

# South Korea's Evolving Balanced Diplomacy and China: A Discourse and Big Data Analysis of President Moon Jae-in's Perception

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## 〈Abstract〉

What is the strategy that made the Moon Jae-in administration maintain a 'balanced diplomacy', thus far? Regarding this, the views of Seoul's allies were negative and sometimes harsh. This paper tries to reveal the substance of Seoul's strategic position and its China policy by analyzing Moon's perception of national security. Here, the term of national security is assumed to have four aspects: existential threat, structural threat, economic security, and political security. As a research methodology, we mainly used discourse and big data analysis. The results revealed that Moon's perception of China stood out for his pragmatism in flexibly responding to the external changes. In terms of national interests, he wanted to secure China's cooperation on the Korean Peninsula issue, ensure diplomatic and security autonomy against the US-China competition, hedge against various economic threats, and overcome domestic confrontation between progressives and conservatives. If we look at Moon's perception considering the meanings of balance, he shows a strong reluctance to outright power politics by great powers, an unexpectedly indifferent attitude toward the negative impact of the US-China competition on the stability and peace of Northeast Asian and the peninsula, and a strong desire to improve the poor distribution of power through national capacity building.

\*Keywords: Moon Jae-in, South Korea, Balanced Diplomacy, Korean-China Relations, US-China, Competition

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## I. Introduction

*"South Korea would bring legitimacy and credibility as a fairly independent foreign policy actor. Despite its alliance with the U.S., South Korea will not simply provide support for any U.S. policy out of habit. (...) Also, a middle or pivotal power such as South Korea can be an asset to superpowers seeking to garner the support of third countries behind their initiatives—a degree of multilateralism"(Pardo 2019).*

Pardo's insight is becoming increasingly appealing due to the remarkable achievements of the Moon Jae-in administration, as the strategic competition between Washington and Beijing intensifies and the COVID-19 pandemic strikes the world. Those achievements include the overwhelming ability to cope with the pandemic, the highest level of economic resilience among OECD member countries, Moon's participation in the Group of Seven summit, the rapid growth of soft power, among others.

Seoul's allies, however, held negative views on 'balanced diplomacy' or 'strategic ambiguity' which was advocated by the Moon administration as the main foreign policy principle. Then, what is the strategy that made the Moon administration maintain its balanced diplomacy? In what framework has Seoul's comprehensive China policy been implemented? What policy implications can we derive from Seoul's way of dealing with its giant neighbor? These questions are even more pronounced because Seoul's policy toward Beijing has shown considerable differences compared to those of the US and Japan. Seoul has preferred to maintain rather than abolish its engagement policy toward China, and to favor a non-zero-sum cooperation, rather than zero-sum confrontation, in its bilateral relations. Unlike Japan, Seoul did not follow the US-led anti-China front in a proxy competition between the US and China.

Unfortunately, the existing literature does not adequately answer these questions. First, they tend to highly focus on Moon's diplomatic stance

on the US-China strategic competition. Their interests in the US-China relations are mainly focused on the confrontational approach of the US toward China, Washington's demand for Seoul's participation in it, among others. They then question whether the balanced diplomacy will be sustainable. Particularly, most South Korean experts hold negative views about the balanced diplomacy(Hyun 2021; Park 2020). The others focus attention on specific issues of ROK-China conflict. These issues as follows: although the Moon administration has effectively managed the dilemma caused by the THAAD conflict and the US-China strategic competition, it has not been able to reset ROK-China relations; there exist fundamental, conceptual, and practical limitations between Seoul and Beijing in their strategic partnership; the ROK-China military relations will deteriorate due to a weak base, a lack of consensus on mutual strategic goals, and the strategic competition(Chung 2012; Kim 2019; Lee 2021).

We must avoid the intellectual tendency to regard South Korea's China policy as a mere response to external challenges. Seoul's recent diplomatic stance is a result of strategic considerations by its policy makers. The analysis of the role of political leadership is vital, in this context. However, thus far, there are very few studies on this topic. Moreover, we need to consider not only structural threats such as the US-China competition, but also ROK-China relations related to the existential threat of the North Korean nuclear issue, economic vulnerability exposed by the THAAD issue, and domestic political threats as well. Such an attempt could help correct the highly politicized discourse in Seoul that the Moon administration underestimates its alliance with the US and overestimates its relations with China. This research can also contribute to enriching research on hedging strategies commonly taken by East Asian countries. In this study, we aim to reveal Moon's perception of China in terms of national security. Here we assume that the 'national security' has four aspects: (a)existential threat, (b)structural threat, (c)economic security, and (d)political security.<sup>1)</sup> The questions raised on these aspects are as follows.

First, in relation to the existential threat of North Korea's military provocation, what role has Moon expected of China? Second, what was the main reason behind Moon maintaining the balanced diplomacy? Third, what was Moon's perception of, and responses against, economic security threats, including China's THAAD retaliation? Fourth, why has Moon not used the Chinese factor politically? We will discuss these questions in III, IV, V, and VI, followed by a brief overview of Moon's perception of China in II.

This study adopts discourses and big data analysis, targeting the text that is directly or indirectly associated with China policy, as stated by Moon. There are a total of 255 primary sources: Blue House chief staff meetings log(47), National Security Council meeting log(9), domestic and international press conferences(15), presidential speeches(87), speeches at the National Assembly(3), cabinet meetings log(30), remarks at the summits(27), and books and newspaper articles(7). In addition, a total of 44,348 data from portal sites such as NAVER News, Google News, and You Tube were used as secondary data. The selected text is investigated based on the speaker's views analyzing the use of specific vocabulary or phrases, the connotation or implied meaning of a specific vocabulary, and direct and euphemistic expressions(Kim 2013, 37). However, discourse analysis may have limitations in data collection, ensuring objectivity, and reliability. To compensate, we add a text-mining technique. Text mining handles structured and unstructured data, and benefits from being able to accurately explain actual phenomena.<sup>2)</sup> Specifically, we conducted a

1) On the concept of national security, we especially refer to Buzan and Hansen(2010, 659-667). For reference, existential threat refers to a threat to national survival or identity. Structural threats mean threats that cause instability to the international security order. Economic security is the ability of a country to follow its choice of policies to develop the national economy in the manner desired. Political security is concerned with to internal conflicts, national identity, and political legitimacy related to ideological competition or political systems.

2) Big data analysis goes through four-phases: (a)information collection; (b)information preprocessing; (c)data analysis; and (d)visualization(Kim 2015, 27). Additionally, we

keyword analysis using Tex-tom, a big data analysis program. Of course, it is difficult to analyze all policy actions with those methods, but we think it is one of effective ways to objectively identify his China policy perception.

## II. Moon's Perception of China: A Brief Overview

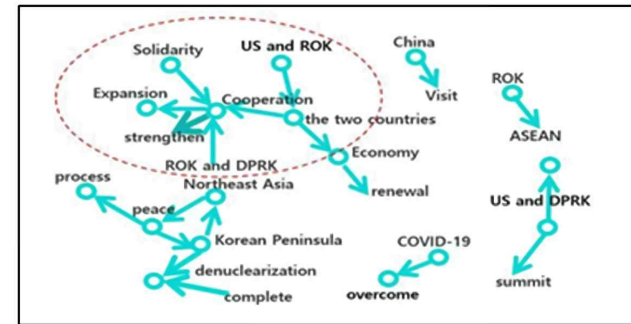
First, we conducted a statistical analysis through text mining of Moon's speeches and discourses to objectively derive his China policy perception. The top 10 words representing the speaker's core message are 'cooperation', 'Korean Peninsula', 'DPRK(North Korea)', 'economy', 'USA(United States)', 'ASEAN', 'history', 'security', 'denuclearization', and 'summit'. In the case of TF-IDF, 'cooperation', 'Korean Peninsula', 'DPRK', 'USA', 'ASEAN', 'economy', 'history', 'denuclearization', followed by 'summit' and 'Japan'. We also conducted cloud analysis and TF-IDF-based matrix chart analysis to visually derive connections and patterns between words(Fig.1 and 2). The results show that Moon emphasized 'cooperation' in the bilateral relations. By strengthening cooperation with China, Moon is trying to urge China to play a constructive role in the North Korean issue, strengthen economic cooperation and cultural, people-to-people exchanges, and respond closely to the coronavirus. 'Korean Peninsula' and 'DPRK' were next in the line of importance. 'Economy' seems to have a relationship with its economic dependency on China and the US-China trade conflict. Furthermore, 'ASEAN' and 'USA' occupied a high proportion in word frequency and TF-IDF.

analyze "N-gram" and "TF-IDF"(inverse document frequency: statistics indicate the importance of a word within a specific document) to examine keyword selection and unexpected word exclusion, simultaneous words, and the importance of specific words.

Figure 1. Word Cloud of Moon's Perceptions of China Policy



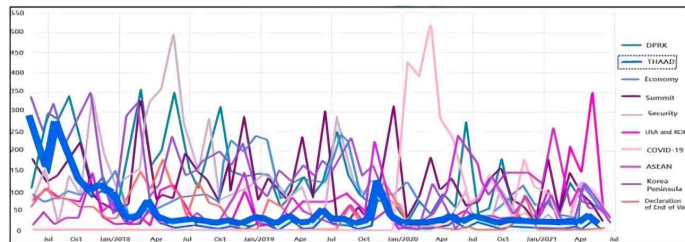
Figure 2. Network Chart of Moon's Perception of China Policy



We then conducted time-series analyses through word frequency and TF-IDF for major China policy issues in the bilateral relations. Moon suddenly decided to deploy the THAAD unit in June 2017, despite his former negative stance. A direct trigger was North Korea's test of an intercontinental ballistic missile in June 2017. The Trump administration considered the THAAD issue as a barometer of the ROK-US alliance and was pressuring Seoul. Moon's decision made ROK-China relations even colder. This is because the Chinese side strongly opposed the

deployment, even with President Xi Jinping's strong words. China has taken various economic retaliatory measures, against former President Park Geun-hye's decision to deploy THAAD in June 2016. To overcome this situation, the two sides announced the bilateral agreement to improve relations between Korea and China on October 31, 2017. After this agreement, two summit meetings were held with Moon's visit to China(December 12-16 2017) and his participation in the APEC summit(December 14 2017). Although it was difficult to view this progress as a complete normalization of the relations, the two sides agreed to put the THAAD conflict aside and strengthen economic ties under the common concerns about the unprecedented tension between Pyongyang and Washington(Graph 1).<sup>3)</sup>

Graph 1. Time-Series Analysis of 'THAAD' Issue

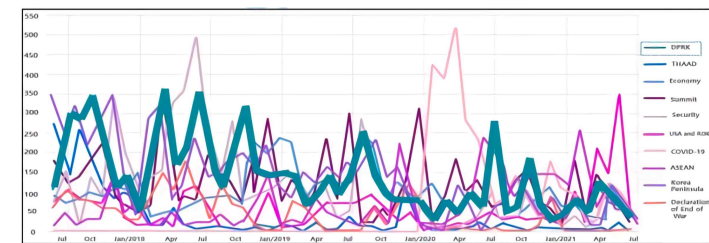


The second issue was on North Korea and the Korean Peninsula. The situation on the Korean Peninsula reached its worst state in the summer of 2007 due to North Korea's military provocations, and then faced a dramatic reversal in the first half of 2018. Moon's role as a 'catalyst' set the stage for the reversal(Snyder & Byun 2018, 85). Starting with the

3) In Summer of 2017, Trump said that Pyongyang will be met with "fire and fury" if it threatens the US and derided Kim Jong-un as the "Little Rocket Man." Kim, in return, threatened that he has a "nuclear button" on his desk and is ready to use it in January 2018(YNA, 24 September 2017).

Pyeongchang Olympics, President Moon led the North Korea-China summit, the inter-Korean summit, and the North Korea-US summit. In the process, Moon urged China to impose stronger sanctions on North Korea's missile and nuclear tests. But while inter-Korean and US-DPRK dialogues were in full swing, he mentioned two Koreas and America, as parties concerned to the end-of-war declaration(Graph 2).

Graph 2. Time-Series Analysis of 'North Korea' Issue



The third issue was the US-China strategic competition, especially the response to requests from the US. Seoul did not accept Washington's request to participate in the anti-China front. Seoul took an ambiguous stance, neither supporting nor rejecting the Indo-Pacific initiative formulated by the Trump administration in the fall of 2017. At the ROK-US summit in Seoul in June 2019, the two sides agreed to promote 'harmonious cooperation' between the New Southern Policy and the Indo-Pacific Strategy, in accordance with the regional cooperation principles of openness, inclusiveness, and transparency. At the ROK-US 2+2 meeting(Seoul) in March 2021, right after the Biden administration took office, Seoul repeatedly put forward the principles in response to the US request for its joining in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue(Quad). On May 21 2021, Seoul agreed to develop the ROK-US relationship into a comprehensive and reciprocal responsibility alliance at the ROK-US summit in Washington. As Graph 3, comparing pre- and post-corona



South Korea and the US—to help resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. The cases cited by him as a threat in relation to China is the extent of the negative impact of the corona pandemic on economic relations between them.

## 2. North Korea as Existential Threat

The most significant existential threat recognized by Moon was North Korea's military provocations, including its nuclear and missile developments, and the resulting escalation of tension on the Korean Peninsula. Moon emphasized, "the biggest challenge we face right now is North Korea's nuclear weapons and missiles. The government will do everything to stop war. Regardless of the twists and turns, the North Korean nuclear issue must be resolved peacefully" ([https://www1.president.go.kr/articles/789.downloaded\\_2021/08/02](https://www1.president.go.kr/articles/789.downloaded_2021/08/02)). As Alagappa aptly pointed out, only three political entities—that is, Taiwan and two Koreas—are in danger of disappearing from the political sphere in the future (Alagappa 2003, 598). Moon's suggested solution was the Berlin Initiative for Peace on the Korean Peninsula. And the Berlin Initiative leads to the New Korean Peninsula Regime. An extract of Moon's published article in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) help us understand the cognitive framework of his foreign policy perception, as given below.

"The current order on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia is deeply linked to the 'Cold War structure' implanted in the region at the end of World War II. In the process of settling post-war matters, the decision was made to divide the Korean Peninsula into two sides against the wishes of the Korean people, who soon were forced to suffer a tragic war. (...) The two Koreas remain divided, and North Korea does not have normal diplomatic relations with either the United States or Japan. (...) If the North Korea-US

dialogue results in complete denuclearization and the establishment of North Korea US diplomatic relations, and if the Korean War armistice agreement is replaced with a formal peace treaty, the old Cold War order will collapse and a new order of peace will start to reign on the Korean Peninsula" (Moon, May 7 2019).

Thus, he possesses a geopolitical notion that the essence of the peace-threatening problem is attributable to the remaining structure of the Cold War on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia. According to him, dismantling of the Cold War structure on the peninsula would lead to overthrowing the structure in Northeast Asia. When presenting this to the Chinese side, he suggested a vision that Seoul's attempts are essential for China's peace and prosperity.

## 3. China's Expected Role

Korean policymakers' desire to achieve their own geopolitical goals—especially the denuclearization of North Korea and reunification—remains a powerful reason for them to continue showing sensitivity to Beijing and seeking friendlier political relations with Beijing (Lee 2021). The policy implementations of Seoul have shown considerable differences between governments. The former Park administration tried to actively draw Beijing into the front line of pressure on Pyongyang by adopting an unprecedented pro-China stance while maintaining ROK-US-Japan coordination. Park's approach was based on the 'China role theory' with two optimistic premises. First, China clearly influences North Korea, and second, China is willing to exert influence on North Korea (Suh 2017, 16-19).

Thus, what role did Moon expect China to play? Unlike Park, he expected China to be a 'limited supporter.' First, he said that "North Korea's test launch of ballistic missiles and nuclear tests pose a serious threat to the geographically closest Korean peninsula and Northeast Asia, and world

peace. The resulting escalation of tension is a great threat to both countries”(https://www1.president.go.kr/articles/1785. downloaded 2021/08/01).

He emphasized that both countries share a common position toward North Korea, leading to Moon and Xi agreeing “four principles for denuclearization and peace-building on the Korean peninsula” at the summit in December 2017(https://www1.president.go.kr/articles/1785. downloaded 2021/08/01).<sup>4)</sup>

Although he did not mention on it, he was possibly concerned about the restoration of DPRK-China alliance.<sup>5)</sup> The revival of the traditional geopolitical perception of the peninsula by the Chinese side was inevitably in conflict with Moon's goal of dismantling the Cold War structure through denuclearization and establishment of a peace regime. Beijing may emphasize the DPRK-China blood alliance, view North Korea as a strategic buffer zone vis-a-vis the US, and focus more on the stability of Pyongyang regime than the realization of denuclearization(Jang 2015, 155). Furthermore, China could be a spoiler in blocking denuclearization by prioritizing geopolitics and using the issue to maximize its influence at the expense of the US(Snyder & Byun 2018, 89).

Moon proposed an end-of-war declaration among three countries, two Koreas and the US, and a peace treaty among four including China. In the case of a peace treaty, China, who is a party to the Korean War armistice agreement, will naturally participate. However, Moon condensed participants into the three as the main body of the declaration to end the war, noting

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4) The four principles are (a)war on the Korean Peninsula is absolutely unacceptable, (b)both firmly adhere to the principle of denuclearization of the peninsula, (c)all issues are to be resolved peacefully through dialogue and negotiations, and (d) improving relations between two Koreas ultimately helps to resolve issues on the peninsula.

5) China successfully restored relations with North Korea by holding the summits (Dalian, July 5 2018; Beijing, June 19-20, 2018), before and after the Singapore summit. At this meeting, Xi emphasized the geostrategic importance of restoring traditional friendly relations. Xi, who visited Pyongyang in June 2019, promised support for the political resolution of the peninsula issue, evaluation of Pyongyang's denuclearization efforts, and ensuring North Korea's domestic security.

that China's participation was unnecessary.<sup>6)</sup> This is because he regarded the declaration as a political declaration expressing their will to resolve hostilities, or, as a gateway to the denuclearization of the peninsula and the peace regime(https://www1.president.go.kr/articles/3138. downloaded 2021/08/02; https://www1.president.go.kr/articles/4346. downloaded 2021/08/02). The US-China and ROK-China have normalized their relations; thus, if the remaining two countries declare an end to the war, the declaration between the four parties to the Korean War will be completed. This shows that Moon recognized China a 'constant' variable in relation to the peninsula issue. In addition, China's role in resolving the North Korean nuclear issue remained important. However, Moon administration wanted to show a friendly attitude of 'interest and support' to the inter-Korean relations that they are leading, rather than using it as a leverage. An improvement in inter-Korean relations can lead to improvement in ROK-China relations, but a deterioration in inter-Korean relations can lead to cooperation between the ROK and the US, which can strengthen China's checks. Unlike Park administration, the Moon administration wanted China to continue to focus on, support, and play a constructive role in the inter-Korean relations, without active political intervention(https://www.korea.kr/news/blueHouseView.do?newsId=148839356. downloaded 2021/02/22; https://www.korea.kr/archive/speechView.do?newsId=132033609. downloaded 2021/07/03; https://www1.president.go.kr/articles/7970. downloaded 2022/02/21).

## IV. Structural Threat: Chasing Two Hares

### 1. Economy, not Security

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The Moon administration considered the intensification of the US-China

6) This issue had sparked controversy over China, However, in September 2018 at the Vladivostok Eastern Economic Forum, Xi declared that two Koreas and the US are parties of the political declaration.

strategic competition as a more serious security threat than the rise of China. The two giants began to apply pressure to prevent South Korea from leaning to the other side. Over the issue of THAAD, the Chinese side, even Xi, strongly insisted on the withdrawal, and the US side regarded the deployment as a barometer of fulfilling its alliance promises. Subsequently, the Moon administration had to face an unprecedented situation of alternative or proxy competition: the US request for participation in the anti-China security initiative, and Chinese check on it. The results of analyzing the trends of Seoul's mainstream media on the US-China competition for a total of 1,483 articles, according to the frequency of words are, as follows: 'conflict', 'trade war', 'economy', 'corporation', 'competitiveness', 'semiconductor', 'THAAD', 'hegemony', 'tightrope diplomacy', and 'exacerbation'. Meanwhile, TF-IDF result shows 'conflict', 'trade war', 'cooperation', 'economy', 'competitiveness', 'semiconductor', 'hegemonic competition', 'tightrope diplomacy', and 'intensification'(Table 2).

Most of them view the US-China competition as a hegemonic one, and foreseeing it to increasingly intensify. Therefore, they tended to criticize Moon's balanced diplomacy, mainly using the word 'tightrope walking'.<sup>7)</sup> The result of analyzing Moon's discourse on the competition shows the economic issue, rather than security, to gain the upper hand. The word frequency, in that order, is as follows: 'economy', 'semiconductor', 'Korean Peninsula', 'cooperation', 'competitiveness enhancement', 'trade war', 'denuclearization', 'THAAD', 'ASEAN', and 'balanced diplomacy'. In addition, the results of the TF-IDF were in the order of 'economy', 'semiconductor', 'Korean Peninsula', 'competitiveness', 'cooperation', 'trade war', 'THAAD', 'ASEAN', 'denuclearization', and

7) In May 2021, the results of the South Korean polls on balanced diplomacy by Korea Research show "Maintaining a balance between the US and China"(33.8%), "Prioritizing pro-China diplomacy"(29.3%), "Prioritizing pro-US diplomacy"(16.1%), and "Don't know well"(20.7%)(Lee 2021). The gap between the mainstream media and the general public can be identified.

'balanced diplomacy'(Table 3).

Table 2. Keywords of Media on US-China Competition

	Word Frequency	TF-IDF
1	conflict	conflict
2	trade war	trade war
3	economy	corporation
4	corporation	economy
5	competitiveness	competitiveness
6	semiconductor	semiconductor
7	THAAD	hegemonic competition
8	hegemonic competition	tightrope diplomacy
9	tightrope diplomacy	exacerbation
10	exacerbation	intensification

Table 3. Keywords of Moon's Perception on US-China Competition

	Word Frequency	TF-IDF
1	economy	economy
2	semiconductors	semiconductors
3	Korean Peninsula	Korean Peninsula
4	cooperation	competitiveness
5	competitiveness	cooperation
6	trade war	trade war
7	denuclearization	THAAD
8	THAAD	ASEAN
9	ASEAN	denuclearization
10	balanced diplomacy	balanced diplomacy

Interestingly, Moon viewed the core of the competition as a battle over dominance in the 'economy', especially in technology, leading to the



perspective that the competition was an opportunity rather than a conflict. He said, "the semiconductor industry is a key national strategic industry in which the present and future of our economy depend," and emphasized at the K-Semiconductor Strategy Committee, "we must make this opportunity our own by strengthening the domestic industrial ecosystem and leading the global supply chain through preemptive investments that will not be shaken by external shocks."(<https://www.korea.kr/archive/speechView.do?newsId=132033201>. downloaded 2021/07/02; <https://www1.president.go.kr/articles/10702>. downloaded 2022/05/07). In sum, President Moon seemed to view the US-China competition mainly on the basis of economic issues. In particular, in economic matters, it was intended to broaden the scope of action with semiconductors and new materials, and to induce cooperation between the US and China.

## 2. Strong Will to Steer its Own Destiny

Meanwhile, the Moon administration has maintained its balanced diplomacy without wavering. This consistent stance seems to have been supported by Moon's firm beliefs. He regarded the ROK-US alliance as the cornerstone of foreign and security policy. Many view Seoul's balanced diplomacy as pursuing a 'neutral line,' which is a misunderstanding. The Moon administration emphasized cooperation with Washington, in promoting the denuclearization of North Korea and continuing the peace process(Kim 2019, 65). Moon was most conscious of the US ally's move(Table 1). Seoul-Beijing relations were a sub-variable of ROK-US relations, and therefore, Seoul's policy toward China could not be completely free from Washington's China policy. He accepted Washington's demands to a large extent, enduring Trump's bluffing that joint ROK-US military exercises would be too costly, and the United States Forces Korea(USFK) would be gradually withdrawn. In addition, the issue of USFK should be decided by the two countries, regardless of the declaration of an end to the war or a peace treaty. The

Moon administration and the newly launched Biden administration in January 2021 then agreed to make the alliance comprehensive and reciprocal. Notably, Moon mentioned that the alliance played an essential role in the formation of South Korea's national identity. At a speech co-hosted by US Council on Foreign Relations, Korea Society and Asia Society in September 2018, he evaluated, "without the alliance, it would have been difficult for Korea to achieve both democracy and economic development in half a century"(<https://www.korea.kr/news/policyPhotoView.do?bbsKey=29698>. downloaded 2021/02/21).

Nevertheless, Moon did not accept Trump's request to participate in the initiative in relation for external balancing against China. Moon had faced two challenges. One was his decision of the THAAD deployment. To the US side, the already deployed THAAD battery was a standard fact, and to the Chinese side, "the agreement in October 2017" was presented. The other challenge was that Moon gave a clear answer that he would not participate in the anti-China front at the ROK-US summit(Seoul) on June 30 2019. Moon has neither supported nor rejected the Indo-Pacific strategy formulated by the US since the fall of 2017, and he expressed his official support for the first time(Kim 2017). However, Trump was eventually unable to obtain Moon's joining.

The Moon administration supported both regional initiatives of the US and China and was willing to seek synergies with its economy-centered regional policies. Seoul's extremely cautious stance on external balancing seems to have revealed Moon's deep-seated perception of geopolitical threats related to the peninsula in addition to economic and North Korean policy considerations. As the FAZ article shows, the criterion for his geopolitical awareness was modern colonial and Cold War experiences. He aimed to secure the right to decide the fate that was not swayed by foreign powers. To realize this, it was essential for him to secure the initiative in relation to the peninsula issue, and prevent the escalation of the geopolitical battle between the two giants. He then had

to avoid Seoul's hostile policy toward China, which is likely to revert to 'ROKUS-Japan vs. DPRK-China-Russia' structure.

Conversely, Moon's efforts to internal balancing were quietly but unprecedently passionate. He has increased the defense budget by 10 trillion KRW in the first two years after his inauguration, ushering in an era of 50 trillion KRW (approximately 43 billion USD) in the defense budget in 2020 (<https://www1.president.go.kr/articles/8002>, downloaded 2022/02/21). The defense reform aims at an early construction of a strong army in preparation for security threats. Thus, Seoul focuses not only on asymmetrical threats from Pyongyang but also on the newly emerging regional threats, including expanding security influence and arms build-ups of its neighbors. Further, Moon successfully persuaded Biden to lift a 42-year-old restriction on Seoul's missile development program. If external environments worsen, these capabilities may prove to be an important hedge against potential threats from outside (*Military Watch* 2018; Missile Threat 2021).

## VI. Economic Security: Anti-China ROK-US Economic Alliance?

### 1. Economic Hedging and Diversification

We should refrain from viewing the THAAD conflict only in the context of the bilateral relations, and should rather look at it as Seoul's response to an attempt toward economic securitization by major countries. Regarding this, Moon felt a considerable sense of crisis. Except for Pyongyang's move, the only use of the term 'threat' was in the matter of economy. For example, Abe cabinet's export restrictions and disruption of the global supply chain due to the coronavirus pandemic was directly mentioned by him as threats.<sup>8)</sup> Moon emphasized, "as we have learned from Japan's unfair export controls, our economy's excessive dependence on foreign countries can thr

eaten our economy at any time." (<https://www1.president.go.kr/articles/8127>, downloaded 2021/08/23). He added, "Protectionism and self-interest in the country are intensifying amid the coronavirus pandemic, the international division of labor is being cracked, and the global supply chain is rapidly reorganizing. It is a very serious threat that cannot be compared with Japan's export restrictions" (<https://www1.president.go.kr/articles/8813>, downloaded 2021/08/23). The Moon administration responded with tough measures, such as filing a WTO complaint and declaring the end of General Security Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA).<sup>9)</sup> Thus, Seoul linked Tokyo's withdrawal of export restrictions and the reinstatement of the whittelist, and Seoul's extension of GSOMIA, with the withdrawal of WTO complaints.<sup>10)</sup> However, whether the Moon administration ended GSOMIA to deliberately undermine the ROK-US-Japan trilateral security cooperation remains doubtful. Considering Tokyo's intention to induce concessions on inflicting a blow to its core economic security, and the rapidly rising anti-Japanese sentiment among South Koreans and their boycott movement against Japan, Moon had to inevitably choose a decisive response.<sup>11)</sup>

How did Moon respond to China's THAAD retaliation? He recognized that Seoul's excessive reliance on Chinese economy, which provided condi

8) As part of a retaliation against the ROK Supreme Court's ruling on forced labor issue, Tokyo imposed export restrictions on three key materials related to semiconductor, Seoul's pivotal export items, on the pretext of security in July 2019. In August, Abe cabinet voted on a decree (catch-all regulation) to exclude Seoul from the white list—a country subject to preferential export control measures.

9) Moon immediately held a cabinet meeting and said, "We will never lose to Japan again. Economic retaliation is a counterattack for the perpetrators. It is a selfish act that causes trouble to the global economy. I will surpass Japan" (*KBS*, 2 August 2019).

10) This declaration on GSOMIA has provoked strong backlash from the Trump administration.

11) A Blue House chief spoke about the situation at that time. When the Blue House aides suggested a "diplomatic resolution," Moon swallowed his anger and rebuked them, saying, "I think this is the biggest winning point where independence of materials, parts and equipments can be achieved. How can you suggest such a message to me?" ([https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=4138977259523064&id=10002324911735&sfnsn=mo](https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=4138977259523064&id=10002324911735&sfnsn=mo), downloaded 2022/03/02).

tions that were targeted by major powers, should also be urgently corrected. His perception of economic security in China can be seen through two decisions. First, his response to China's retaliation against THAAD, and, second, his agreement on an economic and health alliance at the ROK-US summit in 2021. Moon took three approaches to China's THAAD retaliation. First, Seoul sought Beijing's understanding of the THAAD deployment through an agreement in October 2018. In a Chinese CCTV interview, Moon stated the following: "South Korea will continue to be especially careful so that THAAD does not infringe on China's security interests. This is the position that South Korea has already maintained regarding THAAD." (<https://www1.president.go.kr/articles/1724>. downloaded 2021/08/01).

Second, he made diplomatic efforts at the summit to urge the dismantlement of retaliatory measures. Before his visit to China in December 2017, he emphasized the restoration of trust between the two leaders, the gradual resolution of the THAAD issue from the standpoint of the other party, and a separation of economy and politics, that is, trying to normalize politics/security, economy/culture, people exchange/ tourism aside from the THAAD issue (<https://www1.president.go.kr/articles/1724>. downloaded 2021/08/01). In addition, he linked China's Belt and Road Initiative with the New Northern Policy and New Southern Policy (NSP). Third, China's retaliation acted as a crucial variable in Seoul's pursuit of a strategy to diversify trade and investment. Representative examples were the NSP, announced in November 2017. Moon said, "The promotion of economic exchanges with ASEAN is very important in terms of diversifying our export markets, reducing our dependence on Chinese economy, and preparing for the post-China era." (<https://www1.president.go.kr/articles/7503>. downloaded 2021/11/24). The NSP entered a full-fledged track after the ROK-ASEAN summit in November 2019. Indeed, the Moon administration expected some degree of geopolitical effect by pursuing this strategy. By trying to strengthen relations with ASEAN and India "outside" of the US-China competition, Moon attempted to diversify the existing foreign relations, which was biased towards the US, China, Japan.

## 2. Shift to "pro-American"?

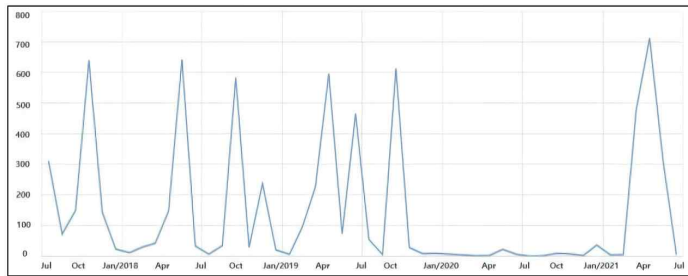
At the joint press conference with Biden, Moon announced that the two sides agreed to (a) establish a global comprehensive partnership for vaccines, combining advanced technology of the United States with South Korea's production capabilities; (b) establish a stable supply chain including semiconductors, electric vehicles, batteries, and pharmaceuticals (bio); and (c) strengthen cooperation to solve the climate crisis (<https://www1.president.go.kr/articles/8002>. downloaded 2022/02/21). This was a joint product of Seoul's successful pandemic prevention, global competitiveness in major manufacturing and high-tech industries, and Biden's emphasis on Seoul for the war on technology, trade and health against China.<sup>12)</sup> Although this is not a direct part of Seoul's China policy, Moon's agreement could have a profound impact on China's strategic positioning vis-a-vis the US.

Moon is considered to have shifted from being 'pro-China' to 'pro-American' with the ROK-US summit, but this cannot be justified. From our discursive viewpoint, it is difficult to find any evidence of Moon's agreement to form a comprehensive alliance against China. He tried to grasp the expanding of alliance as an economic and a national competitiveness issue. At a meeting where party representatives were invited to the Blue House after the summit, Moon said: "Strengthening supply chain cooperation in key industries such as semiconductors and batteries will enable our unrivaled companies to enter the world's largest premium market, the US, to strengthen global supply chain links" (<https://www1.president.go.kr/articles/10388>. downloaded 2021/07/08). Moon has made similar proposals to the Chinese side. Graphs 4-5 present the time-series analysis of the word 'economy' targeting Moon's remarks at nine ROK-US summits and six ROK-China summits from May 2017 to date. Compared to the ROK-China sum

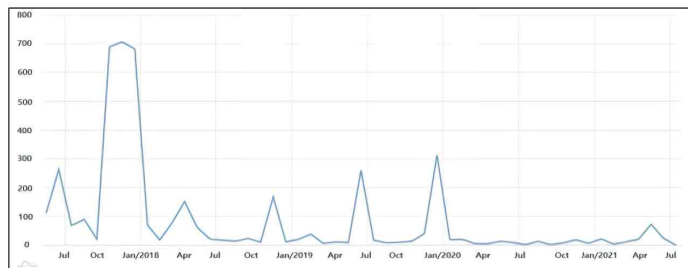
12) A US government report containing the strategy to foster its semiconductor industry in June 2021 mentions 'China' as a technological threat, and 'South Korea' as a cooperation partner, above 560 and 70 times, respectively (Park 2021).

mit, the TF-IDF figure on 'economy' is generally higher at the ROK-US summit. Thus, Moon's expectations for economic cooperation with the US are higher than those with China. The Biden administration's geoeconomic approach seemed to be in line with the traditional mercantilistic strategy of Seoul.<sup>13)</sup> Along with the expansion of trade with ASEAN and India, the expansion of trade and investment with Washington has become another option for Seoul.

Graph 4. Time-Series Analysis of "Economy" Issue at ROK-US Summit



Graph 5. Time-Series Analysis of "Economy" Issue at ROK-China Summit



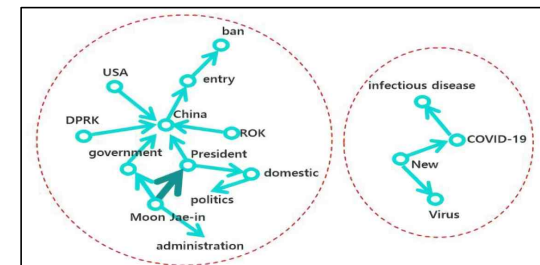
13) Kriekhaus had indicated that Seoul's FTA strategies vis-a-vis the US and China constitute an active hedging in their geo-economics considerations(2017).

## VII. Political Security: Overcoming Domestic Cold-War Confrontation

### 1. Not Othering, Nor Antagonizing

Another characteristic that sets Moon apart from the other leaders is that he has successfully resisted the temptation to try to forge national unity by resorting to othering China or inflating the threat from China.<sup>14)</sup> We performed network analysis through big data and Tex-tome to understand Moon's similar attempts with 946 documents. Figure 5 shows, with the arrow of 'Moon Jae-in' as the center, that the keyword 'China' is located at the center, and the arrows of 'DPRK,' 'USA,' and 'ban on entry of Chinese' continues to center on China. He discussed the Chinese factors in domestic political contexts, including 'cooperation on North Korea issue,' 'importance of relations with the US in its relations with China,' 'no entry ban on Chinese people,' 'prevention of corona virus infection' among others. However, there was no clear pattern.

Figure 5. Network Analysis of Moon's Othering China



14) Rousseau et al.(2012, 358-359) presents three forms of threat inflation: (a)drumbeating which raises public awareness of the threat, thereby increasing public support; (b)moral condemnation that heightens public fears; (c)lying and misleading to convince the public that the adversary is stronger, dangerous, and has evil intentions.

However, Moon tried to define China as a partner country. Regarding the controversial theory of China's responsibility for the corona crisis, he cautioned, as follows: "It is undesirable for some to use their anxiety to spread distrust and incite hatred, and it will never help solve the problem. Trust and cooperation, not fear and disgust, are the true ways of overcoming." (<https://www1.president.go.kr/articles/8049>. downloaded 2021/06/12). To explain Moon's domestic political considerations besides external factors, we must examine political security, that is, security from domestic political threats. Regarding threats, Alagappa(1998) mentions internal conflicts such as a coup d'état or ethnic conflict, national identity such as colonial experience and ethnic composition, and political legitimacy related to ideological competition or political system, and so on.

On Seoul's domestic politics, there are no specific problems related to the previous two categories. However, ideological competition at the national level remains active mainly between conservatives and progressives. Moon did not set universal values such as human rights and democracy as criteria for distinguishing his country from China. He also has not publicly criticized behaviors that go against values of its neighboring countries. Understandably, conservatives criticized the Moon administration for showing a lukewarm attitude toward human rights issues. On the other hand, Moon has frequently emphasized values in his dialogues with advanced countries, including the US. At the breaking ceremony for the wall of remembrance of those killed in the Korean War on the ROK-US summit, for example, he remarked: "America changed the world with the power of values. The nation's owner is the people, and the founding ideology of the United States that everyone should be free and equal without discrimination has become a universal value around the world. Republic of Korea, too, was able to overcome colonization, war, dictatorship and poverty with the power of its values, and write a story of hope rather than fear"(<https://www1.president.go.kr/articles/10343>. downloaded 2021/07/25).

## 2. Against Right-Wing's "Hijacking" China Issue

According to Moon, it was not desirable for the Chinese factor to become domestically politicized. During the May 2017 presidential election, the Chinese factor did not emerge as a major election issue. Although China's THAAD retaliation was in progress, ROK-China relations could be improved depending on whether the deployment of THAAD would be realized. However, with the spread of anti-Chinese sentiment in South Korea, conservatives began to actively take steps to turn this into a domestic political issue. They launched a political offensive against Moon's attitude of not over-stimulating China, arguing that it was due to the pro-China ideological inclination of the progressive administration. In particular, the conservative political-media cartel began to label the Moon administration as 'pro-China and anti-US.' They added China to the existing progressive versus conservative frame—'pro-DPRK and anti-US versus anti-DPRK and pro-US'—expanding it into a 'pro-DPRK, pro-China, and anti-US versus anti-DPRK, anti-China, and pro-US' frame. Regarding why China could never be an alternative to the US, they provided the following reasons: lack of qualifications(unstable economy, the gap between rich and poor, lack of freedom, exaggerated growth rate), ambition for hegemony(ordering neighbors by force, planning to crack the ROK-US-Japan trilateral security cooperation, fear of becoming a marginalized country), avoidance of responsibility(reservation of sanctions against DPRK, refusal to collapse of the DPRK system, fear of border infringement with USFK),<sup>15)</sup>

To Moon, the conservative offensives must have seemed like an attempt to solidify the Cold War structure. As mentioned in the FAZ

15) Kim and Kim(2021, 56-65) argue that the voices of Washington's anti-China forces can be penetrated in the public arena of South Korea because of assistance by Seoul's conservative media. Tokyo's "pro-China and anti-US, and anti-Japan" framing seems to have similarly flown into Seoul.

article, the domestic political reason that he tried to establish the New Korean Peninsula System was to fundamentally dismantle “the system of conflict, division and strife of the Cold War that has been fixed for a long time throughout the Korean Peninsula”(Moon, May 7 2019). To block such an offensive, Moon had to preempt the controversial agenda. Another reason was that he emphasized the ROK-US alliance, which had been reserved for conservatives in the past, and drastically increased the defense budget. He focused on cooperation with the United States rather than China to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue, agreeing to strengthen the ROK-US-Japan trilateral security cooperation against the North Korean nuclear threat, which Park had been hesitant to(Kim 2019, 75).

In retrospect, the ‘pro-US versus anti-US’ composition was formed between the conservatives and progressives in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the former presented anti-communism(i.e., anti-DPRK) and ROK-US alliance absolutism, while the latter favored engagement policy toward North Korea and independent diplomacy. The progressives had a favorable perception of China at that time because they judged that the development of ROK-China relations would help correct the conservatives’ excessive bias toward the US. Here, ‘pro-China’ was a tactical methodology for realizing autonomy from the US. However, with a history of Chinese coercive behaviors, such as distortion of Goguryeo history and retaliation for THAAD, the perception of progressives started to change, not extending to ‘anti-US independence’ but to ‘independence vs. pro-China’ composition(Cha 2017, 73-75).

## VII. Conclusion

Moon’s perception of China stood out for his pragmatism in flexibly responding to the external changes. The national interests he wanted to

achieve included securing China’s cooperation against existential threats, ensuring diplomatic and security autonomy against structural threats, and hedging against economic threats. These conceptions seemed to have gradually developed. His national self-images have changed from being passive to active. Since mid-tenure, his expressions include ‘the master of fate on the peninsula,’ ‘a dignified and responsible middle power,’ ‘the world’s 10th largest economy,’ ‘a model country for Corona quarantine,’ ‘a strong soft power,’ ‘a country with strong national defense capabilities,’ and so on.<sup>16)</sup>

In his recognition of history, he mentioned the positive issues such as the pre-modern Korea-China relations, rather than the negative incidents such as the Qing intervention in modern Korea or China’s participation in the Korean War on Pyongyang side. He attempted to define the character of China largely in terms of geographical, historical, cultural and economic criteria. This is consistent with his ideological tendency, which emphasizes nationalism, economic interdependence, and liberal values such as international multilateralism and solidarity. This was also reflected in his policy judgments. Moon had no intention of balancing, oppressing, or isolating China. Rather, he tried to get the most out of China’s cooperation in North Korea policy and regional economic initiatives. Simultaneously, he signaled to Beijing that Seoul would not participate in the anti-China front. He mainly used soft rather than hard power in terms of policy means. His expectations, however, seem to have diminished over time. His emphasis on ROK-DPRK-US tripartite relationship proves that he did not have high expectations for China’s role on peninsula issues.

Finally, we discuss the policy implications of Moon’s perception. In

16) In the FAZ article, he had viewed the geopolitical identity of the peninsula as being in a fault line where continental and maritime forces collide, similar to the Balkans. Also see a Twitter post by Moon on his way home from the G7 summit (<https://twitter.com/moonriver365/status/1404114523905085440/photo>). downloaded 2022/02/20).

May 2017, just before Moon took office, *The Times* published an article with the cover title of 'The Negotiator,' including the subtitle that Moon aims to deal with Kim Jong-un. However, very few have shown interest in how he tried to manipulate(or tame) great powers such as the United States and China. His seemingly powerless attitude—of being gentle, cautious, prudent, unwilling to provoke—contributes to such an indifference. On the surface, the balanced diplomacy is colorless and odorless like water. If we look at Moon's perception considering the meanings of balance, he shows a strong reluctance to outright power politics, an indifferent attitude toward the negative impact of the US-China competition on the stability and peace of Northeast Asian and the peninsula, and a strong desire to improve the relatively poor distribution of power through national capacity building.<sup>17)</sup>

To objectively evaluate balanced diplomacy, it is necessary to first disprove it. What if Moon had been tempted to achieve national unity by exploiting or promoting hostility and fear? What would have happened if he had joined the US-led anti-China front like the Abe cabinet? The answers are clear. With the deepening of the Cold War structure in Korea, the military confrontation between the two Koreas, and the security dilemma and geopolitical confrontation in Northeast Asia, we may face a new Cold War state. In that sense, we can argue that he might be playing the role of a 'balancer.' If we interpret it more actively, President Moon's new approach of increasing involvement with the United States and distancing from othering China may be the beginning of Korea's self-reliance route toward China in the future. As mentioned before, President Moon emphasized the ROK-U.S. alliance to block criticism from conservatives, while not implementing othering China in order to prevent the domestic politicization of the issue and to maintain an appropriate distance from China as well.

17) On the various meanings of balance, refer to Haas(1953, 446-458).

However, we are not claiming that the Moon administration has no area for improvement. At the Aspen Security Forum, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong insisted that "It's vital for the US and China to strive to engage each other to head off a clash, which would be disastrous for both sides, and the world."(<https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210803-singapore-pm-warns-us-against-hard-line-toward-china>. downloaded 2022/02/10). Unfortunately, it is rare to find such a leader like him who has the courage to speak out against both the US and China. Nevertheless, Seoul's leader should also try to play a more creative and active role, so that the US and China can pursue constructive competition. For Moon, 'balance' between the two giants had a strong implications not on the active level—mediation or neutrality, and so on—but on the passive level, that is, minimizing damage or securing autonomy. There is a key issue that needs to be addressed for this to occur. The existential threat from the North has long acted as a structural condition that gives rise to the 'Korean Peninsula reductionism.' The Moon administration could never be free from this reductionism. Furthermore, Moon has set the North Korean issue as the primary policy agenda.<sup>18)</sup> Therefore, Seoul can truly expand its diplomatic horizon once it achieves a 'cognitive balance' between its North Korea policy and other external relations.

18) After Hanoi summit, Moon admitted "It is true that I put North Korea-US dialogue at the forefront as the dialogue began in earnest. It was because I expected that the door to inter-Korean cooperation would open faster if the dialogue was successful"(<https://www1.president.go.kr/articles/7970>. downloaded 2022/02/21).

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## 국문요약

### 한국의 진화하는 균형 외교와 중국: 문재인 대통령의 인식에 대한 담론 및 빅 데이터 분석

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문재인 정부는 집권 기간 동안 어떠한 전략 하에 '균형 외교'를 유지해 왔는가? 이와 관련한 한국의 동맹국 및 우방국들의 평가는 대체로 부정적이었고 때로는 가혹하기도 했다. 본 연구는 문재인 대통령의 국가안보 인식을 분석함으로써 한국의 전략적 입지와 중국 정책의 실체를 규명하고자 한다. 여기서 국가안보라는 용어는 실존적 위협, 구조적 위협, 경제 안보, 정치 안보의 네 가지 측면을 갖는 것으로 가정한다. 연구방법론으로 우리는 담론 및 빅데이터 분석을 주로 활용했다. 분석의 결과는 외부의 변화에 유연하게 대응하는 문 대통령의 실용주의적 인식이 두드러졌다. 국익 측면에서 그는 한반도 문제에 대한 중국의 협력 확보, 미중 경쟁에 대한 외교적, 안보적 자율성 유지, 각종 경제적 위협에 대한 헤징, 국내의 진보 세력과 보수 세력 사이의 대립 극복을 시도했다. 균형의 사전적 의미에서 보면 그의 인식에서 강대국 간 권력 정치에 대한 강한 거부감, 미중 경쟁이 동북아 및 한반도에 미치는 부정적인 영향에 대한 의외의 상대적 무관심, 자국의 국가 역량을 강화함으로써 열악한 권력배분 구조를 개선하려는 강한 의지를 관찰할 수 있었다.

주제어: 문재인, 한국, 균형 외교, 한중 관계, 미중 경쟁