

# The fate of South Korea's strategic ambiguity to the US and China

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South Korea has found itself in a difficult position after the US' announcement of an 'United States Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China.' The announcement indirectly undermines South Korea's strategic policy of ambiguity towards China, a policy which has enabled South Korea to secure benefits from both the US and China. The strategic ambiguity is an implementation of the concept of *Anmigyojungjoong* (安美經中), which refers to relying on the US for its security interests and on China for its economic interests. This concept premises a 'don't-touch-China' approach.

South Korea has been active in cultivating benefits through its relationship with China. According to the IMF, China is South Korea's top export and import destination, with a 28.9 billion US dollars trade surplus in 2019. China's economic importance remains strong in 2020. South Korea also maintains a crucial security relationship with the US, which provides a security guarantee on the Korean Peninsula through extended deterrence. The US is also one of the key agents vying for the denuclearisation of North Korea.

The strategic ambiguity and *Anmigyojungjoong* reflect South Korea's anxiety as a middle power nation sandwiched between the US and China. Stephen M. Walt's balance of threat theory, which treats a strong neighbouring nation as a threat, explains why South Korea tries not to antagonise China. The

South Korea has found itself in a difficult position after the US' announcement of an 'United States Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China.' South Korea has cultivated deep economic interests tied to China, and obtained security guarantees through its alliance with the US. For the benefit of these interests, South Korea has kept a strategic ambiguity about China's controversial issues, but the US' announcement could push South Korea to change its strategic position which may risk its security and economic interests. In an environment of intensifying hegemonic rivalry, sandwiched between the US and China, it needs to think about a more clear stance. This includes expressing understanding towards US' grievances with China's economic activities and voicing issues related to security and values, like democracy and human rights.

'why-provoke-China' attitude or policy has managed to hold out. But the approach is facing a challenge from the strategic ambiguity as it has the potential to harm South Korea when applied to China.

The US' Strategic Approach points to three Chinese challenges in relation to the economy, values, and security. The US argues that a 'predatory Chinese economy' causes economic challenges, while it also attacks American values. And China's intimidation and coercive behaviour towards the global community

present security challenges which threaten the US' interests. Some may not agree with these challenges and refer to them as arbitrary criticism, but South Korea can nevertheless not ignore this argument. Then, what is the challenge for South Korea?

Firstly, the Strategic Approach's definition of the Chinese economy as 'predatory' is the most significant challenge for South Korea. From the US' viewpoint, its 345.6 billion US dollars deficit with China in 2019 is an evident damage. In this view, South Korea's 28.9 billion US dollars trade surplus would be the result of bandwagoning, a behaviour of a weak country using a strong country for its interests. The Strategic Approach also contains a security challenge for South Korea, as the country has arguably conceded its security interests for economic benefits. South Korea's "three no's" announcement following the 2017 THAAD crisis exemplifies such a typical concession. The three no's referred to no additional THAAD deployment, no participation in the US' missile defense network, and no establishment of a trilateral military alliance with the US and Japan. South Korea, which has its eyes fixed on North Korea, treats China's security threat as an elephant in the room.

The issue with values contains elements of discord between South Korea and the US. The strange silence of South Korea on China's violations of democracy and human rights, including the case of the ongoing national security law crisis and the protests last year in Hong Kong, contrasts with a South Korea that not so long ago held its own Candlelight Revolution, and boasts about its democracy and respect for human rights. How would South Korea react if the US demands it to join the democratic front against China as part of a hegemonic war?

In such a scenario, would South Korea be able to adjust to the US' stance? It seems highly improbable. The discrepancy in interests between the two nations will put South Korea in an awkward position. South Korea will continue to be economically dependent

on trade with China, and the surplus is necessary to invest in its current and future economy. But the US does not hold back in criticising China for its maintenance of an uneven playing field, or for US' own tremendous deficit. Is it then appropriate for South Korea to keep bandwagoning with China for the trade surplus? When the US argued that it had been 'looted' and that China's economic activities cause harm to values, South Korea stayed silent. Such discrepancies shake the credibility of South Korea's strategic ambiguity policy.

If the US-China hegemonic rivalry deepens, the widening gap between the two countries could push South Korea to the bay of entrapment, the excessive entanglement with an alliance, or abandonment, the forceful expulsion from an alliance. Aligning too close to the US may cause South Korea to get entrapped into a hegemonic confrontation, but keeping too much distance from the US may risk abandonment. Currently, conservatives in Korea argue that the country is on a trajectory of abandonment from the US and entrapment by China.

South Korea and the US should focus on enhancing alliance cohesion to prevent an extreme situation. Even though the situation is different, they should be aware that increased conflict within NATO has damaged the cohesion of the transatlantic alliance, thus inviting external threats.

When enhancing alliance cohesion, both countries should note that the ruling group and its supporters have a propensity to play a centrifugal force which hurts cohesion. Point in case, while the Moon government has repeatedly announced a solid alliance relationship with the US, its strong links with the domestic political space where the centrifugal dynamism prevails contains a potential danger to cohesion. The government's ruling group and its supporters do not hide their nationalistic propensity tied in with a pro-North Korea inclination and a China-friendly attitude. A good example is President Moon's comment at the early stage of the COVID-19 crisis:

“Korea stands together with the pain of China.” It was perceived by many South Koreans as too hasty and against the public opinion prevailing at that time. It was seen as a political gesture to invite President Xi Jinping to a summit as early as possible.

South Korea should also be vigilant about the danger of ‘rage politics.’ Rage has been a valuable asset for the left-progressive block, as shown in political campaigns including the Hyosoon-Misun incident, the mad cow protest, the THAAD protest, the GSOMIA protest, and other. Those were worthwhile societal issues, but backed by the anger of the left-progressive block, they have flared up quickly into divisive politics and have left no time for reasonable discussions. If the US’ pressure to China spills over to Korea, it will become a fuse for rage politics. Anti-American sentiments are flaring up again following the US’ pressure on South Korea’s military expenditure and the THAAD issue.

South Korea has work to do; it should review its strategic ambiguity which focuses on profiting from relations while denying facing China’s problems, and abandon it. In this context, the EU may give insight. The ‘EU-China - A Strategic Outlook’, published in May 2019, criticised China’s problematic economic activities, while at the same time calling for cooperation. The EU took a risk, considering that China is its second biggest trade partner, while the EU is the top trade partner of China. South Korea should borrow from this idea and move to the next level.

It can do this by having meaningful discussions about China’s challenges to security and values. This is a logical move because democracy and human rights are South Korea’s principles, as well as those of the US, the EU and the global community. The September G7+4 meeting, which President Trump called for seemingly to construct an anti-China front, will become a decisive test for South Korea.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Dr. Sung Kyoo Ahn** joined the KF-VUB Korea Chair as a Visiting Fellow to conduct research on NATO, with a focus on its relations with Russia, the US and China. He has obtained a PhD degree from Sungkyunkwan University.

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