJ govt (1998-2003)	Roh TW & Kim YS govts (1988-1998)	Korean War/ most of Cold War
Bandwagoning	Accommodating Hedging			Balancing
Capitulation, Dependence, Allied Alignment				Hard balancing, Containment, War
	Moon govt (2017-2022)	Lee & Park govts (2008-2017)		
		Yoon govt (2022-) → ?		

Fig. 10.1 South Korea’s strategic positioning toward China in a historical perspective (*Source* Figure adapted from “South Korea’s Strategic Behavior toward China since 1992” [p. 717] by Kim [2016] and “The balancing-bandwagoning continuum [overview]” [p. 262] by Bloomfield [2015])

2019). In a recent development, the new conservative Yoon government backed down from some of its election pledges that risked straining ties with China (Nam 2022). This is what the recently issued list of policy tasks, that new presidents of South Korea typically present at the outset of their term, suggests. For example, it did not include the deployment of additional US missile systems in South Korea.

At the same time, South Korea has also consistently tried to accommodate the US, which is why analysts describe South Korea’s approach as “dual hedging” or “choice avoidance” (see Snyder 2018: 220–222). South Korea has continuously invested in its security alliance with the US. It was Roh Moo-hyun’s progressive government that decided in 2004, during a period of tense bilateral ties, to accommodate the US and participate, as the third-largest contributor, to the war in Iraq (Len 2004). The government considered the benefits of a strong alliance to outweigh the costs and risks of the troop deployment. Under the progressive Moon Jae-in government (2017–2022), generally considered rather “pro-China,” South Korea expanded its military, showed continued commitment to the US alliance, and joined, for example, NATO’s cyber defense unit (see, Park 2022). By accommodating both great powers, South Korea has, so far, managed to avoid taking sides and making clear choices.

*Explaining South Korea's Strategic Choices: Relevant Factors
and Perspectives*

How well do the various perspectives in the literature explain South Korea's strategic positioning between China and the US? The literature focusing on the international political context (for example, Snyder 2018; Kim and Cha 2016) rightly highlights the persistent geostrategic constraints that South Korea faces in its immediate neighborhood, being surrounded by militarily and economically more powerful countries (except for North Korea). It is also powerful in explaining the widening of South Korea's strategic space in the post-WWII era and its recent re-narrowing. From the 1990s onwards, when global governance was strong and US leadership well-established, South Korea reached unprecedented economic strength and successfully positioned itself internationally. However, new strategic constraints are emerging today with US leadership weakening (or at least being inconsistent in the recent past) and struggling to keep up with China's growth and ambitions in the region. East Asian states become more and more caught up in the zero-sum game created by the US–China competition.

While structuralist approaches accurately capture South Korea's old and new strategic dilemmas, they clearly fall short of explaining the extent to which South Korea has engaged with China over the past 30 years. The country's relations with China are close and have until recently been improving "on almost all fronts" (Kang 2009). In a strict structural reading, South Korea should have every interest to focus on its vital relations with the US, align its security and foreign policies with US policies, and strengthen cooperation with the US and other US allies in the region, such as Japan, with which it shares a similar economic and political system.

Instead, South Korea has continued a dual strategy, deepening its ties not only with the US, but also with China. Under the Moon presidency (2017–2022), South Korea took several notable steps in this direction by announcing that it would not participate in the US missile defense system in Northeast Asia, promoting the transition of military operational control as a national sovereignty issue (like Moon's progressive predecessor) (ISDP, Institute for Security and Development Policy 2021), threatening to withdraw unilaterally from an intelligence-sharing pact with Japan (GSOMIA), refraining from joining US-led initiatives targeted at China's rise, and occasionally supporting North Korean demands in

US-North Korean negotiations (Kim 2021: 2). Per se, the election of the new president Yoon, who has promoted a more critical stance on China, does not question or undermine the strategic importance that Seoul accords to its cooperation with Beijing—as acknowledged by himself (see, Yoon 2022).

The country's engagement with China goes far beyond accommodating the rising great power out of fear, as structuralist accounts may suggest. When South Korea started to strengthen its ties with China, it was not from a position of weakness, but a position of newly gained strength. South Korea is today the world's tenth-largest economy and fifth-largest exporter (International Monetary Fund 2021). Over the decades, it has also changed the conventional military balance with North Korea in its favor. In the 1990s, its successful economic, military, and political modernization became evident and gave its leaders a new sense of agency and room for maneuver in their strategic interactions with other states (Snyder 2018: 7–14); during this period, the country became more internationalist and outward-looking. It joined international organizations, such as the UN (1991), the WTO (1995), and the OECD (1996), and undertook efforts to improve relations with its immediate neighbors, including China and the Soviet Union/Russia. Its growing economic and international standing has made Seoul an attractive partner to Beijing.

To explain the observed, distinct shifts in South Korea's behavior toward China since 1992, the literature on leadership changes offers valuable insights (see, for example, Chung 2012a, b; Kim 2016). It highlights the role of ideology in party competition and political leaders' thoughts (Kim 2021). Early democratic governments, which were from the conservative camp (Roh Tae-woo, 1988–1993, and Kim Young-sam, 1993–1998), were still cautious in their engagement with China and had a desire to contain it (see Fig. 10.1). Subsequent, progressive governments were generally more pro-China and more inclined to tilt toward Beijing than their conservative predecessors (Kim Dae-jung, 1998–2003, and particularly Roh Moo-hyun, 2003–2008).

With the return to power of conservative governments (Lee Myung-bak, 2008–2013, and Park Geun-hye, 2013–2017), South Korea once again engaged in strengthened hedging against China (Han 2008). Under President Moon (2017–2022), from the progressive political camp, South Korea once again had a leader with ideological, pro-Chinese convictions,

promoting strong South Korea-China ties (Kim 2021). The new conservative Yoon government can be expected to move again toward strengthened hedging against China, in line with its conservative predecessors. Promoting a foreign policy that places alignment with Washington at the center of Seoul's priorities, as suggested by the new president, should imply a clearer pro-US positioning of South Korea within the US-China strategic competition. How far South Korea can and will go with this will depend on developments at the international, as well as at the domestic level (Ernst et al. 2022).

However, the ideological competition between different South Korean governments makes it at times difficult to see the highly robust political consensus that exists in the country regarding its overall strategic priorities. The key priorities are security (which means survival) and economic prosperity. Unification with the North is a third priority in South Korean foreign policymaking (Kang 2010; Sheen 2009; Snyder 2018: 5). While differences in views between parties exist as to how close South Korea's alliance should be with the US and what the most effective policy is, in dealing with the North Korean threat, the varying governments have generally been consistent in making their strategic choices with regard to China and the US, respectively. They have shared the vision that strengthening ties with China and reducing dependence on the US (even if to varying degrees) is in the country's interest as it allows it to maximize its strategic options (Goh 2006; Chung 2007). The proactive engagement with China has, thus, followed this larger strategic rationale in addition to an economic rationale. This strategic positioning started under Roh Tae-woo whose administration normalized relations with Beijing in 1992 and who was explicit about this (see Chung 2012a, b).

This political consensus and the related consistency with which various governments engaged with China, constantly expanding and improving ties since 1992, reflect shared perceptions in South Korean society. In the 1990s, a change in Seoul's perception of Beijing made a shift toward a more proactive engagement with the latter possible. China was no longer seen as a revisionist, but a status-quo power (Cha 1999). Elite views were still dominant then. With democratization progressing, the opinion of the broader public became more influential starting at the turn of the century (see Chung 2001, 2012a, b). People who are now in their 40s and 50s became an important political voice (see Lee 2020b: 88–90). They hold political views that are different from the more conservative views of

the older generation. They grew up with anti-American sentiments and sympathized with China and Maoist ideology (Shin 2021). The promotion of strong South Korea-China ties, thus, reflects the political view of these populous, progressive age groups.

However, continuing generational and societal changes may lead to further shifts in South Korea's foreign policy, potentially giving rise to a more conservative, less China-leaning positioning. First, people in their 20s and 30s hold increasingly critical views of China. This may narrow the discrepancy in China-related threat perceptions between South Korea and the US. Perceptions have differed with regard to the centrality and priority of the security threat emanating from China, with South Korea seeing North Korea-related threats as more important and imminent security threats (Overhaus and Sakaki 2021). Second, the generations of South Koreans who have a personal memory of a unified Korea and strongly favor reunification over other forms of solutions to the Korean conflict are fading away (Kim et al. 2018). Both developments have the potential to decisively affect South Korea's long-term strategic goals and its overall foreign policy orientation toward China. Reunification as a main South Korean strategic priority could become less and less urgent and important, also lessening the importance of China's cooperation in this.

International relations theorists, adhering to the influential balance-of-power tradition, predicted that a rising China would trigger fear among East Asian states and lead the latter to balance against it.¹¹ South Korea's strategy toward China clearly falls short of a balancing strategy and has, since the 1990s, remained within the hedging/accommodation zone. Perceptions are again an important factor here. Differently from Japan, for example, the country has not seen China as a major security threat in the past. Its focus has been on North Korea with its armed force structure remaining focused on the North Korean threat (Kang 2009). For a long time, South Korea did not perceive China as an economic competitor either. It even shared some threat perceptions with China, such as regarding an unstable North Korea or a regionally overly ambitious Japan. Over the past few years, the South Korean public has come to see China much more critically. Still, while a shift from "light hedging" against China to balancing is a theoretical option, it is not very likely at

¹¹ For a discussion, see, for example Ross (2006).

this stage. It would constitute a big step and a departure from the policy line followed in the past decades.

Conclusion: Shrinking Strategic Options and Changing Perceptions

Over the past three decades, South Korea has sought to build and maintain favorable relations with both great powers, the US and China. For its security and economic prosperity, the US has been an indispensable partner. South Korea's economic strength and international standing are founded on its close relations with the US. With regard to economic prosperity, China is today an equally important partner for South Korea. The significance that South Korea attributes to its relations with China is also related to the North Korean issue. Any durable solution in inter-Korean relations will require China's approval and support. Thus, relations with both great powers serve South Korea's vital interests. As a consequence, the country is not likely to swiftly take sides and fully align with one of them—at the expense of the other—in the near future.

Recent international developments, including the weakening of the international order, uncertainties in the US-South Korea alliance, and China's new power and ambitions in East Asia, negatively affect South Korea's strategic space that it has gradually gained with US engagement in the region in the post-WWII era. Today, international relations in East Asia are increasingly dominated by the deepening US-China rivalry. South Korea, as well as many Southeast Asian countries, generally see the shift from a focus on region-wide economic cooperation and interdependence to more politicized, securitized relations in more exclusive, minilateral cooperation formats as going against their interests. The current situation reveals South Korea's vulnerable position in a regional context marked by high geopolitical competition. Competing views exist as to how Seoul should try to keep some strategic space, i.e., through a clearer alignment with the US, as suggested by the new South Korean president, or a balanced approach toward both great powers, as pursued by the previous president.

In addition to facing new structural constraints, policymakers in South Korea also have to respond to changing domestic perceptions and related political pressure regarding the country's positioning in the US-China competition. The 2022 presidential election campaign illustrates the intensification of political debates over South Korea's future strategic options. Recent surveys show that the South Korean public tends to hold

an increasingly less favorable view of both great powers but would side with the US over China if forced to choose. However, even the conservatives, who are staunch supporters of a strong alliance with the US, fear the negative effects of a full alignment with the US—against China. They include negative effects on the economy as well as on unification prospects. Progressives have traditionally promoted more independence from the US and good relations with China, but their view of China is also changing. A new trend, especially among young South Koreans, is the adoption of anti-China sentiments. This trend, presently accentuated by the election of a new, rather China-critical South Korean president, is expected to affect the country's positioning toward China going forward.

The pressure to take sides will rise as the rivalry between the US and China grows. Both great powers have considerable influence over South Korea, which is why it is trying to accommodate both and engage in a “dual hedging” approach. Since the end of the Cold War, South Korea has worked hard on maintaining favorable relations with both great powers and having the “choice of not making choices” (Chung 2007). It has tried to position itself as a “middle power” and “bridge-builder” (Cha 2019). If a military confrontation were to become more likely in future, South Korea might even start considering alternative strategic options that have remained unsuccessful or merely theoretical in the past, such as strengthened regional security cooperation or even neutrality.

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