

A Gilded Alliance: Global Korea's G-20/Yeonpyeong Moment Revisited

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Heajeong Lee

Alliance is an instrument for national interest, which is dependent upon the international environment and defined by domestic, democratic political processes. This commonsense notion of alliance was not fully embraced by the incoming South Korean administration of Lee Myung Bak in 2008. For the Lee administration, South Korea's alliance with the United States was much more than an instrument of foreign policy. The alliance embodied South Korea's political identity and was severely damaged by the preceding Roh Moo Hyun administration's anti-American, pro-North Korean policies.

The restoration of the Republic of Korea (ROK)-US alliance was both the goal and key to its national security strategy of Global Korea to enhance South Korea's influence, contribution, and stature on a global scale.¹ Thereafter, in a circle of the alliance's cheerleaders in both Seoul and Washington, the alliance has almost taken its own life: the alliance should be protected from disruptive political forces and modernized/adjusted/expanded into new dimensions for the preservation of the alliance itself.

In the post-Cold War years, the United States has tried to modernize its military alliances in order to preserve its influence at reduced costs. The Barack Obama administration had to mend US alliances strained during the George W. Bush administration's war on terror. In 2009, Presidents Lee and Obama agreed on "a comprehensive strategic alliance of bilateral, regional, and global scope, based on common

values and mutual trust."²

The so-called Great Recession, triggered by the fall of Lehman Brothers on September 15, 2008, has both brought to power and bedeviled the Obama administration; 9/15 has become a new historical marker, replacing 9/11. The very "common values" of the ROK-US strategic alliance—democracy and market economy—have been put to the test; the worries and cries over the decline of the US have arisen once again.

In May 2010, the Obama administration published its national security strategy of national renewal and global leadership. Nation-building at home was the primary goal of and imperative to national security. Along with moral leadership to "live" American values, global architecture to embed both allies and challengers in US-centered institutional networks became a new feature of American global leadership.³ "The United States can, must, and will lead in this new century," asserted Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in September 2010 at the Council of Foreign Relations, the oldest bastion of American global leadership. She

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The East Asia Institute
909 Sampoong B/D, Eulji-ro 158, Jung-gu,
Seoul 100-786, Republic of Korea
Phone 82 2 2277 1683 Fax 82 2 2277 1697
Email eai@eai.or.kr Website www.eai.or.kr

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went on to declare that “the complexity and connection of today’s world have yielded a new American moment, a moment when our global leadership is essential, even if we must often lead in new ways.”⁴

Confirming that “the 21st century will be another great American century,” President Obama argued at this year’s Air Force Academy graduation ceremony that “we have laid the foundation for a new era of American leadership.”⁵ Global Korea, with a comprehensive strategic alliance and a free trade agreement with the United States and hosting of a G-20 meeting and nuclear security summit, has been an integral part and a success story of American global architecture. The Lee administration was awarded with the first two-plus-two (foreign and defense ministers) meeting in 2010, which had been previously held only with Japan, and a state visit to Washington in 2011. “The relation between our two countries has never been stronger,” commended Secretary of State Clinton in this year’s second two-plus-two meeting. Korean Defense Minister Kim Kwan-Jin confirmed the 2015 operation control plan and expressed commitment to make “the alliance the best alliance in the world.” American Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta lauded an ongoing trilateral collaboration, including Korea and Japan, to deter North Korea as “another way to strengthen and modernize our alliance.”⁶

It is widely disputed that the Obama administration has seized a new American moment and laid the foundation for a new American century. The Obama administration has been beset with rampant unemployment and snowballing deficits. “The Moment of Truth,” a bipartisan commission’s report on the financial crisis, issued a warning in 2010 that it is imperative to raise revenues and to cut both defense and nondefense spending—in short, a complete overhaul of the existing American national security state and social welfare system.⁷ However, the political polarization of the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street and resultant partisan gridlock have foiled nation-building at home and led to the first downgrading of the US credit

rating and a self-made financial cliff of sequester—mandatory across-the-board budget cuts in the next ten years beginning January 2013.⁸

Against its lean and mean years, the Obama administration’s rhetoric of a new American moment or century rings hollow. In contrast, the positive—it couldn’t be better—evaluation on the state of the ROK-US alliance is widely held.⁹ Nevertheless, the alliance’s success does not resonate with a (far from positive) strategic reality facing South Korea; nor does the alliance translate into a smooth-working component of American global architecture.

The Lee administration has doubled down on its alliance with the US. With the Obama administration’s “strategic patience” or no policy toward North Korea,¹⁰ the Lee administration has succeeded in punishing/isolating North Korea but failed to prevent the latter’s development of nuclear capacity, not to mention the latter’s denuclearization. Or, to put it differently, when it comes to nuclear issues or power transition, North Korea has been on its own, with no South Korean leverage over the latter. Most critically and tragically, Global Korea’s prime moment of hosting a G-20 meeting in November 2010 (in the midst of the final renegotiation of a Korea-US free trade agreement) was followed by North Korea’s shelling of Yeonpyeong Island, which in turn led to a joint Korean-US military exercise including the USS *George Washington* aircraft carrier and which was opposed by China.

In the G-20/Yeonpyeong moment, the Lee administration succeeded in synchronizing its strategic and comprehensive alliance with the US and global contribution but rather miserably failed to maintain peace on the Korean Peninsula and manage its relationship with China. On the other hand, the ROK-US comprehensive and strategic alliance does not dispense with politics among allies; nor does it develop into a trilateral cooperation of the United States, South Korea, and Japan.

The Lee administration has been at odds with the United States on the issues of spent nuclear fuel reprocessing and missile development, albeit much out of



public scrutiny. In addition, the Lee administration has recently confronted Japan with the territorial issue of Dokdo and Japanese colonialism, along with a public relations campaign, including President Lee's visit to Dokdo in August 2012. This was an abrupt turnabout from its attempt to share information with Japan on North Korea through a military accord—a trilateral collaboration that Panetta mentioned as a way to modernize the ROK-US alliance. Faced with a public uproar against the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), the Lee administration canceled the latter's signing ceremony at the last minute and turned to confront Japan, which reciprocated with its territorial claim and disavowal of historical responsibilities for colonialism, and even a threat to halt financial cooperation.¹¹

In sum, despite of (or because of, if you will) the much touted success of the ROK-US alliance, South Korea is now in a diplomatic wilderness, isolated from all of its neighbors—North Korea, China, and Japan. Why? It is, I argue, because President Lee's Global Korea was a vision for a bygone, pre-Great Recession, and pre-G-2 world.

As long as the United States confronted an assertive China with allies and new partners, South Korea's strategic alliance with the United States could serve both the former's security interests and the latter's regional architect. The sinking of the *Cheonan* happened in the context of such confrontations of the United States and China over the South China Seas, which led to the re-scheduling of transfer of operational control (from the United States to South Korea) from 2012 to 2015 that had been requested by the Lee administration.

However, as the United States began to embrace China and both deemed it necessary to contain security tensions on the Korean Peninsula, an assertive South Korea against North Korea and China became a liability to the United States, and South Korea's strategic, global, comprehensive alliance with the United States became superfluous, if not necessarily inimical, to South Korea's local and regional interests. Such was the case after the

shelling of Yeonpyeong Island. Following is a reconstruction of an anticlimax of Global Korea in the historical contexts of the Obama administration's struggles to forge a new American global leadership.

A New American Moment

A new American moment alludes to “the unipolar moment” at the end of the Cold War or, in a longer perspective, Henry Luce's 1941 call for “the American century.”¹² However, September 2010, when a new American moment was declared by Secretary of State Clinton, was hardly comparable to 1989 or 1941 when the United States was emerging out of the Great Depression and intervening in World War II on its way to building the American century. Even in a much shorter time frame of the Obama administration's political fortune, it was not a promising moment.

The Obama administration had inherited and increased budget deficits by its own stimulus packages and bailouts and immersed itself in health care reform in which no president had ever succeeded. In March 2010, Congress passed Obama's health care reform with a strict party-line vote. Hope for post-partisanship was dashed. Obama, caught in bitter partisan politics and legislative schedules, had to postpone his visits to Australia and Indonesia (and which were to be delayed again in June due to a massive oil spill incident in the Gulf of Mexico). The Republicans, especially fiscal conservatives and Tea Party activists, had attacked Obama's socialistic health care reform and fiscally irresponsible big government for hampering economic recovery. The Obama administration had hoped for and predicted the so-called recovery summer to come as a result of its stimulus package. Obama had invented, in a fund-raising meeting, and countered Republican critics with an analogy of a (Republican) driver, who had pushed his car into the ditch and, when the car was pulled out (by the Obama administration), asked for the key. “No, you don't know



how to drive” was Obama’s campaign theme. This ingenious slogan, however, did not bring recovery summer. In September 2010, the unemployment rate was approaching 10 percent; a Republican surge in the midterm election was sealed.

Of course, the Great Recession was the root cause of Obama’s political plights. The Cold War’s end had evidenced, the Bush administration once boasted, that there was “a single sustainable model for national development: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise”—the American system itself.¹³ Such a belief has been, to say the least, no longer sacrosanct in the wake of the Great Recession that has emanated from the United States and wrought havoc on advanced industrial countries. The rise of China has been a major concern of American strategists, whose usual “suspect” or caveat regarding the rise of China has been whether China could sustain economic growth and manage economic, financial crisis and attendant political unrest. The Great Recession has shown that such a concern should not be applied only to China, while accelerating the rise of China. Overtaking Japan, China has become the second-largest national economy and America’s first creditor. Francis Fukuyama, who had once epitomized America’s unipolar moment with “end of history” triumphalism, has recently declared the rise of “post-Washington Consensus” and questioned how the middle class of the first world would survive the current crisis of globalization in “the future of history.”¹⁴

Clinton’s “new American moment” speech was an elaborate vision to salvage American global leadership amid the Great Recession or to institutionalize American hegemony on the cheap. On the basics, she emphasized that national renewal—in terms of both economic power and moral leadership that were hardest hit by the Great Recession and Bush’s fiascos in the war on terror—was imperative. She checked an American inventory. Demand for American leadership or invitation for American intervention, America’s global reach and institutional networks, and resolve to leadership were identified: “The world looks to us because America has

the reach and resolve to mobilize the shared effort needed to solve problems on a global scale in defense of our own interests, but also as a force for progress.” Global architecture—a network of alliances, partnerships, and regional and global institutions—was to ensure American global leadership: for example, “[A] core principle of all our alliances is shared responsibility.”¹⁵

On the question of exactly how to accommodate and control new powers, the National Security Strategy of May 2010 was revealing: “New and emerging powers who seek greater voice and representation will need to accept greater responsibility for meeting global challenges.”¹⁶ This is a tactic of co-opting, whose underlying idea is paternal: the United States rules the rules, defines the responsibilities, and awards the voices and reputations. There should be no problem if a new power accepts the existing rules and the authority of the United States, like President Lee’s Global Korea. But what if a new power challenges the existing responsibilities and aspires to make its own rules?¹⁷ “Disagreements are inevitable,” Clinton bluntly put it, “on certain issues such as human rights with China or Russian occupation of Georgia.” She listed two more ways to confront those nonconforming emerging powers. One was to directly engage people of those powers, and the other was to construct global, cross-regional networks of those allies, friends, and people sharing American values. Unmentioned was what if the people themselves would not be receptive to American values or what if democracy would empower anti-American forces (such as Hamas’s victory in the 2006 Palestine election).

Besides outright challenges from emerging powers, new American global leadership premised upon global architecture has many soft spots, cross-currents, or structural defects. To mobilize nations and peoples of “diverse histories, unequal resources, and competing worldviews” is, as Clinton herself pointed out, a tall order. Furthermore, demand for American leadership and America’s global reach could work against the United States as well. Unanswered invitation begets disappointment and even resentment. The United



States could be caught in conflicting demands. In its global reach and long history of intervention, the United States has its own fair share of glories, successes, follies, and “blowbacks.”¹⁸ Most of all, unless buttressed with economic power and moral leadership, both the US resolve to leadership and the power to co-opt and mobilize are much circumscribed. In short, resource or power matters most.

A Ship Trying to Sail on Yesterday's Winds

Global Korea was out of sync with the Great Recession, though it was a willing participant in American global architecture. To borrow a line from the ongoing US political campaigns, President Lee was “like a ship trying to sail on yesterday’s winds.”¹⁹ His social engineering, economic development vision of (denuclearized) North Korea belongs to the pre-Iraq Bush era. His vision of a rapid South Korean economic growth, to be boosted by a free trade agreement with the United States, is premised upon a booming, American-centered world economy that has been swept away by the Great Recession. Depending almost exclusively on South Korea’s strategic, comprehensive alliance with the United States is mistaken, given that South Korea has been in a region of competing social systems and values, traditionally under Chinese military influence, and recently drawn into a Chinese economic vortex. (For example, from 2000 to 2011 China’s share in South Korea’s foreign trade has increased from 9.2 percent to 20.2 percent, while the US share has decreased from 19.8 percent to 9.4 percent.)

Global Korea’s prime moment was its hosting of the G-20 meeting November 11–12, 2010. On November 23, Yeonpyeong Island was under North Korean bombardment: South Korea fired back. It was the first North Korean attack against South Korean territory and civilians since the Korean War. North Korea claimed that its military had responded to the South Korean military’s shelling into North Korean waters.

The South Korean military exercise itself was a part of beefed-up military activity after the sinking of the *Cheonan* in March 2010 but suspended for the holding of G-20. The Obama administration dispatched the USS *George Washington* to the Yellow Sea for a joint military exercise, which had been requested by South Korea and opposed by China. China protested against the United States and South Korea; South Korea confronted China, which did not condemn North Korea.

This was a culminating point of military tensions in the Yellow Sea, and in a wider context, China’s military confrontations in the South China Sea served as a model scenario for invitation of American leadership. The sinking of the *Cheonan* led to the (from 2012 to) 2015 operation control plan in the ROK-US alliance, the call for increased naval power on the US home front,²⁰ and the Obama administration’s implementation or exercise of regional architecture that Clinton had laid out in her Asian policy and “new American moment” addresses. In contrast, the Yeonpyeong incident—the first major combat between two Koreas that escalated into the military show-off of the US aircraft carrier and diplomatic brawls—was followed by Chinese president Hu Jintao’s state visit to Washington and a new US policy toward China in January 2011.

On January 14, 2011, Clinton introduced a new US policy toward China. She contextualized the moment in two—short and long—historical perspectives. In the short term of the Obama administration’s tenure, “America and China have arrived at a critical juncture, a time when the choices we make—both big and small—will shape the trajectory of this relationship.” In a very long-term historical context, the rise of China is non-zero sum and unprecedented, for it occurs in a globalized, dynamic—and complicated—landscape. Thus, America’s approach to China is “grounded in reality, focused on results, and true to our principles and interests. And that is how we intend to pursue a positive, cooperative, and comprehensive relationship with China.”

The new “positive, cooperative, and comprehen-



sive” policy had three elements. The first was, not so new by then, America’s active regional engagement or construction of regional architecture such as modernization of alliances, pursuit of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and participation in the East Asian Summit. The second was a novel and striking feature—bilateral trust building not only through existing strategic and economic dialogue but also through military-military dialogue and exchange of peoples and students. The third was common endeavor to address a long list of “shared challenges” from the global financial crisis to climate change and development of the third world, and various security issues.

The (North) Korean issue stood out among security issues: “The United States and China both understand the urgent need to maintain peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and to achieve the complete denuclearization of North Korea.” She explained “intense engagement in recent weeks, including a conversation between President Obama and President Hu.” She emphasized that the United States had to “respond clearly” to North Korean military provocations; in other words, or translated into plain and direct words, the United States had dispatched the USS *George Washington* not to challenge China but to restrain North Korea. The United States also understood China’s “unique tie to North Korea” and came to share the latter’s insistence on the need of the resumption of diplomatic dialogues that South Korea under President Lee had all refused. Here Clinton was walking a very tight rope: “We are building momentum in support of North-South dialogue that respects the legitimate concerns of our South Korean ally and that can set the stage for meaningful talks on implementing North Korea’s 2005 commitment to irreversibly end its nuclear program.”

This amounted to America’s betrayal of Global Korea, one of its most faithful allies that had just held a G-20 meeting and suffered a historic military attack. G-20 was Global Korea’s pride but could not measure up to G-2. For the United States, Global Korea was not China: “In the aftermath of the global financial crisis,

the United States and China worked effectively through the G-20 to help spur recovery. Can you imagine where we would be economically if either China or the United States had failed to work together so constructively? It almost is a frightening prospect to imagine.”²¹ The joint statement of the January 2011 Hu-Obama meeting characterized the relations between both countries as “vital and complex” and, with all the due caveats, “called for the necessary steps that would allow for early resumption of the Six-Party Talks process.”²²

Most of all, another Korean War is a strategic nightmare for the United States.²³ However undeserving it may be, “South Korea must avoid the temptation to act unilaterally”; Victor Cha and Katrin Katz issued a sympathetic but stern warning: “in every unclassified scenario game we have played on exactly this contingency, the trigger for major-power conflict in Korea has been unilateral South Korean actions that spark an action-reaction spiral between the U.S. and China. This must be avoided at all costs.”²⁴

The Moment of Truth

The Great Recession, along with a geopolitical fate, dictated America’s betrayal of Global Korea and “vital and complex” relations with China. Its political fallout was the biggest Republican surge since 1938 in the November 2010 midterm election—what President Obama called a “shellacking.” The House fell to the Republican Party. In December, the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility published “The Moment of Truth.” President Obama, who had organized the bipartisan commission, did not act upon “the Moment of Truth” in his budget plan. Paul Ryan, who had chaired the Republican House Budget Committee and been a member of the commission and opposed the latter’s recommendations, launched a fiscal reform drive.

In May 2011, President Obama announced the killing of Osama bin Laden and exhorted Americans



to focus on nation-building at home. The Republican fiscal conservatives, or hawks, refused to increase the debt ceiling and thereby spawned the fear of government shutdown. With the Republican pledge to no new taxes and sacred cows of defense spending and domestic entitlements pitted against each other, a grand bargain between President Obama and the Republican House Speaker John Boehner eventually faltered. The US credit rating was downgraded in August 2011 and was followed by the Occupy Wall Street movement in the next month.

Nation-building on the US home front was in disarray. Secretary of Defense Panetta was deeply concerned: “We are beginning to emerge out of a decade of war, but facing economic hardship, record debt, and a partisan paralysis in our political system that is threatening our ability to tackle these problems and find the solutions that have to be found if we are to maintain our leadership in the world.”²⁵

In November 2011, President Obama presided at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting in Hawaii and participated in the East Asian Summit, with the fanfare of “America’s Pacific Century.”²⁶ In the same month, the US Congress’s supercommittee failed to agree on budget reform and the (an opposition member detonated) tear-gas-filled Korean Parliament ratified the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement. Obama, who had opposed the original Korea-US free trade agreement of 2007, had driven a hard bargain of renegotiation. The original agreement, which had been defended by the Roh and Lee administrations as the best deal for Korean national interest, was the casualty or Global Korea’s “tribute” to its strategic, comprehensive alliance with the United States.

In January 2012, the Obama administration announced a new defense posture, the Defense Strategic Guidance—America’s pivot to Asia, or rebalancing on Asia. Secretary Panetta pleaded against the possibility of sequester that would result in “a demoralized and hollow force.”²⁷ America’s pivot to Asia on military terms was not so much a proactive and coherent pro-

gram as a reactive wish list to keep everything on the cheap: for example, the Cold War relic of two-war doctrine was still there and Secretary Panetta has not initiated any bold actions.²⁸ In comparison, America’s diplomatic pivot to Asia was much more proactive and programmatic (especially in the form of global architecture) but still clouded by attentions on the Middle East (Libya, Syria, Iran, and Israel) or controversies over America’s “leadership from behind,” and overwhelmed by the accelerated power shift to Asia.

In April 2012, Secretary Clinton once again emphasized the US “grounded in reality” approach to China, announcing that “Today’s China is not the Soviet Union.... In less than 35 years, we’ve gone from being two nations with hardly any ties to speak of to being thoroughly, inescapably interdependent.” This time she went much further than a diplomatic cliché of “a thriving China is good for America” and vice versa and declared that “we will only succeed in building a peaceful, prosperous Asia Pacific if we succeed in building an effective U.S.-China relationship.” Recognizing and refuting critiques that “our talk of architecture and institutions and norms is really code for protecting Western prerogatives and denying rising powers their fair share of influence,” she was even willing to admit what might be called China’s “coauthorship” of the future: “Rules and institutions designed for an earlier age may not be suited to today. So we need to work together to adapt and update them and even to create new institutions where necessary.” Of course, she still insisted on the universal values of freedom, open economy, and peaceful settlement of dispute, and counseled that “selective stakeholders” would in the long run “end up impoverishing everyone.”²⁹ Nonetheless, China was no longer expected to be “corrected” or coerced by the United States and now reckoned as a force on its own interest, value, and influence.

In May 2012, as noted above, President Obama argued at the Air Force Academy that his administration had “laid the foundation for a new era of American leadership.” His inventory included American



resilience, military power, alliance and institutional networks, and the very American (and supposedly universal) values. His address ended with a usual tribute to American exceptionalism: “the United States has been and will always be the one indispensable nation.”³⁰ However, as he pointed out in the National Security Strategy of 2010, “America’s greatness is not assured—each generation’s place in history is a question unanswered.”³¹ Or, as Secretary Panetta emphasized, “We bless ourselves with the hope that everything will be fine in this country. But very frankly, it doesn’t mean a damn thing unless we are willing to fight for it.”³²

In the press availability after the second two-plus-two meeting between South Korea and the United States in June 2012, Secretary Clinton was first asked about American policy toward Egypt and Syria and later about the new leadership in North Korea. “This young man, should he make a choice that would help bring North Korea into the 21st century,” she hoped, “could go down in history as a transformative leader.” North Korea, once a target of regime change or partner of a grand bargain with the United States, is now on its own. Maybe this should be no wonder, given America’s “leadership from behind” or the failure of a grand bargain between Obama and Boehner on fiscal reform.

By the way, it is hard to figure out or, simply a head-scratcher, why President Lee has turned around to confront Japan. What is certain is that alliances do not necessarily add up. South Korea and Japan are now being caught in the moment of the 1951 San Francisco conference. After World War II, George Kennan observed, the United States in Japan was “not confronted, with any local sovereign government, which had to be pressed, wheedled, or persuaded before we could achieve what we wanted. It was our cake. We had only to cut it.”³³ It is desirable that both South Korea and Japan should move beyond history as many American strategists counsel. Nevertheless, the United States is far from an innocent bystander in the ongoing history and territorial disputes between its

key allies. The United States is not in a position to force China to make peace with Japan and other neighbors over territorial issues, either. With the rise of China, the Chinese Foreign Ministry makes it clear that “Long gone are the days when the Chinese nation was subject to bullying and humiliation from others.”³⁴ After all, the United States can’t (not any longer) eat its cake and have it too.

Leaving the United States where the Republican and Democratic National Conventions were orchestrating American exceptionalism to their respective partisan tunes, Secretary Clinton had recently been on a six-nation Asia tour. In Beijing, she was greeted with a firm Chinese stance on the territorial sovereignty issues. Given the differences of both countries, she still maintained that “it’s impossible for our two countries to see eye to eye on all the issues, but we believe that the mutual respect for each other’s core interests and major concerns is an important precondition for the steady and smooth development of our bilateral relationship.”³⁵ Her final destination was Vladivostok, where Russian president Vladimir Putin hosted this year’s APEC summit meeting. Russia is, for the Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney, “America’s number one geopolitical foe.” President Obama, who had hosted last year’s APEC meeting in Hawaii, was busy campaigning at home. It was the first time in 14 years that the US president missed an APEC summit meeting.³⁶ After all, what matters most for the United States and especially for President Obama is (campaigning for) nation-building at home: as the former president Bill Clinton, who has provided the best defense of Obama’s lean and mean years at the Democratic National Convention, once noted, “It’s the economy, stupid!”

On September 11, the US ambassador to Libya was killed in an attack against the US consulate in Benghazi, which was a part of a widespread Arab protest against a US-made Islam-mocking film. “How could this happen,” Secretary Clinton asks, “in a country we helped liberate, in a city we helped save from



destruction?” Unlike President Bush, who asked why they hated us in the wake of the terrorist attacks 11 years ago, Clinton is much somber: “This question reflects just how complicated and, at times, how confounding the world can be.”³⁷

The strategic vista of the Korean Peninsula is indeed complex, complicated, and confounding. Of course, South Korea has grown economically and matured politically; for a rising and conservative South Korea, it was very tempting to moralize the vices (or original sins) of North Korea and search for its place on the globe by doubling down on its alliance with the United States. However, the Korean Peninsula is still locked in the Korean War, haunted by Japanese colonialism and a more distant past of Chinese imperialism, and caught in a strategic swirl of the rise of China and bedeviled by a nuclear North Korea.

Global Korea is no match for China. A new era of US-China relations has dawned: both would compete fiercely but with a mutual understanding (or resignation) of common interests, disagreements, and complicated, inescapable interdependence. And North Korea is neither Libya nor Ukraine. Buying off has been, so far, the only way to denuclearize. Moralizing or condemning has not proven effective against the nuclear development of China, Israel, India, or Pakistan, either. Given America’s preoccupation with domestic problems and embrace of China, and its “leadership from behind” or not-so solid pivot to Asia, what should matter most for South Korea is not a gilded alliance with the United States for the sake of alliance itself. It is imperative to focus on and to devise a new strategy to navigate the rather vicious, bewildering strategic landscape of the Korean Peninsula. Not alliance but alignment should matter: a new alignment of South Korea’s (enhanced) national interests on the Korean Peninsula, regional and global scales should be devised in this political season of presidential election. Fortunately, President Lee has no second chance. ■

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——— *Heajeong Lee* is a professor at the Department of Political Science and International Relations, Chung-Ang University.



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