

*Policy Perspective*

# Crisis Management on the Korean Peninsula and Regional Security

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**Abstract** – The Korean Peninsula has emerged as a focal point in the broader geopolitical competition between the U.S. and China, often characterized as the “New Cold War”. This policy perspective paper examines the impact of increasing bloc formation on regional security, particularly the role of North Korea as a key player in the revisionist bloc with China and Russia. North Korea’s strategic value has significantly increased in this new global order, positioning it as a critical actor in the confrontation between the revisionist and liberal blocs. The paper also explores the implications of North Korea’s alignment with Russia and China on its nuclear ambitions and provocations. Additionally, the paper analyses the security responses by South Korea, Japan, and the U.S., culminating in the formation of the trilateral security consultative body (JAKORUS). While the institutionalization of this alliance is key to maintaining regional stability, its sustainability hinges on public support and continued diplomatic cohesion amidst shifting domestic political landscapes. This paper contributes to the discourse on crisis management and security strategies in the Indo-Pacific region under the evolving New Cold War dynamics.

**Keywords:** Korean Peninsula; New Cold War; regional security; bloc formation; trilateral security; revisionist bloc

## Introduction

The current international order is facing significant changes. The global trend in the early post-Cold War era was liberalization. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, there was a belief that if countries with different identities were ‘engaged’ to induce economic liberalization, it could eventually lead to political liberalization. The United States pursued such an engagement policy towards China. It supported China’s accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) and granted China Most Favored Nation (MFN) status, deepening trade relations between the two countries. In the 2000s, while the United States was fighting the war on terror and exhausting its national power in Afghanistan and Iraq, China grew dramatically, transforming into a great power that not only dominated the region but also challenged the hegemonic status of the United States. Contrary to the U.S. intention to make

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China a responsible member of the international community, China has become a revisionist state that threatens the existing order, intending to revise rather than conform to the U.S.-centered international order. With the U.S. declaring a full-fledged 'strategic competition' against China, the international order has regressed into an era of great power competition.

The competition between the U.S. and China is often referred to as a new Cold War, drawing an analogy to the Cold War between the U.S. and the former Soviet Union. Of course, the strategic competition between the U.S. and China and the resulting changes in the international order have many differences from the strategic competition and Cold War order between the U.S. and the former Soviet Union. Even two snowflakes, when viewed under a magnifying glass, can be seen to have very different forms. However, snowflakes of different forms share an important qualitative commonality: they are formed when water evaporated from the earth rises in low pressure and collides with high pressure, and such snowflakes have distinctly different qualities from raindrops. The metaphor of the new Cold War should also be understood in terms of the qualitative similarities with the old Cold War. The old Cold War and the new Cold War share qualitative similarities as typical strategic competitions of great powers on a global scale. In 2021, Mearsheimer wrote that "today, China and the United States are locked in what can only be called a new cold war

## **New Cold War and blocization of order**

What are the qualitative commonalities between the Old Cold War and the New Cold War? The strategic competition of great powers inevitably involves 'geopolitical' competition for the preservation and expansion of their 'sphere of influence'. Just like during the Cold War, the U.S. and China are engaged in a geopolitical competition to preserve their own sphere of influence and erode that of the other. If during the Cold War, the U.S. and the Soviet Union mainly competed geopolitically over Europe, now the U.S. and China are engaged in a geopolitical competition over the core region of the Indo-Pacific. The competition for the expansion of spheres of influence to the 'Global South' is also fierce. The main regions for the preservation and expansion of spheres of influence have changed, but the nature of the competition can be said to be quite similar.

Competition among great powers often involves the formation of blocs. This was the case during the Cold War, and the competition among great powers before World War I and World War II also proceeded with the formation of blocs. Just like during the Cold War, the new Cold War also involves the formation of blocs, and competition is intensifying between blocs. The current international order tends to be divided into a bloc of liberal states represented by the U.S. and a bloc of revisionist states represented by China and Russia. Of course, it is also true that there are quite a few countries, such as India, Turkey, and Brazil, that do not lean towards one bloc and are walking a tightrope between the two blocs. The Global South is also staying in the middle ground, striving to maximize its national interests. Considering these aspects, the new Cold War can be said to be weaker in terms of blocization and more multipolar compared to the Cold War. However, considering that a considerable number of countries adopted a policy of non-alignment while advocating a neutralist line during the Cold War, the formation of blocs in the Cold War and the new Cold War can be said to be a matter of degree.

This formation of camps tends to be more clearly manifested in the case of great power competition that involves ideological competition. Like the Cold War, the new Cold War also has an ideological flavor. Of course, China is not immersed in a dogmatic ideology that communism must be propagated worldwide, as the Soviet Union did in the early days of the Cold War. However, China has the perception that its unique political and economic model can be an alternative to the American-style liberal democratic political model and market capitalist economic model. Before the opening ceremony of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, Xi Jinping held a summit with Vladimir Putin, who was visiting China, and the two leaders revealed this perception in a joint statement issued after the meeting.

The biggest difference between the new Cold War and the Cold War is that the new Cold War has a much higher degree of economic interdependence between camps compared to the Cold War. During the Cold War, there was no significant economic relationship between the liberal camp and the communist camp. In contrast, the economies of the U.S. and China are intertwined like threads through various supply chains. High economic interdependence makes the geo-economic competition of the new Cold War very complex. Nevertheless, the trend of camp formation in the new Cold War is expected to strengthen, and competition between camps is also expected to intensify.

### **Regional Security: Challenge of Revisionist Bloc**

Blocization is the most conspicuous in Asian security order. China and Russia are flaunting their 'limitless friendship', and the relationship between Russia and North Korea morphed into a de facto military alliance. North Korea now has become an indispensable member of the revisionist bloc. North Korea welcomes the arrival of New Cold war era. North Korea was 'mentally collapsed (멘붕)' when the U.S.-Soviet Cold War ended somewhat abruptly. When Russia and China successively established diplomatic relations with South Korea, North Korea felt a strong sense of betrayal. When communist dictatorships in Eastern Europe were falling one after another, Kim Il-sung was restless, and he began to embark on nuclear weapons development in earnest. However, the international order of detente brought harsh trials to North Korea. While countries that rode the wave of globalization achieved unprecedented development, North Korea, which chose isolation, became one of the most backward countries in the world. Now the arrival of the new Cold War era is acting as a major strategic opportunity for North Korea.

In the international order of blocization, North Korea's value has risen sharply. This also means that the strategic value of North Korea has increased for China and Russia. Unlike most countries in the world that want to avoid the new Cold War, North Korea is rather welcoming the arrival of the new Cold War. North Korea knows this and is performing the role of a vanguard of revisionist states. North Korea is one of the few countries that support Russia in the Ukraine war. At a state banquet with Putin during his visit to Russia in 2023, Kim Jong-un branded the U.S., Japan, and South Korea as "evil groups" and ignited his will to "punish them and win in the fight for justice."

Now China and Russia act as guardians of North Korea. In the early 2000s, blocization was not prominent, China and Russia had shown efforts for North Korea's denuclearization, but now they are not even pretending. Rather, they are covering up North Korea's nuclear missile provocations. After completing his fifth inauguration, Putin visited China and held a summit with President Xi Jinping. In a joint statement after the summit, both leaders warned against "military intimidation" of North Korea. China and Russia will continue to indulge North Korea, which is standing at the forefront of the new Cold War competition and playing the role of a vanguard.

Russia is leading the way in neutralizing the UN sanctions resolution against North Korea, which it passed with its approval as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Although it is true that China wants to keep a certain distance from North Korea and Russia, which are going too far, the possibility of China leaving the 'North Korea-China-Russia' bloc is very slim.

### **Regional security: Response of ROK, Japan, and the US**

According to Walt (1981), the most important reason for states to form alliances or security consultative bodies is the sharing of a "common threat perception" between those states. The reason why the three countries of South Korea, Japan, and the United States held the Camp David Summit and launched a trilateral security consultative body is because they perceive the challenge of the revisionist bloc as a common threat, and they have come to share the perception that they can respond to such threats through close trilateral security cooperation. All three countries have a clear

identity as liberal states and perceive the strengthening of solidarity and attempts to change the status quo by the revisionist bloc as a serious threat to their core national interests.

In fact, the need to strengthen the trilateral security policy alliance of South Korea, Japan, and the United States has been raised for quite a long time. Nevertheless, there were many difficulties in actually building a trilateral security consultative body. The most important reason was the difficulty of the relationship between South Korea and Japan. The South Korea-Japan relationship was at its lowest due to the cancellation of the comfort women agreement and the issue of forced labor compensation.

The relationship between South Korea and Japan is a highly volatile political issue in both countries. Especially in South Korea, it can be said that domestic politics account for more than half of the impact on the relationship with Japan. Nonetheless, President Yoon Seok-yeol made considerable concessions to Japan, omitting domestic political ground work, and held a South Korea-Japan summit for the first time in four years as a South Korean president. This bold decision allowed him to secure some momentum for the restoration of South Korea-Japan relations. It appears that the people who were skeptical about President Yoon's rapid efforts to improve South Korea-Japan relations later endorsed the president's decision, because many people in South Korea have come to share the perception that despite the numerous problems between South Korea and Japan, such as history and territorial issues, they need to hurry to restore South Korea-Japan relations and strengthen South Korea-US-Japan cooperation to respond to the challenge of the revisionist bloc. As North Korea's nuclear missile threat goes beyond the line and becomes fierce, and China and Russia are circling around North Korea, public agreed that South Korea needs to improve its relationship with Japan.

### **Concluding remarks: Future of JAKORUS**

The South Korea-Japan-US security consultative body, which was born through the Camp David Summit, was a strategic decision by three countries to preserve and strengthen the region's liberal international order. South Korea and Japan have laid the groundwork for cooperation on many issues in the Indo-Pacific in the future, and South Korea has also created an opportunity to strengthen global hub state diplomacy. Both countries secured a mechanism to respond more efficiently to North Korea's nuclear missile provocations, and established an important cooperation mechanism to defend against the expansion of the sphere of influence to the Korean Peninsula by the North Korea-China-Russia revisionist bloc.

The key to the future of trilateral security consultative body is to secure sustainability. Three countries have made great efforts to institutionalize the consultative body to secure the sustainability of trilateral security cooperation. If trilateral cooperation is institutionalized, the trilateral consultative body will be relatively free from domestic political changes. However, even if a diplomatic agreement is institutionalized, a situation where it is invalidated can occur when a politician with a very different perspective on the direction of foreign and security policy becomes the top leader. The Moon Jae-in government of South Korea canceled the comfort women agreement, and the former Trump administration of the United States unilaterally canceled many diplomatic agreements and agreements such as the Paris Climate Agreement. This suggests that institutionalization is a necessary condition for securing sustainability, but not a sufficient condition.

In order to secure sustainability, it is important to secure sufficient public support in addition to institutionalization. It is difficult for even the top leader to arbitrarily overturn a diplomatic agreement that receives considerable public support. In order to derive more active public support for the trilateral consultative body, it is necessary to emphasize more that the trilateral alliance of liberal states is directly linked to the core national interests of South Korea and Japan. It is necessary to actively persuade the people that protecting the existing liberal international order is directly linked to the 'national interest' of South Korea and Japan, despite the numerous problems between South Korea and Japan.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

Jaechun Kim is a political scientist trained at Yale University (MA in International Relations; M.Phil. in Political Science; Ph.D. in Political Science). Before joining Sogang GSIS, he worked for Yale University as lecturer for the Department of Political Science and Yale Center for the International and Area Studies (YCIAS). Earlier in his career, he had worked for the National Assembly of Korea as legislative assistant and the Bankers Trust Company as credit analyst. Since early 2003, he has been advising ISR (International Strategic Reconciliation) Korea as board member and executive director. His research interests include International Relations Theory, U.S. Foreign Policy Making, International Security and Peace, and Intelligence Policy. His recent publications deal with intelligence policy of the U.S. during the Cold War era to secretly undermine democratically elected governments and the Democratic Peace scholarship. At Sogang, he offers courses on International Relations, International Security and Peace, International Political Economy, Research Methods, and American Politics and Society.

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