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Strategic dilemma or great blessing? by Sukjoon Yoon

Sukjoon Yoon (sjyoon6680@kims.or.kr), retired Captain of the Republic of Korea Navy and senior research fellow at the Korea Institute for Maritime Strategy.

South Korean Foreign Affairs Minister Yun Byung-se has been defending remarks in a speech to the Korean diplomatic corps that characterized South Korea's position between China and the United States as a "great blessing" and emphasized the "strategic ambiguity" of his government's policies. Washington has been pressing Seoul to consent to deployment of a sophisticated missile defense system on South Korean soil, the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD), while Beijing has been trying to persuade Seoul to join its project, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), as a founding member (Seoul agreed on March 26).

South Korea is sandwiched between these two great powers, but rather than seeing this as a dilemma, Yun sees a great diplomatic and strategic opportunity for Korea, as a middle power with significant autonomy, to affect the policies of the superpowers for the benefit of the whole region. Yun's remarks signal a new and constructive approach, which is welcome. Yet his use of the phrase "great blessing" has provoked a backlash among political and diplomatic commentators because South Korean opinion is polarized about THAAD deployment and about joining the AIIB. Will THAAD work? Is a multiple-interception structure necessary to protect the US and South Korean militaries? Is it worth the diplomatic fallout? Are China's proposals – to rehabilitate its traditional Silk Road routes and integrating them with maritime routes connecting the Korean Peninsula to Europe – timely and plausible?

South Korea's interests

South Korea should explore new markets and investment opportunities: its factories in China – making cars, phones, and other goods – face rising labor costs so it is natural to look further afield. And of course, South Korea should continue to sustain regional peace and stability through its security alliance with the US, not least to deter North Korean threats, from weapons of mass destruction to cyber-attacks. South Korea has only recently begun to appreciate the leverage it has as a middle power and to implement appropriate policies, for example *Trustpolitik*, the Eurasia Initiative, and the Korean Peninsula Process known as the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI).

Through such policies, South Korean President Park Geun-hye has made a good, if rather belated, start. She is now pursuing middle-power diplomacy with neighboring countries and with the US. Inevitably, however, Seoul will be pulled in two directions: both China, as the emerging power, and the US, as a relatively declining power, have a strong interest in shaping South Korea as a pliant and predictable actor, but South Korea can and must continue to build its capacity to act autonomously.

A balanced foreign policy

South Korea's greatest long-term strategic challenge is how to maintain the US alliance, with its Cold War origins and legacies, while a second great power emerges as a rival to the US. In attempting to manage this issue, Korean policy-makers must consider the best advice from shrewd and experienced analysts, taking into account national security, economics, and international relations. Recent heated disputes have highlighted the difficulties. If the transition is to be managed through a balanced foreign policy that articulates strategic ambiguity then, so far as possible, each great power should be "ambiguously accommodated." Some have derided this strategy as "premature appeasement" in regard to China but Yun's recent remarks have focused attention on questions that need to be considered in an era of geopolitical transition.

The "great blessing" debate can be distilled to three questions. First, is China's rise real and permanent? Second, does this mean that US hegemony in the Asia-Pacific will become unsustainable? And third, given the expected increase in China's relative power and the unpredictability of tensions between China and the US, is it better for South Korea to stand firm in its strategic position, as Japan is doing, or to hedge its bets by at least partially accommodating China?

Yun has highlighted the position of Park's government. He believes that Seoul's strategic cooperative partnership with Beijing is strong enough to withstand disturbances arising from Seoul's attempts to nurture its security relationship with Washington, so that a dangerous crisis is unlikely. He also assumes that South Korea can and must remain on good terms with both great powers; it should pursue South Korea's own interests, and scrupulously refrain from any partisan alignment. Yun appears to conclude that Seoul has an opportunity to develop more autonomy through the rise in Chinese power and influence. He believes that by not taking a definite position in the struggle between the two superpowers South Korea can avoid ending up on the losing side, though perhaps incurring the displeasure of one or both.

The burden of ambiguity

An earlier attempt at balancing China and the US by Roh Moo-hyun was unsuccessful since he was widely regarded as anti-American. Yun's approach is much more plausible, however, and has much to recommend it, though it will not be an easy path to follow. He proposes to escape the strategic dilemma of choosing one of the great powers by playing them against each other. But such a stance must be driven by the issues of the day, and will always be a difficult and unstable burden for South Korea. For example, THAAD deployment

could be interpreted as a quid pro quo for South Korea's joining the AIIB; but any attempts to treat China and the US equivalently will always be subject to criticism from both. What concessions are appropriate in any given situation will remain contentious: too little will be judged unsatisfactory, and too much might destabilize the entire region by providing a critical advantage to one great power. Nevertheless, South Korea's current position offers new opportunities: it is a great blessing, not an intractable dilemma.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.