

# Letter from Joseon to Korea: International Politics of the Korean Peninsula

Kun Young PARK

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South Korea has indispensable military relations with the United States (US), especially in the context of its hostile relations with North Korea. In addition, China's giant economic power makes South Korea reluctant to abandon its relations with China. Yet another significant factor complicating the regional dynamics for South Korea is the unresolved historical issues inherited from the imperial exploitation by the Japanese Empire on the Korean peninsula. This book aims to replace the narrative of South Korea's as an "agent" in the global arena, considering its historical values and above-mentioned transforming conditions, with a multifaceted approach called "strategic pragmatism." The author asks the following questions: what resources does South Korea have in its foreign policy-making processes?, what is its strategy based on these resources?, and what are the sources of the fundamental beliefs that construct the policymakers' perception of South Korea's foreign policy strategy?

Strategic pragmatism combines the interaction between internal dynamics and the international system rather than adopting a stance of complete opposition or commitment to normative values and the status quo. This approach recognizes post-Cold War changes in the global system and South Korea's evolving material capacity. Emphasizing a dynamic understanding of national interests rather than pure interest maximization, strategic pragmatism advocates long-term pragmatic goals while recognizing the dominant values of the international order, such as human rights and democracy. In this way, the author provides a pragmatic approach that does not fall into binary idealism by considering the transformation of the relationship between the structural order that shapes relations on the Korean Peninsula and Korean values in a dynamic framework (p. 5-6). Moreover, the author distinguishes strategic pragmatism from pejorative interpretations such as value-neutral interest-seeking, emphasizing the importance of prioritization between current and future potentials. However, the system-centered approach functioned to understand Korea's capacities and status and to recognize changes in its material and immaterial capacities by enabling it to grasp the profit-loss

mechanism of the international system (p. 33). The author's approach facilitates South Korea's assertion as an "actor" in international relations and allows it to navigate complex global dynamics without complying with binary oppositions. Through mutual complementarity and an organic consideration of international exchanges, the agent-centered approach helps South Korea navigate its search for identity without falling into ideological traps.

The book is structured around three main themes: the origins of Korean traditional diplomacy during the Joseon era (1392-1910), foreign policy after independence (1945-1950), and foreign policy after the Korean War (1953-2020). The first section focuses on Joseon's foreign policy, which still affects contemporary practices. The second section thoroughly explores how South Korea's security-centered policies emerged in the competitive Cold War environment following Korean independence. In the third section, the author analyzes the repositioning of South Korea's place in the international system after the democratization process in the post-Cold War era. This analysis is framed through the author's concept of strategic pragmatism and is supported by case studies such as the evolution of South Korea-North Korea relations, South Korea's troop dispatch to the Iraq War in 2003, and The Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD)<sup>1</sup> deployment to South Korea in 2017. The Korean peninsula's historical identity during the Joseon era (1392-1910) was divided into loyalty diplomacy and practical diplomacy, with the early part of the Joseon era dominated by practical diplomacy. Yet, by the late 17th century, loyalty diplomacy was the central foreign policy (p. 25), which prioritizes hierarchical ties with powerful states through diplomatic channels rather than mere material power, owing to the peninsula's geopolitical position.

Integral to comprehending the author's theoretical underpinning is grasping the concept of *Jaejojieun*,<sup>2</sup> denoting "the grace that saves the state from collapse." Korean history is marked by diplomatic engagements when facing such potential collapses. The author criticizes that it is normal for ordinary people to be grateful to "savior" states, but when this approach becomes a foreign policy, it leads to destructive consequences. Such destructions epitomized the late Joseon era's approach, prioritizing morality, ethics, and loyalty through *Sadaejuui*.<sup>3</sup> This notion entails honoring China's supremacy in foreign policy. The author posits that such loyalty diplomacy fostered dichotomous thinking, placing the Joseon era in a bipolar foreign policy trap, a legacy resonating in contemporary conservative/progressive and alliance/independence dichotomies even today. These binary divides, with their exclusionary nature, manipulated public opinion and perpetuated crises (p. 104-110). Moreover, such a "risk-averse" approach persisted with South Korea's dominant foreign policy during the Cold War, and its "rigid" nature proved more detrimental than beneficial (p. 125). The author claims that despite changing the name of powerful states, the reverence for "saving grace" endured.

1 The Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) is a high-altitude ballistic missile defense system developed by the US-based Lockheed Martin. THAAD deployed in South Korea against North Korea's long-standing nuclear and missile threats in 2017. THAAD became an important part of South Korea's multi-layer air defense system against the ballistic missile threats developed by North Korea. However, with the deployment of the THAAD defense system to South Korea, the positive relationship between Korean President Park Geun-hye and Chinese President Xi Jinping suddenly turned upside down.

2 For Korean, please refer: 재조지은 (再造之恩)

3 For Korean, please refer: 사대주의 (事大主義)

Despite facing intense public backlash, the Roh Moo-hyun government (2003-2008) defined its foreign policy agenda as “an approach that harmonizes values and interests, allies and multilateralism, globalization, and state identity,” which aligns with the author’s thesis. The Roh administration aimed to change the cognitive structure of the previous passive and dependent relationship by becoming a balancer and an influential actor. Still, with the division of the Korean Peninsula, South Korea’s lack of material power, and the hopelessness of resolving historical conflicts with Japan, such prospects remained far from what Morgenthau called “splendid isolation” and too complicated to be compatible with theory (p. 500). In contrast to previous governments, the Lee Myeong-bak government (2008-2013) has adopted an approach that uses political differences as leverage for a phased relationship with North Korea. This transformation is unilateral, contrary to the claim that this stance is pragmatic, and is designed as a pragmatic pivot in South Korea’s foreign policy. The author emphasizes that Lee’s policy was not pragmatic because such a policy preconditioned North Korea’s agency in its relations (p. 503). The Park Geun-hee administration (2013-2017) also opened a new dimension in its ties with North Korea, aiming for a rapprochement with China. After North Korea continued its nuclear tests despite all the pressures, South Korea decided to deploy THAAD missiles, which upset relations with China. In this process, the author argues that although South Korea aimed for a pragmatic foreign policy approach, the fear of abandonment by the US combined with South Korea’s reflexive move to protect liberal values led to the THAAD decision within the rhetoric context of the Cold War.

In conclusion, the author advocates for a strategic-pragmatic framework for South Korean foreign policy, emphasizing the importance of balancing alliance dynamics while protecting sovereign rights. By adopting “comprehensive security” policies and understanding North Korea’s identity, South Korea can avoid the pitfalls of the “alliance overlap dilemma” with the US, fostering an environment of mutual trust and threat reduction. In this book, the author sheds light on the continuities and changes in Korea’s indigenous diplomacy and concept, examining its impact on the present and the future. While this approach may face criticism from conservative circles, it does not entail blind compliance with US policies, like Churchill’s stance on Vietnam. The strategic-pragmatism approach emphasizes dynamic reciprocity between agency and structure and highlights the impact of structural factors and continuity in Korean values by avoiding “existential” diplomacy. The author proposes discarding Cold War bipolar rivalry logic for pragmatic outcomes through systematic time-space analysis to navigate South Korea’s role in a constantly evolving global landscape.

This study is valuable for understanding the structure of power struggles on the Korean Peninsula and the historical trajectories of Korean identity. At the same time, it effectively explains the dilemmas of South Korea’s foreign policy, which prioritizes liberal values brought about by its rapid economic development and democratization through its relations with North Korea. The author’s conceptualization of strategic pragmatism not as a romantic nationalism or an idealistic third way but within the context of today’s declining US hegemony and unipolar order, makes it possible to draw future-oriented conclusions. This book will be very instructive for those who want to evaluate the foreign policy of South Korea, an essential actor in the increasingly important East Asia region, from a historical perspective with Korean social reflexes.