

South Korea's Eurasian Strategy: Evolving Geopolitics of Northeast Asia

Abstract

The main academic interests of this study lie in the field of international security and Eurasian geopolitics. The article employs an interdisciplinary and policy-relevant approach. More specifically, the study trespasses several academic disciplines. It aims to be interdisciplinary, drawing from various branches of social sciences. Thematically, the article will investigate South Korea's Eurasian strategy within the evolving geopolitical realities of Northeast Asia. To this end, the case study approach allowing in-depth, multi-faceted explorations of complex Korean Peninsular politics will look at Eurasian policy initiatives under different South Korean administrations. The research questions in this project are exploratory. They aim to reveal and understand the factors that would help decipher the foreign policy orientation of South Korea vis-à-vis evolving geopolitics in Northeast Asia. The study will utilize document analysis by taking a systematic approach to understanding and interpreting the relevant documents to reveal answers to the specific research questions. Within the scope of the above-mentioned conceptual parameters, this project aims to contribute to a better understanding of the ever-changing geopolitical dynamics in Northeast Asia from the South Korean perspective.

Keywords: Geopolitics, Korean Peninsula, Northeast Eurasia

Güney Kore'nin Avrasya Stratejisi: Kuzeydoğu Asya'nın Değişen Jeopolitiği

Özet

Bu çalışmanın ana akademik ilgi alanları, uluslararası güvenlik ve Avrasya jeopolitiği ile ilgilidir. Makale, disiplinler arası bir yaklaşım kullanıp, değişik siyasi etkileri incelemektedir. Daha spesifik olarak, çalışma birkaç akademik disiplini kapsamaktadır. Sosyal bilimlerin çeşitli dallarından yararlanarak disiplinler arası olmayı amaçlamaktadır. Tematik olarak bu çalışma, Güney Kore'nin Avrasya stratejisini Kuzeydoğu Asya'nın gelişen jeopolitik gerçekleri içinde değerlendirip, sofistike Kore Yarımadası siyasetini derinlemesine sorgulamaktadır. Bu doğrultuda farklı Güney Kore yönetimleri altındaki Avrasya politikası girişimlerine bakacaktır. Kuzeydoğu Asya'da gelişen ve değişen jeopolitik karşısında Güney Kore'nin dış politika yöneliminin deşifre edilmesine yardımcı olacak faktörleri ortaya çıkarmak ana hedefler arasındadır. Çalışma, belirli araştırma sorularının yanıtlarını ortaya çıkarmak için ilgili belgeleri anlamak ve yorumlamak için sistematik bir yaklaşım benimseyerek belge analizini kullanacaktır. Bu proje, yukarıda belirtilen kavramsal parametreler kapsamında, Kuzeydoğu Asya'da sürekli değişen jeopolitik dinamiklerin Güney Kore perspektifinden daha iyi anlaşılmasına katkıda bulunmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Jeopolitik, Kore Yarımadası, Kuzeydoğu Avrasya

Dr. Çağrı Erdem (Keimyung University, Daegu, South Korea)

OrcID: 0000-0002-0313-3939 **E-mail:** cagerd@gmail.com

1 Introduction

Rivalries among the great powers and challenges from newly rising regional middle powers for global affairs have overruled the old hierarchical structures and have become a widely accepted reality of twenty-first-century international relations. As a result, there were many attempts at different levels to revise the international system after World War II. It seems that the American/Western European engineered international order is facing substantial and numerous challenges with demands to accommodate the changing global realities. Similarly, the South Korean Eurasian initiative, rejuvenated Nordpolitik, and its desire to influence the regional geopolitical outcomes need to be scrutinized from that perspective. Moreover, South Korea's impressive economic standing, dazzling technological advances, and, most importantly, the speedy building up of its military-industrial complex are all indications of the future more assertive regional and global policy initiatives.

Chinese President Xi Jinping, while visiting Kazakhstan and Indonesia in September and October of 2013, inaugurated the initiative of jointly building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. Around the same time, on October 18, 2013, at the Global Cooperation in the Era of Eurasia conference in Seoul, South Korean President Park Geun-hye proposed the "Eurasia Initiative." The initiative's geopolitical motto of "one continent, creative continent, and peaceful continent" is associated with a unified system of transport, energy, and trade networks across the vast Eurasian landmass. Moreover, the initiative is supposed to create a steppingstone for further integration of Eurasia by gradually eliminating trade barriers to create a vast free-trade zone. Furthermore, linking energy and logistic infrastructure would be instrumental in creating connectivity across Europe and Asia. In crude terms, the Park Geun-hye administration's Eurasian initiative was the South Korean alternative to the Chinese Silk Road initiative. In addition, it aimed to improve inter-Korean relations and incorporate North Korea as an integral part of its larger regional strategy.

However, since its initiation in 2013, the project has witnessed ups and downs due to global geopolitical transformations. Therefore, the article will elucidate some fundamental questions such as related to the fundamental objectives of South Korea or the factors interrupting or facilitating the smooth progress of the initiative.

2 Literature Review

The impact of middle powers will be much more significant in the 21st century compared to previous historical periods vis-a-vis the dominant greater power(s) in their respective regions and the transformation of regional challenges/changes. Therefore, the ever-expanding literature on middle powers would be instrumental to comprehending Korean foreign policy orientation (Cooper, 1997; Fox, 1977; Hayes, 1994; Holbraad, 1984; Manicom, 2014; Spero, 2004). Evidently, middle powers lack options in their foreign policy decision-making to transform the international system/order. However, the surveys of middle power literature show a representative body of critical analyses on these lesser-known and frequently underappreciated types of middle powers.

Although the middle powers depend on militarily stronger great powers, such as the United States in the case of South Korea, they can possess significant diplomatic and economic clout and influence, even if they do not dominate continental power dynamics (Schweller, 1998). The functioning of the middle powers within their respective regions on foreign and security policies has been addressed adequately by traditional realist theories via balancing and bandwagoning frameworks (Kapstein, 1999; Mearsheimer, 2001; Walt, 1985, 1987, 2002; Waltz, 1979).

The following section explores the geopolitical context for how such middle powers become pivotal and their significance to historical power challenges across Eurasia (Mackinder, 1904). To this end, a brief overview of geopolitics and geopolitical analysis as a method broadly influenced regional security systems in Eurasia dominated by stronger, dominant regional major powers.

3 Geopolitical Analysis as a Method

This article utilizes a geopolitical method of analysis to elucidate the significance of evolving Eurasian power relations. In crude terms, the term "geopolitics" is defined as being the study of international relations "from a spatial or geocentric viewpoint, the understanding of the whole ... being its ultimate object and justification" (Parker, 2015). The first use of the term "geopolitics" is associated with the Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellen in an 1899 article (Chapman, 2011).

Geopolitics is essential to the understanding of the behavior of human societies organized into complex, geographically well-defined systems. Evidently, in modern times, this approach has translated itself to the study of nation-states. While the methodology of geopolitics is inherently spatial, its subject matter draws heavily from other social sciences. Notably, three intertwined notions, namely, economics, war, and politics, are instrumental in understanding the behavior of nation-states. They are an indivisible entity together establishing the reality of the nation-state. Subsequently, the nation can be viewed as a wealth-producing and wealth-defending structure

connected through a complex web of domestic and foreign relations performed by individuals governing the nation-state (Friedman, 2008).

Geopolitics offers an overarching approach by eliminating these distinct spheres of economics, military, and politics, which in turn provides a more coherent picture of the social reality of the nation-state. Political and military power continually influence economic life and vice versa. It is impossible to imagine war, peace, or development without considering politics and economics. Equally, it is inconceivable to think of domestic or foreign policy without weighing economic and military matters. In crude terms, the abovementioned three aspects are only conceived to organize human activities into manageable pieces. The reality is only seemingly made more manageable, and in fact, is falsified. The conventional classification of these aspects imagines distinctions that don't exist and complexities that hide rather than expose the nature of the problem at hand (Friedman, 2008).

This article's model of applied geopolitics starts with geography. It looks at how mountains, plains, rivers, and mineral resources constrain a nation's political, security and economic imperatives. Political geographers believe that power is firmly rooted in the physical nature of the world itself. There is no doubt that geopolitics is also an abstraction, but it has the virtue of not creating imaginary distinctions. Geopolitics by adding a forced simplification provides a more comprehensive view of reality. At this junction, it would be fair to assert that geopolitics is the quest for the center of gravity of reality. Most certainly, the factors and actors at play are never entirely political, military, or economic. However, they are neglected and deemed insufficient due to the fact that they are considered just too simple (Friedman, 2008).

4 Centrality of Eurasia and Strategic Quadrangle in Northeast Asia

For the scope of this article, the concept of Eurasia is geographically defined as the vast landmass from the Okhotsk Sea to the Mediterranean/Atlantic Ocean, from the Arctic Ocean to the Indian Ocean. Over the last two decades, the great power competition resulted in many strategic maneuvers vis-à-vis natural resources, geopolitical fault-lines, and strategic choke points to enhance their position vis-à-vis others.

Eurasia is home to several vital geopolitical maritime and terrestrial choke points. For example, the Suez Canal, Bab al-Mandeb, Strait of Hormuz, Turkish straits in Western Asia; Malacca, Sunda, Lombok, and Makassar straits in Southeast Asia; Taiwan, Korea, Soya (La Perouse), Tartary, and Bering straits in Northeast Asia are a few to name in terms of maritime choke points. Mainly, maritime transport is an essential tool for international trade since a significant percentage of global merchandise uses the high seas to reach its destination. Hence, the stability of those choke points located on the strategic trade routes for commercial shipping becomes even more valuable for those wishing to revise the international hierarchical order set after WWII.

On the other hand, Afghanistan, Caucasus, Kashmir, and the Balkans are some important illustrations of terrestrial choke points across Eurasia where the interests of diverse civilizations/powers encounter each other. Interestingly, those Eurasian terrestrial choke points are considered major geopolitical fault-lines with a potential target of unrelenting claims for territorial control, which may give birth to a military confrontation. Any shifting in those geopolitical tectonic plates would have dire consequences for the rest of the world.

Another piece of evidence implying the evolving Eurasian geopolitical shift is mapping the global economic center of gravity. Throughout the last two Millennium, the Earth's economic center of gravity based on calculations considering all the GDP produced in our planet indicates a firm shift towards the center of Eurasia. Since the industrial revolution, the dynamics of the global economy were on the move to the West under the weight of Eurocentric transatlantic trade. However, China's spectacular economic growth rates obtained after the reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping in the early 1980s, coupled with the rise of the rest of Asia, reversed the momentum and drifted the center of gravity incrementally to the East. Extrapolation of the data indicates that the world's economic center of gravity would settle by 2050 somewhere between India and China, which were the most significant economic powerhouses up to the 18th century. Subsequently, the major decisions and policies regarding the global economy and governance will command a more assertive foreign policy orientation from the rising regional powers.

Moreover, Northeast Asia is home not only to two members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC)—China and Russia—but also to three countries with nuclear weapon capabilities—Russia, China, and North Korea—and the world's two largest economies—Japan and China. All those aspects converge around the unstable pivot of the Korean peninsula. Probably, it ranks today among the most dangerous areas of the planet, tormented by security problems of nuclear and missile proliferation (Rozman et al., 2008).

5 Nordpolitik

South Korea's Nordpolitik dates to President Park Chung-hee (1963-1979) and made significant progress during the Roh Tae-woo administration (1988-1993) in the late 1980s and early 1990s to be utilized by the succeeding administrations, regardless of their political proclivities. The main objectives were to enhance peace and security on the Korean Peninsula and advance into the Eurasian continent for further economic gains.

The Park Chung-hee government was the first to inaugurate Nordpolitik. The June 23rd declaration of 1973 displayed South Korea's determination to keep the doors open to communist countries. Park's initiative seized the opportunity created by the détente between the United States and China in the early 1970s and launched the initiative on the momentum generated by the American overture to China.

The Roh Tae-woo administration gave an extra boost to Nordpolitik by utilizing the favorable environment in the closing days of the Cold War, establishing diplomatic relationships with all of the Soviet bloc countries and China. Roh's Nordpolitik was also attached to an enthusiastic North Korean policy, reflected in the two Koreas simultaneously joining the United Nations. However, the first North Korean nuclear crisis halted Nordpolitik after encircling North Korea with the former communist countries. The succeeding Kim Young-sam administration could not take advantage of the opportunities created by the USSR's demise and the end of the Cold War.

The Lee Myung-bak administration (2008-2013), in contradiction with the previous progressive administrations, advanced the importance of the Korea-US alliance and the collaboration between S. Korea, Japan, and the US, to the detriment of Peninsular relations. Moreover, the Cheonan incident gave birth to the suspension of all sorts of interaction with North Korea, which in turn heavily impacted any favorable outcomes for Lee's success with Nordpolitik in the realm of peace and security.

Nordpolitik under the Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003) and Roh Moo-hyun is in clear opposition to that of Kim Young-sam (1993-1998) and Lee Myung-bak. Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun Presidencies' Sunshine Policy towards the North aimed to soften North Korea's attitudes towards the South by encouraging interaction and economic assistance (Kirk, 2009). In crude terms, it remained faithful to the Inter-Korean Basic Agreement of the Roh Tae-woo administration.

The tendency of the engagement policy of Kim Dae-jung persisted in the Roh Moo-hyun government despite the second nuclear crisis provoked by North Korea in 2002 and its first nuclear test in 2006. Under the "Peace and Prosperity" motto in Northeast Asia, Roh depicted a vision of Korea where it played a central role in connecting the Eurasian continent beyond just inter-Korean relations. Based on the "Master Plan for Korea's Advance to Central Asia," he greatly enhanced economic relations with Russia and Central Asia.

Nordpolitik, since its inception in the 1970s, went through a bumpy road with ups and downs. However, it can be considered a partial success with noteworthy progress made in economic relations with Russia (at least until the Russian invasion of Crimea and Donbas regions of Ukraine) and Central Asia. On the other hand, in the security realm, the Korean Peninsula is still witnessing hurdles similar to the early 1970s.

6 New Nordpolitik

Moon Jae-in administration (2017-2021) envisaged building nine bridges connecting transportation, logistics, and energy infrastructure. This new Nordpolitik was an ambitious strategy to connect South Korea firmly to the rest of Eurasia. It was the central pillar of South Korea's foreign policy. It would be fair to argue that North Korea is the primary motivation behind the New Nordpolitik initiated by Moon Jae-in. The administration firmly believed that the most suitable way to guarantee long-term peace and stability in the Korean Peninsula is by making North Korea part of Northeast Asian trade networks (Armstrong et al., 2006).

The approach strives to link South Korea to the rest of Eurasia through western and eastern corridors running along with North Korea, China, and Russia, respectively. The diversification of the export routes to Europe would make South Korea less vulnerable to the maritime choke points running through the South China Sea, the Straits of Malacca, and off the Horn of Africa, in addition, to cutting the prices of South Korean exports to the rest of Eurasia.

Another aspect of such an overture is that it would accentuate South Korea's regional middle power credentials (Melissen & Sohn, 2015; Spero, 2019; Swielande et al., 2019). Since the Roh Moo-hyun government (2003-2008), South Korea has portrayed itself in such a way. This partly stems from the avoidance that its foreign policy does not become a prisoner of the issues surrounding North Korea. One way to achieve that goal was to be an active player in regional affairs. Therefore, Moon Jae-in utilized the New Nordpolitik as an effective tool to highlight South Korea's active role in East Asian geopolitics.

Moreover, the New Nordpolitik can be considered complementary (instead of being rivals) to other initiatives for Eurasian connectivity, namely China's Belt and Road Initiative and the EU's Eurasian strategy. Furthermore, the required funding for the successful implementation of the projects became largely available thanks to the backing of economic powerhouses of Eurasia such as China and the EU, creating invaluable synergies.

7 Renaissance of Geopolitics in Northeast Asia

One prominent new phenomenon is endangering the new Nordpolitik, namely the return of classic geopolitics that thrived in the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries. Northeast Asia is the prime example of a geopolitical chess game where politics revolve around strategic national rivalries, territorial disputes, arms races, and past historical grievances. A rising and revisionist China with improved maritime credentials challenges US supremacy,

contending its pivot to the region. The Chinese assertiveness in the East and South China seas are all indicative of those tendencies. Japan, under Abe's push for collective self-defense or questioning Article 9, also prompts concerns for the countries of the region, which are still plagued with Japan's imperialist past.

Northeast Asia is also affected by Russia's pivot to Asia. The accelerated new policy direction is due mainly to the Ukrainian crisis in 2014 and 2022, which drove its relations with the West to a new low not seen since the end of the Cold War. Russia and China are instituting a collaborative front to oppose the American pivot to Asia.

The regional geopolitical conditions are driving South Korea to choose one of the belligerent alliances. In this highly antagonistic context, the US and Japan, the main economic and security partners during post World War II era (including for the Nordpolitik), want to make sure that South Korea does not tilt toward Russia and China and remain in the alliance system. However, no doubt that there is a high cost associated with South Korea remaining an active ally of the US which is also detrimental to the well-functioning of any further new Nordpolitik or Eurasian policies.

On the other hand, the Korean peninsula's northern borders along the Talu and Tumen rivers create economic opportunities for Russia and China. On multiple occasions, China indicated its desire to develop the three Northeastern provinces of Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang. Most certainly, the North Korean border areas play a crucial role in the development projects such as the Liaoning Coastal Economic Belt and the Development of the Changchun-Jilin-Tumen area. China has been part of joint projects with North Korea to develop Rason city and the Rajin port (the first pier of the port was developed by China). There were also development schemes concerning the Changchun, Jilin, and Tumen areas. China also built an expressway between Hunchun, the easternmost Chinese city bordering North Korea and Russia, and Rajin. Moreover, once all projects are completed, the Chinese national railways and the Russian railway system (Trans-Siberian network) will intersect via the North Korean cities of Jeongju and Rajin.

Russia also has been actively looking for economic development opportunities for its sparsely populated Far East region with the Asia-Pacific economy. To this end, the Russian "New East Policy" presents an exciting perspective for the economically underdeveloped Far Eastern region. The undeniably substantial economic potential of the Russian Far East would be unearthed through projects such as the joint venture to connect the 54-kilometer-long Rajin-Khasan railroad and develop Rajin's third pier and its facilities.

8 Policy Recommendations

The Republic of Korea was America's creation. Consequently, to this day, the ROK has a limited range of choices and, more importantly, must cooperate closely with the USA. Until the closing years of the 20th century, all aspects of South Korean military security were closely tied to US support. Moreover, US assistance and participation have been instrumental in pursuing the Han River's economic miracle and modernization. However, in the past decade, Korea has unveiled a number of new strategies for expanding its global influence in Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific region, as the country's rising international standing now requires it to take on a more prominent role in promoting peace and security across the region. To this end, Korea could initiate a wide range of policies such as:

- Developing a geopolitical vision to create new opportunities facilitating further cooperation in Eurasia.
- Working with other small/middle powers for a benign geostrategic space for Korean national interest.
- Forging new relations with Eurasian nations to deepen geostrategic depth vis-a-vis security issues and national defense.
- Envisioning new options for cooperation in various fields, such as traditional and non-traditional security challenges and economic prosperity and more cooperative platforms at different levels.
- Strengthening the stability in Eurasia to settle regional crises, promote the rule of law and international standards, ensure balanced/sustainable economic development, and foster the deployment of quality infrastructure while preserving the global commons.

9 Conclusion and Directions for Future Work

The renaissance of geopolitics may be the correct term for some corners of Eurasia. However, it does not convey the situation well for Northeast Asia and the Korean Peninsula. Geopolitics has been an enduring characteristic of the region since the 19th century. The division of the Peninsula following the Cold War separated South Korea from the rest of the Eurasian continent.

The renaissance of geopolitics adds another layer of sophistication to an already complex Nordpolitik agenda. South Korea, as a middle power, finds itself in the middle of major politico-military power competition perpetuated by the traditional great powers of Northeast Asia. To create healthy progress for the Eurasia Initiative, the geographical space needs to be used as an arena where cooperation is valued instead of confrontation. The northern border areas of the Korean Peninsula along the Yalu and Tumen rivers are a natural geopolitical gateway connecting Mongolia, China, and Russia. Therefore, the economic cooperation schemes implicating the two

Koreas, China, and Russia, in the gateway area will be well received by Beijing and Moscow, as it is closely linked to their domestic economic development projects.

Although it is too early to make assumptions, the newly elected South Korean President, Yoon Suk-yeol, will significantly support the liberal international order, resist the autocratic and illiberal practices, support American Indo-Pacific Strategy, and make greater efforts to recover bilateral relations with Japan. On the other hand, the Yoon administration will endeavor to diminish dependence on China and take a less submissive policy stance toward Beijing than the previous administration. Most certainly, it is expected that the new administration will take a more hawkish stance toward North Korea than his predecessor while maintaining inter-Korean dialogue.

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