

# China's Sharp Power and South Korea's Peace Initiative

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If we understand geopolitics as “representations of space” as well as “spatial practices,” then the Indo-Pacific region can be understood as a newly emerging geopolitical hotspot in which major powers are not only vying for the control of spaces, but also waging a war of discourse on values and worldviews, reconstructing geographical spaces in their own interest.<sup>1</sup> Discourse on a nation’s visions and strategies are increasingly employed as a soft power instrument of foreign policy to persuade the international audience, both state and non-state actors. Sharp power is gaining ground in this peculiar context of geopolitical competition combined with the battle for values and ideas.

China is at center stage in this geopolitics-cum-discourse game in the Indo-Pacific region. “We should increase China’s soft power, give a good Chinese narrative and better communicate China’s messages to the world,” Xi Jinping exhorted his comrades in 2014, underscoring the importance of international discourse as a type of communicative soft power.<sup>2</sup> But it is hard to distinguish sharp power from soft power solely in terms of the assets employed, as both utilize similar assets. The differences between the two are revealed only by looking into how those assets are mobilized in the real world. When actually put to use, sharp power is often mingled with soft and hard power, easily stretching into the realm of conventional security.

This chapter delves into how Beijing has been creatively capitalizing on a hybrid approach, using both hard and sharp power in disseminating its message in narrative form. By putting a special focus on Beijing’s strategic moves made against the backdrop of the U.S. deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system to South Korea, I examine the ways China combines its sharp and hard power in tackling security issues that its leadership considers as serving “core national interests.” I also address South Korea’s response to China’s sharp power offensive through the lens of inclusionary identity politics, which underscores the need for constructing a shared identity based upon a common vision, even on such critical issues as security. China’s sharp power certainly poses grave challenges to the liberal international order, but what makes Beijing’s value-based offensive sharp-edged is essentially not the discourse per se, but the methods it employs in propagating its narrative. Amidst the contending blocs of values between liberalism and counter-liberalism, South Korea, resorting to peace diplomacy as a non-great middle power, should play the role of a reconciler to avoid the clash of values and ideas, if not civilizations. Below, I argue that South Korea’s peace diplomacy should be ultimately aimed at designing its diplomatic trajectory of advancing counter-geopolitics in order to mitigate geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific region.

## Public Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics, Seeking Global “Blocization” of Values

After four decades of its remarkable rise, China is now clearly revealing its aspirations for global preeminence by re-elevating itself to what its leaders see as its “historically rightful place.” In an attempt to expand its geopolitical influence and fulfill its aspirations, Beijing has been innovative in leveraging a combination of types of power to rewrite the terms of trade, diplomacy, and security on its own terms, challenging the liberal international order. Realizing its soft-power deficit, however, Chinese leadership has underlined in the

last decade the need for enhancing soft power and public diplomacy. Since soft power was explicitly referenced in national government policy for the first time at the 17th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2007, Beijing's public diplomacy drive has been accelerated under Xi Jinping, revealing some notable characteristics.<sup>3</sup>

First, the foci of public diplomacy have been moving away from assuaging the “China threat” perceptions in the West and neighboring countries towards Chinese developmental model, the CCP-ruled political system, and theories and values that support Chinese governance. Unmistakably noticeable in today's public diplomacy is not simply a representation of a country's national identity in its language, history, and culture, but also the ideas and values for which a nation strives to stand in international society. Ideas and values are often constructed as discourse and “strategic narratives.”<sup>4</sup> China's strategic narratives, particularly in the Xi Jinping era, appear to be composed of two elements: the vision of the “China Dream” and traditional Chinese values focused on Confucianism. Overcoming the historical injustice of the “century of humiliation” caused by Western imperialism and Japanese militarism, by 2050 when China achieves its two centennial goals, China will have attained a great power status as a global leader, thus realizing the dream of the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” In his work report at the 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the CCP held in October 2017 Xi declared that, while Mao attained China's independence from colonialism and Deng realized economic prosperity, he would make China strong again in a new era.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, the CCP underscores traditional Confucian values. As Xi emphasized in his speech at the international conference celebrating the 2,565<sup>th</sup> birthday of Confucius, Chinese traditional culture represented by Confucianism has provided stable values for enhancing social solidarity and national identity.<sup>6</sup> The CCP considers the restoration of traditional values integral to the “core socialist values” keeping Chinese people from being contaminated by a corrupt Western liberal ideology. China's global domination is justified with the traditional notion of *tianxia*, or “all under heaven,” in which the world is ruled by the Chinese emperor, around which all else revolves, and from where China would spread harmony through its culture, language, and values—a Sinocentric empire that values order over freedom, ethics over law, and elite governance over democracy and human rights.<sup>7</sup>

To propagate these narratives and values, Beijing deftly employs diverse power toolkits that include not only soft, but also hard and sharp power. Sharp power refers to the ability to affect others to obtain desired outcomes not through attraction, as in the case of soft power, but through distraction and manipulation of information.<sup>8</sup> Often involved in the exertion of sharp power are attempts by the government to guide, buy, or coerce political influence, and control discussion of sensitive topics globally, typically through nontransparent and questionable, if not outright illegal, means. Thus defined, however, hard power is often so mingled with soft power in practice that differences between the two are blurred when they are actually put to use. Their differences are revealed only by looking into “how” and “with what intended purpose” sharp or soft power assets are employed and implemented as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Sharp power vs. soft power: how and with what intended purposes are power assets implemented?**

		How to implement assets of sharp or soft power	
		Transparent	Non-transparent (covert, coercive, corrupt)
With what intended purposes	Attraction	Soft power	Sharp power
	Distraction (division, manipulation)	Sharp power	Sharp power

Beijing is disseminating its discursive strategic narratives, which contain elements of illiberal values and worldviews, in various areas of soft/sharp power assets, as illustrated in Table 2.<sup>9</sup>

**Table 2: China’s public diplomacy in different areas of soft/sharp power assets**

Areas of Activity	Characteristics
Discourse/Narratives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “China Dream”</li> <li>• Traditional Confucian values</li> <li>• Sinocentric worldview</li> </ul>
Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Media offensive</li> <li>• Utilizing local media companies through buying-up and “borrowed boat” strategy</li> </ul>
Diaspora	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Utilizing diaspora organizations/Chinese-language media and Chinese student and scholar associations as both agent and target</li> </ul>
Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confucius Institutes disseminating official views</li> <li>• Self-censorship</li> </ul>
Political pressures/cooptation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Direct &amp; indirect political pressure</li> <li>• Economic incentives</li> <li>• Self-censorship</li> <li>• Encouraging Chinese compatriots’ political participation</li> </ul>

In contrast to Russia, whose sharp power offensive focuses on undercutting the credibility of the target country’s political and economic institutions and amplifying internal tensions and discord in local communities, China’s sharp power is more concerned with justifying the CCP’s uncontested grip on power and controlling discussions of sensitive issues abroad, but its proposed alternative is more egocentric.<sup>10</sup> When Xi Jinping contended at the 19<sup>th</sup> National Party Congress that a “socialist system with Chinese characteristics” would be a new choice for those developing countries that are seeking economic development and independence simultaneously, he was effectively proposing the China model of party-centered and state-led development and governance as an alternative to liberalism. The tightening authoritarian grip at home, and particularly a phenomenal concentration of power in the hands of the CCP and Xi Jinping, radiates outward into the international realm, being expressed as assertiveness of behavior and sharpness of power. Xi has, in fact, eliminated the dividing line between domestic and foreign policy. Now that the country is exporting its political values and norms, China’s governance model is front and center in its foreign policy making and implementation. Sensitive issues are nothing but grave challenges to the CCP authorities and to Chinese sovereign integrity, which should be contained at any cost both at home and abroad. Beijing relentlessly seeks to face down every effort, both domestic and international, that is opposing the CCP.

China recently has taken a comprehensive engagement approach toward developing countries in Southeast Asia, Central Asia, South Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America, under which political, economic, military and soft powers are combined.<sup>11</sup> Until the early 2000s, China eyed developing countries mostly as a source of raw materials and as markets for Chinese manufactured goods. However, with Xi's ascent to power, Beijing embarked on a comprehensive approach with an emphasis on "major power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics." The approach is characterized by a combination of public diplomacy with political, economic, and military cooperation in traditional diplomacy. Together with summit diplomacy and diplomatic exchanges, for example, the International Department of the Central Committee of the CCP provides education and training programs for political parties of the developing countries. In the economic realm, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) seeks to create a new Sinocentric era of globalization using traditional tools of Chinese statecraft as well as new types of economic incentives and debt-financing arrangements, while in the military field, joint exercises, personnel exchanges, and Chinese naval port visits are conducted together with public diplomacy.

China's recent pattern of exercising power and influence upheld by its strategic narratives and values, particularly when combined with Russia's behavior, drives growing "blocization" of values in the global arena. Since the end of World War II, American value diplomacy has been taking a major role in shaping the postwar international order, which is now facing challenges from both within and outside liberal democracies. The rise of far-right nationalist populism poses a grave challenge from within the liberalist group. Populism mushrooming across the Atlantic is fundamentally attached to ethnic or racial nationalism, and even pan-European civilizational identities are based on the differentiation between the Judeo-Christian West and Islam identity, demonizing everything foreign including individuals as well as political and economic establishments.<sup>12</sup> In the U.S., the alt-right, proponents of racist beliefs and policies, are fanning the flames of white supremacy and nationalism. A right-wing populist wave sweeping through Eastern Europe started as a countervailing response triggered by grievances about the liberalist transition that dominated their political landscape since the 1990s. In Hungary and Poland, in particular, democracy is morphing into an instrument of exclusion by denying the minority's rights. The weakening, or voluntary abdication, of American liberal international leadership under the Trump administration accelerates the cleavages within the liberalist bloc itself.

Beijing and Moscow, in contrast, sharing statism and anti-liberalism, view the world order shaped and dominated by the U.S. and its allies as unfair and unjust, and thus, see the promotion of liberal democracy, such as a series of "color revolutions," as a grave threat to regime survival. Anti-hegemonism, anti-Americanism, and anti-liberalism provide common goals for the two countries to forge a counter-liberalist coalition. They ardently advocate democratization of international relations and the multipolar world order, in which the views and interests of non-Western countries are "duly" taken care of. Seen in this viewpoint, the recent rapprochement between Beijing and Moscow is more a "partnership of consequence" founded on normative affinity of the two countries than a "partnership of convenience" for pragmatic interests.<sup>13</sup>

Counter-liberalist values shared by Beijing and Moscow have positive repercussions in some non-Western countries. The BRICS countries—Brazil, India, and South Africa—are concurring with Beijing and Moscow's advocacy of anti-hegemony, a multipolar system,

multilateralism, and the core Westphalian principles of state sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs. Their anti-liberalist discourse has considerable persuasive power and attraction, i.e. soft power, for some developing countries and non-democratic regimes. In this context, Vladimir Putin proposed, at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum in June 2016, a comprehensive Eurasian Partnership that would include the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), China, India, Pakistan, Iran, Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) member states, and other interested countries and organizations. Moscow, in its advocacy of the core traditional conservative values of family, nation, and Christianity (in the form of the Russian Orthodox Church), also finds “natural allies” in the far-left and far-right political parties and conservative forces that include think tanks, scholars and academic institutions, fringe media, and the Catholic churches and NGOs in many European countries where nationalist populism is making a striking advancement.

“Blocization” of values, unlike in the Cold War era, essentially builds on deleterious identity politics, which is revealing exclusionary collective resentments based on national, ethnic, religious, sectarian, and other primal identities and trumpeting anti-liberalist values. Value “blocization” of today thus takes place in the form of scattered confrontations between different national and primal identities, in contrast to the two clashing ideological blocs consolidated in the Cold War era.

## The THAAD Dispute: China’s Sharp Power Manifested

Given the recent way China has been exercising power, its charm offensive could turn into outright threat and pressure, combining hard, soft, and sharp power, whenever the national interests the leadership considers to be “core” are at stake. The Seoul-Beijing dispute on the deployment of the THAAD battery in South Korea demonstrates this pattern of China’s foreign behavior toward neighboring countries, the relationship with which is fundamentally asymmetrical in terms of hard power.

During the Park Geun-hye administration, the deployment of the THAAD battery pushed the bilateral relationship of the two countries from their “unprecedented” nadir to the bottomless pit. After Park took office in 2013, the year 2015 was among the highest points in the South Korea-China relationship since diplomatic normalization in 1992: In March South Korea joined the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) initiated by China to finance the BRI, and in September Park attended the Victory Day Parade in Beijing to celebrate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of victory over Japan in World War II, despite suspicious eyes in the West. In December the South Korea-China Free Trade Agreement was ratified. The intimate relationship between the two countries even aroused in policy circles in Japan and the U.S. concern that Seoul was leaning toward Beijing and away from Washington. Seoul’s expectations for Beijing’s positive role in resolving the North Korean nuclear issue were heightened by the “unprecedentedly good relations” with China.

North Korea’s fourth nuclear test in January 2016 turned the atmosphere sour, however. Park vainly tried to reach Xi Jinping on the phone. Beijing, to the disappointment of Seoul’s wishful expectations, called for Seoul and Washington to calm down, asking for “cold-hearted responses” to North Korean provocations and reiterating its three principles on Korean issues (no nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula, peace and stability, and peaceful resolution

of the North Korean nuclear issue). On February 7, a day after Pyongyang again conducted a long-range ballistic missile test, the Ministry of National Defense of South Korea announced that it would start official talks with the U.S. Department of Defense on the issue of the THAAD deployment to South Korea, reversing the so-called “Three No’s” principle—no request from, no consultation with the U.S., and, therefore, no decision on deployment. Disappointed with China’s tepid attitude, South Korea announced jointly with the U.S., on July 8, 2016, the decision to deploy the THAAD battery. In February 2017, Seongju in North Gyeongsang Province, approximately 300 kilometers southeast of Seoul, was announced as the site of deployment after North Korea launched four ballistic missiles that landed off the Japanese coast. After the U.S. military began deploying the THAAD system to South Korea on March 2017, the first THAAD launchers were declared operational in May. In September all six launchers were deployed after North Korea’s sixth nuclear test.

Frustrated with Beijing’s reticence in the face of North Korea’s provocations, the Park Geun-hye administration tightened pressure on North Korea by enhancing Seoul-Washington security cooperation. Beijing expressed its concerns about the enhancement of trilateral security cooperation between South Korea, the U.S., and Japan against North Korea as “a small NATO in the Asia-Pacific.” The THAAD issue came to the surface, among the toughest conflictual issues since the normalization of diplomatic relations. From 2016, China started sanctioning South Korean entities on its soil in response to the deployment decision. There are at least four notable points of attention revealed in China’s way of exerting pressure in the THAAD case.

First, China imposed unofficial economic sanctions as a retaliatory measure against what it perceives as an infringement on its “core interests.” South Korea was vulnerable because of its economic dependence on China. Economic retaliation was partial and selective, however, targeting South Korean companies and sectors which are active in Chinese markets or susceptible to Chinese consumers, but not sectors such as semiconductors, punishment of which could inflict pain on Chinese firms as well.

Lotte Goup, a South Korean family-run conglomerate that operates retail stores across the region, was among the first to be bludgeoned by China’s retaliation for its supply of the land for the THAAD installation in Seongju. Chinese regulators temporarily closed Lotte stores in China for fire code and safety violations. Lotte eventually withdrew from China’s distribution sector, suffering a loss of over 1 trillion won. But China’s punitive measures were not confined to Lotte, spreading to other South Korean companies which have active business in Chinese markets. There were also scattered efforts to implement a pop-culture blockade, with South Korean television programs pulled from Chinese websites. Events and concerts in China featuring South Korean music and TV stars were abruptly canceled. In particular, China’s ban on group tourism to South Korea drastically cut the number of Chinese tourists to South Korea almost in half by 2017.<sup>14</sup> (Chinese tourists accounted for 8 million of the roughly 17 million people who visited South Korea in 2016.) China’s National Tourism Administration was reported to have ordered travel agencies to stop all tour groups and cruise ships by March 15, 2017, which was sporadically confirmed by some Chinese travel agencies.<sup>15</sup> In a little more than a decade, China has gone from a minor player to the most important country of origin for tourists across the Asia-Pacific region, with 129 million making overseas trips in 2017. Due to its unique ability to control outbound tourists, China can use tourism as a tool of pressure with few effective countermeasures.<sup>16</sup>

Although there are no official statistics on South Korea's overall economic loss caused by Chinese economic sanctions, one study estimates it to reach 8.5 trillion won, or 0.5% of South Korea's GDP in 2017 alone—7.1 trillion for the tourist sector, 1.4 trillion for exports, and 8.7 billion won for cultural losses.<sup>17</sup> It is quite obvious, though tricky to prove, that economic retaliation is now Beijing's oft-used political modus operandi, adopted to put it in a stronger position in diplomatic relations, as evidenced by the way Beijing addressed troubles with Japan, Norway, the Philippines, Mongolia, and Taiwan in the past. China's use of economic clout to bash its counterparts politically is an effective tactic partly because it is such a veiled maneuver difficult to prove. In the THAAD case as well, the Chinese authorities denied any official measures against South Korean products.

Second, China tried to exploit divided views on the THAAD deployment within South Korea to its advantage. South Koreans have been divided over the issue since the announcement of the deployment. According to a series of surveys by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, support for THAAD was highest in the immediate aftermath of North Korea's fourth nuclear test in February 2016, when 73.9% supported the American missile defense system.<sup>18</sup> However, the numbers continued to decline as the issue became politicized in the country. Disapproval has increased from the lowest 20.7% in February 2016 to the highest 50.6% in March 2017.

Conservative forces led by the then-ruling *Saenuri* Party argued that the THAAD deployment was the right decision because it was an unavoidable self-defense measure to cope with the North Korean nuclear and missile threats and a concrete sign of Washington's unwavering commitment to the South Korea-U.S. alliance. Meanwhile, progressive forces led by opposition parties took a contrasting stance, calling for immediate reversal of the decision. They argued that the THAAD system is of limited military utility and believed its deployment would not only harm relations with China, South Korea's vital economic partner, but also pit China and Russia against South Korea while strengthening their ties with North Korea. Opposition groups see the deployment of the THAAD system as a prelude to Seoul joining a U.S.-led missile defense system, which could in turn revive a new Cold War structure in Northeast Asia. This binary approach was evident in Korean public discourse, which labels those who support THAAD as "pro-American," and those who oppose it as "pro-Chinese."<sup>19</sup>

As the domestic division intensified and the THAAD issue became politicized in the midst of the early presidential elections due to the impeachment of Park Geun-hye, China tried to seize this opportunity to press South Korea to reverse the deployment decision. An editorial of *Global Times* wrote, "Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with seven Korean lawmakers from an opposition party over THAAD, and they have since been criticized back in their country as 'serving a big power' and 'selling out the national interest.'"<sup>20</sup> China's retaliation appeared to target the intensifying division in South Korea, which eventually would lead to reversal of the decision and drive a wedge between South Korea and the U.S.

Third, Beijing methodically and deliberately stoked Chinese nationalism as a means of strengthening social cohesion in pressuring South Korea. The Chinese media heavily covered the THAAD issue, contributing to the deterioration of public opinion against South Korea, which in turn led to boycotts of South Korean products. There were circular effects mutually reinforcing between unofficial sanctions, the media's negative and aggressive coverage, and Chinese public opinion. *Global Times* argued:



“The South Korean government has seriously underestimated China’s public opinion against THAAD. Department stores in Seoul may be popular among Chinese tourists. However, these tourists haven’t forgotten their identity. Chinese people have a clear mind about the situation on the Korean Peninsula and will not sacrifice national interest for Korean cosmetics if Seoul chooses to side with the U.S.”<sup>21</sup>

Xinhua News Agency wrote, “The right decision would be for Lotte to defer or reject the deal...Lotte stands to lose Chinese customers and the Chinese market. That would be a very large slice out of their business pie.”<sup>22</sup> Even Chinese school children have reportedly joined boycotts of Korean goods, chanting along with a teacher, “Lotte, leave China! Boycott Korean goods! Protest THAAD! Love China!”<sup>23</sup> According to over twenty opinion polls conducted by *Huanqiu* Online between February 2016 and November 2017, an absolute majority of Chinese respondents approved China’s retaliatory measures for South Korea.<sup>24</sup> In a February 2017 poll, 95% supported boycotts of not only Lotte goods, but also all South Korean products. After the conclusion of the land swipe between Lotte and the government, boycotts of South Korean products began to intermittently take place across the country.

Fourth, although the deployment decision was made jointly by South Korea and the U.S., China’s retaliation was exclusively targeted at South Korea. By doing so, China tried to widen any divide between South Korea and the U.S. There is a fundamental difference in the views on the deployment of THAAD between South Korea and China. Seoul, together with Washington, insisted that the decision to deploy the THAAD battery was solely to meet the defensive need against North Korean nuclear and missile threats, while China sees the deployment from a strategic viewpoint in the competition with the U.S. What concerns China is not a direct military threat from the THAAD battery in South Korea, but the expansion of American containment of China through the enhancement of the South Korea-U.S. alliance and trilateral security cooperation between the U.S., South Korea, and Japan.<sup>25</sup> China’s foreign minister Wang Yi stated, “The THAAD system has far exceeded the need for defense in the Korean Peninsula and will undermine the security interests of China and Russia, shatter the regional strategic balance and trigger an arms race.”<sup>26</sup> China sees South Korea as the weakest point in the trilateral security relationship and may have hoped that it could drive a wedge by creating an issue that would stir up anti-American sentiment in South Korea or, optimally, that would produce an apparent defeat for the U.S. if China could persuade South Korea not to deploy the system.<sup>27</sup> If South Korea rolled back its decision to deploy the THAAD system, it would likely shake the foundation of the alliance, eventually weakening the military role of South Korea in U.S.-led containment efforts against China.

China’s pressure failed to attain its goal—the withdrawal of the THAAD battery from South Korea—with mutual perceptions of South Koreans and Chinese only deteriorating. A March 2017 public opinion survey shows that the favorability of China among South Koreans dropped precipitously to a level (3.21 on a 1 to 10 scale) even below that of Japan (3.33). South Koreans’ favorable stance toward China has declined sharply from its high of 5.46 in September 2015 when Park Geun-hye attended the military parade in Tiananmen Square.<sup>28</sup> The THAAD dispute revealed a discrepancy between Beijing’s rhetorical values and its deeds, in which case, values stop functioning as soft power.<sup>29</sup> Despite China’s lofty description of itself as a different kind of great power with noble intentions, China failed to live up to its own standards. It utilized hard and sharp power, from economic leverage to

political and public pressure, to try to influence the policy choices of South Korea. Beijing's often touted "principle of amity, sincerity, mutual benefit and inclusiveness" in its relations with neighboring countries, as well as its emphasis on a "community of common destiny," turns out to be hollow when what its leadership considers "core interests" are at stake.

Beijing's sharp diplomacy throughout the THAAD dispute indeed played a crucial role in disillusioning South Korean people at large, and its intellectuals in particular, who, regardless of their political inclination, had nourished an image of benign power from a rising China. The Seoul-Beijing relationship has had unstable moments for the past three decades since the normalization, particularly whenever historical and territorial disputes broke out between the two that appealed to nationalist sentiments, such as China's Northeast Asia Project and its territorial claim to leodo, a reef located 149 kilometers from the southernmost South Korean island Marado. The THAAD dispute, however, revealed Beijing's geopolitical intention that goes far beyond parochial, nostalgic nationalism. Many South Koreans have now come to recognize that Beijing's expansive nationalism is combined with assertive geopolitical aspirations to make China more threatening with its sharp-edged power.

## Geopolitics, Divided National Identity, and South Korea's Peace Diplomacy

No doubt, a country's foreign policy reflects its historical experience, culture, norms, and values that constitute its national identity. Constructivists believe that self-defining identity becomes a basis for choosing foreign policy goals and strategies, thereby shaping national interest.<sup>30</sup> National identity consists of diverse components that include a group of essentialist elements such as ethnicity, language, and shared culture and history, and ideational ones such as norms, values, and ideals. When values as an ideational component of identity refer to abstract standards or principles of what is right and desirable, value diplomacy can be defined as a country's foreign policy to advocate, promote, and realize specific values embedded in its national identity. Value diplomacy thus defined has multiple dimensions, as shown in Table 3.

<b>National identity</b>	Foreign policy reflecting values ingrained in national identity.
<b>Cognitive frame</b>	Values in foreign policy serving as a cognitive frame, through which actors construct social reality from material reality.
<b>National role conception</b>	Value diplomacy should go in parallel with concrete roles and practice.
<b>Soft power</b>	When value diplomacy gains recognition and acknowledgement in the international realm, it could be a source of soft power.
<b>Norm entrepreneur</b>	Values could create norms in the international society, around which coalesce like-minded countries.

South Korea's value diplomacy can be assessed along these multiple dimensions. Its values embedded in national identity, and reflected in foreign policy, have vacillated in the post-World War II era as the Northeast Asian geopolitical structure has been shaping South Korea's identity politics. While geopolitics is generally conceptualized as the struggle between states for control and influence over space and place, it is also, seen through the lens of critical geopolitics, about a geographically-grounded approach of spatializing the world that "provides the geographical framing within which political elites and mass publics act in the world in pursuit of their own identities and interests."<sup>31</sup> This critical view focuses on how certain geopolitical representations, or imaginations, underpin specific policies and practices that are then interpreted in terms of them. Actors respond to the geopolitical environment, but they do so by "framing" their policies largely in terms of bigger geopolitical pictures.

The manifestation of Cold War geopolitics helped to secure and reinforce a set of geographical identities in South Korea, while serving to discipline differences within the country. Thus, throughout authoritarian administrations under presidents Syngman Rhee, Park Chung-hee, and Chun Doo-hwan, South Korea's national identity construction had long been suppressed and imposed from above with such widely exalted national aims as anti-communism and promotion of national security, and as a corollary, a great emphasis was on the importance of the South Korea-U.S. alliance. Competitive identity construction only began with democratization in the late 1980s and intensified especially since the 2000 inter-Korean summit between Kim Dae-jung and Kim Jong-il. Progressives and conservatives have competitively constructed contending views on North Korea as a crucial element—the significant other—of national identity, which have been reproduced and amplified by experts, policymakers, and media. The deepening polarization in South Korean identity politics has played a crucial role in shaping South Korea's policy toward the North. The South-South divide, or *nam-nam kalteung*, firmly founded on Korean identity politics, has had a deep, enduring influence on the way successive administrations craft and implement their foreign policy. Different administrations have taken different approaches to North Korea, appealing to their respective political constituency. The ideological divide, in combination with the regional divide, has become a crucial electoral platform for garnering South Koreans' votes.

The progressive administrations, led by presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, endeavored to set and attain their national aims of inter-Korean reconciliation and peaceful coexistence of the two Koreas. In contrast, the conservative administrations, under presidents Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye, placed their policy priority on consolidating the South Korea-U.S. alliance even at the expense of inter-Korean reconciliation. They clearly show differences in their commitment to inter-Korean reconciliation and the South Korea-U.S. alliance, and their policy choices were a function of their own policy preferences premised on particular political dispositions. The respective continuity in North Korea policy of progressive administrations and conservative administrations demonstrates the enduring effect of South Korea's identity politics on its North Korea policy choice in particular, and value diplomacy in general.

In the tradition of progressive administrations, the Moon Jae-in administration embraces peace as the utmost value to pursue through its foreign policy making and implementation. This is manifested not simply in a series of Moon's speeches and major government documents, but also in South Korea's role in making a lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula. Soon after its inauguration in May 2017 amid a grave security environment, the Moon administration declared the resolution of the security crisis and the establishment of peace on the Korean Peninsula top priorities, proclaiming three policy goals: the peaceful resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue, the establishment of a lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula, and the development of sustainable inter-Korean relations and realization of a new economic community on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>32</sup> A clearer element of Moon's peace initiative was disclosed in his speech at the Körber Foundation in Germany on July 6, 2017.<sup>33</sup> Under the vision of "peaceful coexistence" and "co-prosperity," the so-called Berlin Initiative consists of five pillars aimed at establishing peace on the Korean Peninsula: pursuit of peace which neither involves North Korea's collapse nor a forced unification, denuclearization that guarantees security of the North Korean regime, enactment of the inter-Korean agreements into law and conclusion of a peace agreement with the participation of relevant countries, work toward drawing a new economic map on the Korean Peninsula, and consistent pursuit of nonpolitical exchanges and cooperation projects.

The value of peace does not simply reflect the elements embedded in South Korea's national identity politics. It is also serving as a cognitive frame for the Moon administration to perceive North Korea and Korean reunification in inclusionary, not exclusionary, terms. Moon sees Korean unification not as an outcome as did his predecessors, but as an enduring inclusionary process "where both [North and South Korea] sides seek coexistence and co-prosperity and restore its national community."<sup>34</sup> Moon states, "What we are pursuing is only peace. A peaceful Korean Peninsula...is a peninsula where the South and the North recognize and respect each other and live well together."<sup>35</sup> If peace between the two Koreas is institutionalized to allow all Koreans to live without threat, North and South Korea will be able to recover national homogeneity and a sense of community, and, ultimately, achieve peaceful unification.<sup>36</sup>

This inclusionary view is in contrast with Lee Myung-bak's "Denuclearization and Opening 3000" and Park Geun-hye's "Unification as Bonanza," which underscore the preconditions for South Korean economic assistance to the North and the benefits to be gained by unification. Lee Myung-bak promised to provide comprehensive economic support to raise North Korean per capita GDP to \$3,000 per year in exchange for the North's denuclearization and integration with the international community. Park's strategy, based on a strong alliance with the U.S., adopted essentially the same template that had been used by the Lee administration. North Korea's denuclearization was considered a prerequisite for the achievement of a trust-based inter-Korean relationship, while the administration continued to view the security alliance with the U.S. as the foundation for its security by building on Lee's pro-alliance policy.<sup>37</sup>

The Moon administration's peace value is now being upheld by South Korea's specific role in the Korean Peninsula peace process. National role conceptions refer to domestically held political self-views or self-understandings regarding the proper role and purpose of one's site in the international arena.<sup>38</sup> Providing long-standing guidelines or standards for

behavior, a role conception conveys the image of what policy-makers regard as appropriate orientations of their state toward the external environment. South Korea's role in three areas is particularly notable: balanced diplomacy between the U.S. and China, inter-Korean reconciliation, and mediation between the U.S. and North Korea.

The resolution of the THAAD dispute between Seoul and Beijing, however incomplete it may be, could be viewed as South Korea's effort to take a balanced position between the U.S. and China. Soon after his inauguration in 2017, Moon exerted considerable effort to restore the relationship with China through multiple diplomatic channels. Beijing responded with positive signals such as high-level contacts and the renewal of the bilateral currency swap deal. On October 31, after a series of close consultations through diplomatic channels, the two countries finally agreed that the difficulties in bilateral relations due to the THAAD issue were not in accordance with the mutual interests of the two countries.<sup>39</sup>

In a joint statement, Beijing reiterated its opposition to the deployment of the THAAD system to South Korea and its concerns about the U.S.-led regional missile defense program, the deployment of additional THAAD batteries, and U.S.-South Korean-Japanese military cooperation. Although Seoul did not explicitly present its position on these issues in the statement, Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha stated Seoul's "Three No's" policy in a National Assembly hearing a day before the agreement, saying that Seoul had no intention to install additional THAAD batteries, participate in a regional missile defense system, and form a trilateral alliance with the U.S. and Japan.<sup>40</sup>

Having held bilateral meetings with Xi on the occasion of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Da Nang on November 11 and Prime Minister Li Keqiang on the occasion of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) +3 summit (with +3 referring to China, Japan, and South Korea) in Manila two days later, Moon made a state visit to China in December, which came at the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations. During the Moon-Xi summit on December 14, the two leaders concurred on the restoration of bilateral exchanges and cooperation, as well as four principles to secure peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>41</sup> Moon's state visit gave momentum to restoring relations. Consequently, Chinese group travel to South Korea partly resumed and various activities to strengthen relations once again also began to resume, including cultural exchanges organized by local governments and private institutions, thereby promoting people-to-people exchanges between the two countries.

In essence, South Korea agreed to at least symbolically distance itself from a U.S.-led strategy of containing China's presence in the region, in an effort to assure Beijing of its strategic position in the region. Although the agreement stirred up fierce domestic disputes in South Korea, with conservatives saying it was humiliating, low-posture diplomacy damaging security sovereignty while progressives valued it as peace momentum, the gist of the resolution of the issue was to strike a balance between Washington and Beijing to further pursue a neutral, peace diplomacy. While valuing an alliance with the U.S., Moon vowed to step up diplomatic efforts with China to peacefully resolve the North Korean problem through dialogue. Moon made this position clear by stating in an interview with *Channel News Asia* that he would pursue "a balanced diplomacy by honoring relations with the U.S. and having a closer relationship with China at the same time" as "the relationship with China has become more important not only in terms of economic cooperation, but also for strategic cooperation for the peaceful resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue."<sup>42</sup>

Moon's move to mend relations with Beijing while maintaining the deployment of the THAAD system represents Seoul's ongoing tightrope balance between its two most important bilateral relationships. With the top priority given to promoting peace and diplomatic resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue, the Moon administration is not eager to take sides between the two competing powers. This position was also demonstrated in Seoul's cautious approach to the U.S.-initiated Indo-Pacific strategy. When Trump during his visit to South Korea in November 2017 highlighted the U.S.-South Korea alliance as "a linchpin for security, stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific," Seoul was slow to embrace the concept, or its role as a linchpin, especially when the most clearly defined characteristic is its military and defense-orientation.<sup>43</sup>

Another notable role of South Korea is that of peacemaking on the Korean Peninsula through inter-Korean reconciliation. Following Kim Jong-un's 2018 New Year's speech, Moon had launched his peace initiative, which eventually led to North Korea's participation in the PyeongChang Winter Olympic Games. Since then, Moon and Kim have met three times in less than a year. The inter-Korean summits on April 27 at Panmunjom and on September 19 in Pyongyang, while supportive of North Korean denuclearization, put great emphasis on an "epochal advancement of the North-South Korean relations," military tension reduction through confidence-building measures (CBMs), and eventually the establishment of a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. While at Panmunjom, the two leaders declared the opening of a "new era of peace" on the peninsula, the Pyongyang Joint Declaration recommitted both sides to activities already agreed in the Panmunjom Declaration, and produced a longer annex on military CBMs signed by the two sides' defense ministers. The "Agreement on the Implementation of the Historic Panmunjom Declaration in the Military Domain" prescribes a range of confidence-building and practical steps to reduce tensions at the border.<sup>44</sup> These include the demolition of guard posts within the DMZ, joint demining and search for missing-in-action (MIA) remains in two areas within the zone, and the establishment from November 1, 2018 of specified no-fly limits on either side of the Military Demarcation Line (MDL). From that date all military exercises along the MDL aimed at the other side are also proscribed.

Since the three inter-Korean summits, inter-Korean relations have continued to forge ahead. In the months after the Pyongyang summit, the two Koreas continued to meet at lower levels to discuss creative and effective ways to implement its provisions. Although it remains the case that almost all economic dealings with North Korea risk breaching sanctions and, thus, progress in economic cooperation was slower since UN and other sanctions continued to block most inter-Korean economic dealings, a series of dialogues, exchanges, and cooperation in culture, arts, and athletics have been taking place.

No less important is Moon's adroit mediating role between Washington and Pyongyang. The Moon administration has sought a virtuous cycle of a conciliatory inter-Korean relationship and friendly relationship between North Korea and the U.S. based on mutual efforts at advancing the confidence-building process. In the past, when inter-Korean relations were completely broken, third party interventions were needed to foster inter-Korean dialogue and understanding, all the more so because the North had refused to have any meaningful dialogue with the South while attempting to improve communications with the U.S., a stance called *tongmi bongnam* (communicate with America, while blocking the South). Since the latest rapprochement, however, Seoul has emerged as a means to improve communications with Washington.<sup>45</sup>

The historic Singapore summit in June followed two critical moments. The first was when Trump accepted Kim Jong-un's invitation to meet immediately upon hearing about it from the South Korean delegation in the aftermath of the April Panmunjom summit. The second was when Trump abruptly canceled, on May 24, the scheduled U.S.-North Korea summit in Singapore. The two heads of states, Moon and Kim, met unexpectedly on the North Korean side of Panmunjom on May 26 at Kim's request to put their heads together to discuss ways to salvage the canceled summit meeting. Having met with Trump in Washington on May 22, Moon played the role of mediator between the two by tactfully delivering each side's messages to the other. He delivered Kim's expression of his "firm commitment to a complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula," while briefing Kim on his meeting with Trump in Washington, telling him that the U.S. was willing to end hostile relations and provide economic cooperation with North Korea should it completely denuclearize. "Since both Chairman Kim and President Trump want a successful summit, I stressed that the two sides need to communicate directly to remove their misunderstandings and to hold sufficient working-level talks on the agenda for the summit meeting," Moon said in a press briefing after the second summit with Kim.<sup>46</sup>

On February 19, 2019, one week ahead of the second Kim-Trump summit, Moon told Trump in a telephone call that South Korea was determined to take up the role of opening economic engagement with North Korea as a "concession" if it would hasten Pyongyang's denuclearization.<sup>47</sup> Moon appeared to suggest that if Washington could not immediately ease the current UN or bilateral sanctions, it should consider letting South Korea press ahead with inter-Korean collaborative projects, such as reconnecting rail and road links between the two Koreas and other economic cooperation, as an alternative incentive for the North. Moon pinned his hopes on encouraging the North to denuclearize by incentivizing its actions.

The second U.S.-North Korean summit in Hanoi in February 2018 ended with no agreement whatsoever, only revealing the gap between Washington and Pyongyang in their approaches to North Korean denuclearization: Washington demanded the final, fully verified denuclearization (FFVD) of North Korea ahead of the full lifting of sanctions against it, while Pyongyang, according to Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho's midnight press conference after the summit was over, offered to dismantle the nuclear facilities in Yongbyon under the observation and verification of the U.S. in exchange for partial lifting of five UN Security Council sanctions resolutions imposed since 2016. The failure of the Hanoi summit, however, does not spell the end of South Korea's peace initiative. Despite the Hanoi setback, Seoul remains optimistic about the peace process because the negotiation track is still open, and Pyongyang and Washington can be brought back to the table. South Korea has a pivotal, albeit very daunting, role to play in the process's coming phase, drawing Washington and Pyongyang closer to each other by narrowing the gap between the two approaches. Moon's peace initiative, and his constructive role between Washington and Pyongyang in particular, would be a critical foundation, once successful, on which to build South Korea's peace diplomacy beyond the Korean Peninsula in a longer time horizon.

## Conclusion

Over the course of its history, South Korea's political landscape has long been dominated and entrapped by the tumultuous geopolitical dynamics of Northeast Asia. The divided Korean Peninsula with the two confronting Koreas created an environment conducive to the penetration and manifestation of the post-World War II geopolitical environment on the peninsula, with the two nations falling victim to regional geopolitical dynamics for decades. Since rifts between the South and the North have continued and often been amplified by such regional dynamics, the end of the Cold War did not bring an end to, or at least roll back, the influence of ideological geopolitics on the Korean Peninsula.

Ideological geopolitics has now morphed into classical geopolitics marked by great power rivalry, particularly between the U.S. and China, whose scope is not necessarily delineated by ideological contentions. Inter-Korean confrontation has been spawned and unfolded in a way that entraps South Korea in this newly forged geopolitical rivalry in the region, making its dependence on the alliance with the U.S. necessary since the end of the Korean War. Added to this security dependence on the U.S. is South Korea's growing economic dependence on China, attributable to its export-driven economy and China's rapid rise. China, when combined with Hong Kong, now accounts for nearly one third of South Korea's exports. Almost half of total foreign visitors to South Korea are Chinese, who spend, on average, five times more than an ordinary foreign tourist. Moreover, Chinese investors hold almost 18 trillion won in South Korea's government bonds and publicly traded securities. Thus, the current picture of South Korean politics and diplomacy is complicated by Seoul's dual dependence, meaning the intertwining of security dependence on the U.S. on the one hand and economic dependence on China on the other. This dual dependence makes South Korea vulnerable to great power competition, and China's sharp power offensive in particular. Seen in this perspective of a geopolitical trap, improvement of inter-Korean relations and the establishment of a lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula would be a crucial, fundamental requisite to effectively navigate through the coming wave of China's sharp power offensive.

In today's global context of value "blocization" driven by great powers, it is crucial for non-great powers to espouse impartial and inclusionary values and roles to prevent "blocization" from erupting into violent confrontations. In converting the current exclusionary identity politics into inclusionary politics, it would be critical not to join either of the blocs hurriedly, but to uphold neutral, inclusive values such as peace, coexistence, and reconciliation, bolstered by concrete roles to fulfill the ideals of such values. Central to inclusionary identity politics is to admit and acknowledge differences between the "Self" and "Other," and to endeavor to peacefully coexist with the different others. The "Self" and "Other" should not necessarily be pitted against each other in order to foster peaceful, constructive coexistence. It would be possible for South Korea to unlock the potential for launching a well-grounded platform for its peace diplomacy in the years ahead based on the ongoing peace process between North and South Korea. Moreover, the role of an inclusive peace facilitator, once successfully performed and recognized by the international community, would also provide South Korea with invaluable diplomatic leverage punching over its hard power weight.



## Endnotes

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- <sup>9</sup> This part draws on Taehwan Kim, "Authoritarian Sharp Power: Comparing China and Russia," *The Asan Forum* 6, no. 3 (May-June 2018).
- <sup>10</sup> Among the issues Beijing considers "sensitive" are the 1989 Tiananmen protests, Tibet, Xinjiang, Taiwan independence, the Dalai Lama, and Falun Gong.
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- <sup>13</sup> Alexander Lukin, *China and Russia: The New Rapprochement* (New York: Polity, 2018), xv.
- <sup>14</sup> According to the Korea Tourist Organization, the number of Chinese tourists to South Korea was reduced to 4.17 million, a 48.3% decrease from the previous year. *Kookmin Ilbo*, January 22, 2018.
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- <sup>29</sup> Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 11.
- <sup>30</sup> See, for example, Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
- <sup>31</sup> John A. Agnew, *Geopolitics: Re-Visioning World Politics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 3.
- <sup>32</sup> Early in 2017, North Korea tested a series of ballistic missiles including Pukkuksong-2(SLBM) on February 12 and Hwasong-12(IRBM) on May 14. North Korea launched a total of 20 ballistic missiles in 2017 alone, and proclaimed to have "finally realized the great historic cause of completing the state nuclear force." Due to Pyongyang's repeated acts of provocation and threatening rhetoric, the situation on the Korean Peninsula grew more unstable, and some within the U.S. began to raise the possible use of military force. This led to an unprecedentedly heightened sense of crisis.
- <sup>33</sup> "President Moon Jae-in's Address at the Körber Foundation, Germany on July 6, 2017." <https://english1.president.go.kr/BriefingSpeeches/Speeches/65>.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

- <sup>36</sup> The ROK Ministry of Unification, *Moon Jae-in's Policy on the Korean Peninsula: A Peninsula of Peace and Prosperity* (2017).
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- <sup>38</sup> Mathilde Chatin, "Brazil: Analysis of a Rising Soft Power," in Chatin and Giulio M. Gallarotti, eds., *Emerging Powers in International Politics: The BRICS and Soft Power* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 36-37.
- <sup>39</sup> For a full text of the October agreement, see Press Release of the ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs, October 31, 2017, [http://www.mofa.go.kr/www/brd/m\\_4080/view.do?seq=367200](http://www.mofa.go.kr/www/brd/m_4080/view.do?seq=367200).
- <sup>40</sup> *Chosun Ilbo*, October 30, 2017.
- <sup>41</sup> These four principles are: war on the Korean Peninsula can never be tolerated; denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula will be firmly maintained; all issues, including the denuclearization of North Korea, will be peacefully resolved through dialogue and negotiations; and an improvement in inter-Korean relations will ultimately be helpful in resolving issues involving the Korean Peninsula.
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- <sup>44</sup> The full text is available at <https://www.ncnk.org/resources/publications/agreement-implementation-historic-panmunjom-declaration-military-domain.pdf>.
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