

“A New Type of Great-Power Relations” and the Implications for South Korea by Sukjoon Yoon

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Brad Glosserman’s recent comment on proposals for a “new type of great-power relations” between Washington and Beijing (“A new type of great power relations? Hardly,” *PacNet* #40) concludes that the US and China envisage some kind of Cold War framework. His rather jaundiced view of the prospects for a new era in US-China relations derives from an overtly Western perspective on security issues in the Asia-Pacific region, in which China is regarded as nakedly ambitious to reestablish its Middle Kingdom hegemony. Let me offer an Asian view on what this new pattern of great-power relations between Washington and Beijing might look like.

From the Asian point of view, it is timely for international relations to reflect a new understanding of what constitutes great power. The concept of great power has long been associated with a hierarchical structure in world politics, but since the end of the Cold War, the idea of “superpowers” has become less useful, and a new understanding of power and influence has emerged. After a brief flirtation with the idea of a “G2,” most analysts in the Asia-Pacific region prefer to characterize great-power relations in a new way. Although both the US and China have frequently displayed the military and economic muscle that qualify them for “great-power status,” they have also both adopted a managerial role in maintaining order in the region. China’s size and cultural significance are at least comparable with, if not superior to, that of traditional Western great powers, and now that military and economic equivalency is imminent, China and the US might reasonably consider each other to be members of similar standing in the great-power club.

From the Asian perspective, this change is undeniably genuine. In addition to the military and economic strengths that define the traditional concept of great-power status, Asians also expect modern-day great powers, whether in Asia or overseas, to shoulder certain burdens: to honestly accept their political responsibilities by preserving regional security and cooperating to protect transoceanic and universal interests. Both the US and China are working, albeit cautiously, with a new model of great-power relations that allows them to acknowledge their mutual responsibility for regional issues. The areas in which they can see scope for collaboration include climate change, maritime jurisdictional disputes, cyber-security, and the proliferation of nuclear weapons. So at their recent summit at Sunnylands in California, the two great powers of our time do seem to have made a commitment to

real change. The nations of East Asia remain concerned, however, about the impact of any agreements the big boys make: how have the “core interests” of the Chinese government been reconciled with the “critical national interest” of the US in securing freedom of navigation (despite not ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea)? Other nations of East Asia are hopeful that the US and China will act as responsible stakeholders, even though they are still sending suspicious signals, notably the US rebalance to Asia and China’s apparent aspirations to reclaim regional hegemony.

History makes it very clear that the interests of lesser powers, such as Poland in Europe or Korea in Asia, are often sacrificed on the altar of great-power accord. And over the last few years, both great powers have sought to convince their clients, Pyongyang and Seoul, to accept a divided Korean Peninsula as a settled fact so that the great-power game would no longer be needed in the region.

For the time being, South Korea must strike a balance in an era of China-US rivalry. It grows more difficult to maintain strategic equilibrium when Chinese economic power is waxing and US military power is waning. South Korea’s relations with the US and China need not be trapped in a zero-sum game. The rise of China and its continuing tensions with the US have already led to a reappraisal of their relations with South Korea: the US praised Park’s recent visit to Washington and China welcomes her forthcoming visit to Beijing in late June. With the US rebalance to Asia proceeding in parallel with China’s military and economic rise to become, potentially, a near-peer maritime competitor for the US, South Korea cannot but be influenced by the new pattern of great-power relations emerging from the Sunnylands summit, with its alluring prospect of an end to the China-US regional rivalry of the last decade.

For South Korea, an established middle power experiencing China’s rise and US decline, strategic autonomy is essential if the somewhat loose balance of power system in East Asia is to be replaced by a new pattern of great-power relations. The last few decades have been full of confrontation and friction, with disparate interests expressed by the US and China; but now China regards South Korea as a partner in strategic cooperation, and the US recognizes its strategic alliance with South Korea as a model for future relations in the region. And the movement toward a new type of great-power relations is already having some impact: North Korea’s recent saber-rattling failed to disrupt President Park’s *Trustpolitik*, and the meeting with South Korea scheduled for June 12 was abandoned after failure to agree on the composition of the delegations – not because of agenda issues. It seems that the two Koreas are finding it hard to identify appropriate strategies to adapt to the new pattern of great-power relations.

Has there really been a sea-change in the attitude of the great powers? Only time will tell. The US and China share an interest in maintaining peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region, and it makes sense for them to adopt a more collective approach to mitigating regional insecurity. Still, the US must demonstrate its continuing commitment to its ally, South Korea, and China must reassure its neighbor, North Korea, that it will not be abandoned. The Korean Peninsula is one of the most challenging issues that the “new type of great-power relations” must accommodate. Whatever the substance of this new initiative, South Korea must find a way to strike a strategic balance in its relations with the two great powers, straddling the Eastern and Western worlds.

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