

JEJU FORUM FOR PEACE & PROSPERITY 2019

Panel organized by the Center for ASEAN-Indian Studies &
the Korea National Diplomatic Academy on

US-China Rivalry and Korea-ASEAN Strategic Cooperation: What Next?

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Talking Points

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1. How does US-China strategic competition affect Korea-ASEAN relations?

- At the heart of US-China strategic competition are security threats to, and perceptions of, present and long-term core interests. These competitions are hard to defuse—they take on a logic and momentum of their own—are quick to escalate, and, historically, do not end well (see, G. Allison's 2015 Thucydides Trap). The assumption that competitors are reasonable actors and have as much chance of negotiated compromises as protracted tensions (US Vice President Mike Pence's 'New Cold War') or even, as China's President Xi Jinping realized, violence as a result of strategic miscalculations, is not a safe one given their zero-sum qualities. That is precisely why the UN system was put in place after the Second World War. Today, the very countries that underwrite the admittedly imperfect multilateral rules-based system are themselves locked in this competition and ignoring diplomacy and the system in favour of power projection.
- In strategic competitions, contending powers naturally seek and strengthen their allies. This is true even under US President Trump's unilateral and non-consultative approach. Some countries view China as their foremost existential security threat (whether now or in the future), and are prepared (eagerly or reluctantly), to associating themselves with the US, given their closely aligned interests. For the last seven decades, Korea's security, like some in Southeast Asia and elsewhere in the world, has been dependent on the deterrent capabilities of the US military capabilities. President Moon Jae-in's efforts to operate a less tightly US-aligned foreign policy towards North Korea and China has produced some remarkable results but far less than needed to confidently ensure South Korea's security. Past efforts to engage the North have proven futile and present ones are not assured either. A continued positive bias towards the US therefore seems to this observer to be the most likely course of action.
- For ASEAN member states, security considerations are far less clear and uniform. In some cases, especially for small developing states, security hedging choices are severely restricted, either vis-à-vis China or the US for that matter. For others, economic considerations feature more prominently. This is not to necessarily say that security is unimportant, only that their underlying wherewithal capabilities cannot be decisive in ensuring their security. Short of taking a clear and unambiguous stance on the matter, something that would have political costs, ASEAN as a grouping, can do no better than to openly espouse a position of intended 'neutrality' with respect to big

power rivalry. This neutrality is of course, to varying degrees, a constructed but necessary myth that affords members a legitimate position from which to hedge.

2. Is US-China strategic competition a push factor or pull factor for Korea-ASEAN strategic cooperation? If so, why? If not, why not?

- US-China strategic competition is and will be a growing area of contention not just for the region but also other countries and regional groupings. China's Belt and Road Initiative may or may not have started with the intention of securitizing its borders and sea lanes of communication but now carries unmistakable security connotations, not least due to the combative nature of US and Western government narratives. The overarching narrative is that China is creating client states through cheque book, debt trap and loan-to-own diplomacy. It is not in the economic or security interests of ASEAN, however, to alienate China by taking an unmistakable position on the matter. After all, it is difficult to argue that one can have truly good relations with China and yet reject the BRI, which is the frontispiece of the latter's diplomacy. For the moment, it is still possible for them to hedge (or act ambiguously) under the general rubric of economic development and connectivity but this may not be true in the future.
- ASEAN has therefore shown itself to be uncomfortable with the various versions of the Indo Pacific concept (as has India). This concept would have been another mega regional proposal and would offer countries with the advantage of choice, were it not for the strong underlying political connotations and subtexts. At the close of the 2018 ASEAN Singapore Summit, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong warned that Southeast Asian nations may have to choose between the rival visions of China and the US. He said that ASEAN was caught in the middle between the escalating economic and security rivalry of the two. Like it or not, this is the present reality and one must be prepared for it. On the issue of restricting Huawei's and ZTE's participation in 5G and telecommunication networks of countries, again on security grounds, the US, along with its key allies, have drawn another line in the sand. Canada has been an unfortunate victim of the crossfire, an object lesson that could apply to others.
- Korea may, like many countries, be an unwilling participant but it is difficult see how given its present circumstances, even on an on-balance argument, would favour a non-US/Western led regional security order. The 2017 decision to install the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) mobile anti-missile battery systems in Korea, for example, drew China's anger and had and is having political and economic costs. Despite early efforts of the Moon administration to politically distance itself from the decision, these systems were installed and are being tested in 2019. The US-Korea security alliance has hitherto not significantly impinged on Korea-ASEAN relations but this could change if rising US-China tensions increases the likelihood of divergent interests between the two.

3. How should Korea and ASEAN respond to the strategic regional environment of increasing US-China rivalry? What can Korea and ASEAN do together, bilaterally, unilaterally or collectively, to cope with the risks, uncertainties, and constraints stemming from US-China strategic competition?

- The reality of big power politics currently being played out across the globe is that there is relatively little that middle, let alone small, countries can do that is commensurate. The desire not to be drawn into any such cold or hot conflict is more a rhetorical wish than what we know to be reality. If Korea were to be drawn into a

tighter orbit of the US as a result of rapidly mounting tensions, a closer association could be a liability. The same would be true of ASEAN, which as Singapore's Premier Lee has warned, could be split in the event of an escalation.

- Although unable to resolve the global contest of wills, supporting regional institutional architecture and processes, ones that avoid giving any overt impression of band wagoning with one or the other superpower, can still be useful building blocks for regional peace and security. At certain times, such institutions may even be called on to be circuit breakers to reduce conflict and facilitate conciliation; the important thing is that they be present, functioning and credible honest brokers. ASEAN Plus Korea competition is not the suitable platform for this but working in close cooperation within larger regional or sub-regional contexts or on matters of global and regional importance can provide some basis for stability that can be nurtured.
- Korea's overdependence on China was one of the reasons for President Moon's announcement of Korea's New Southern Policy (NSP). This envisages that ASEAN countries will be a more significant economic partner in future. Mitigating against the NSP is the fact that the Korean policy establishment does not appear to be taking a cohesive and well thought out approach. There is a lack of policy follow-through, hence the lack of bold and substantive initiatives and details of any scale that can remotely compare with China (or the US for that matter). Admittedly, it is difficult to really catch ASEAN's attention given the diversity of members' interests. The frequent changes in policy following changes in leadership, however, does not inspire confidence to take these measures seriously.