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South Korea's Challenges and Opportunities in the Post-Covid Era

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Crises tend to be incubators and accelerators of global change. The pandemic that has ravaged the world in 2020 is no exception. The crisis has still not fully played itself out and nobody can say with certainty what the post-Covid world will look like but at least some of the writing is on the wall. Covid-19 has swept over the Asia Pacific like a tidal wave-toppling longstanding hierarchies and shattering deeply held assumptions with astonishing speed. Though the most devastating phase of the crisis might come to the end in 2021 with the development of effective vaccines, its aftereffects will linger for years creating new possibilities and new limitations for governments throughout Asia. Although the inauguration of Joe Biden as president in January promises to shift American policies toward the pandemic and its allies in a more constructive direction, Washington's failed response to Covid has caused many to doubt American leadership and these doubts will not be easily assuaged. Amidst this turmoil, South Korea will confront new challenges and new opportunities. Its leaders will need to navigate the tides of international politics carefully to avoid getting caught up in

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emerging rivalries and harness South Korea's economic and cultural dynamism in ways that benefit the world and serve national interests.

The most prominent challenge that South Korea will have to face is the declining influence of its most important ally, the United States. Despite the recent change in political leadership in Washington, America's economic problems will not disappear and this will have ramifications for American globalism. It will still be many months before airlines, hotels, restaurants, and countless other businesses that play critical roles in creating jobs and expanding the GDP will be able to function normally. America's budget deficit for 2020 is likely to reach over \$3 trillion-more than triple the already record-breaking sum recorded in 2019. With its struggling economy and overstretched budgets, the United States will have a very limited appetite for expanding its influence abroad. Spending on the military and economic assistance will come under greater scrutiny as the U.S. will be forced to devote a greater proportion of its revenues to keeping businesses afloat and providing relief for the unemployed. America's bleak economic outlook will ultimately make it difficult to reverse the trend toward retrenchment that has characterized the Trump administration.

Yet the damage that the United States has suffered during the pandemic is not only economic but also political and cultural. For decades, America has been a country that the rest of the world envied, admired, and at times hated. But even anti-Americanism was often fueled by antipathy toward U.S. power and dominance. Recently, however, the United States has suddenly found itself the object of pity and even contempt as it has suffered far more deaths due to Covid

than any other country in the world. The inability of the United States and its European allies to contain the pandemic while other countries have succeeded has naturally caused many to wonder if US is equipped to lead in the changing world of the twenty-first century. The number of liberal democracies around the world had been declining before the pandemic and the failure of Western democratic institutions to manage the greatest challenge of our era threatens to perpetuate this trend.

For South Korea, whose alliance with the United States is the cornerstone of its national security policy, this sudden weakening of America's global position cannot be a welcome development. It will inevitably force a debate within South Korea about its policy options going forward but none of these options are without risks. Seoul can try to persuade Washington to maintain its commitments but this approach might alienate China and run up against the new constraints that the United States will face in the post-Covid era. It can increase its own defense spending but this might reduce the government's capacity to invest in technological innovation and social programs. Or it can seek to enhance its security partnerships with members of the "quad"-India, Australia, and Japan. But this might prove challenging for two reasons: first, frictions between Seoul and Tokyo over geographic and historical issues are likely to persist and second, South Korea's strategic interests diverge from those of other members of the quad on a number of issues. Ultimately, America's declining power and influence will force South Korea to choose from a number of options that all have significant drawbacks.

A Biden administration will undoubtedly make things easier for South

Korea than they would have been if President Trump had been reelected. Biden places a far greater value on America's alliances than Trump and will undoubtedly seek to cooperate with South Korea rather than punish it. His election will likely bring an end to the kinds of unreasonable demands made by the Trump administration for massive increases in South Korea's contribution to the costs of the alliance. It has been widely reported that Biden will take a more traditional approach to North Korea and emphasize sanctions and containment rather than summitry and rapprochement. Some of the statements that he made during the campaign also suggest that there might be some differences between Biden and Moon on dealing how to handle North Korea. At the same time, we should not be too quick to assume that Biden will bring things back to the stalemate that existed during the Obama administration. It is important to keep in mind that throughout Obama's presidency, his counterparts in Seoul were conservative leaders who had little interest in seriously pursuing engagement with the North. It will remain for President Moon to convince the new American president that productive engagement with Pyongyang can yield real benefits.

While Biden's election is generally good news for South Korea, this good news will still be tempered by the sobering realities of world politics in the twenty-first century. The new president might adjust the tone of American foreign policy toward its allies but changes in Washington's approach toward adversaries and competitors will likely be less dramatic. Biden will continue the hardline that the Trump administration took toward China although he will be less bombastic in

his rhetoric. There seems to be little chance that the incoming president will lift any of the sanctions and tariffs that Trump put in place though he may also focus on a slightly different set of issues. The Trump administration was reluctant to criticize China's detention camps in Xinjiang but Biden has vowed to make this an issue, raising the possibility of another area of friction between Washington and Beijing. Ongoing Sino-American rivalry will leave South Korea in a difficult position. The United States will continue to seek South Korea's cooperation in its efforts to build a global coalition geared at containing China. But Beijing will use its considerable economic leverage to make sure there are negative ramifications for South Korea if it takes measures that strengthen the U.S. position against China in the Pacific.

South Korea's balancing act between China and the United States will only become more precarious in the next few years because of Beijing's increasing assertiveness. Driven by a hyper-nationalism that is reminiscent of Mao Zedong's revolutionary zeal, the Xi Jinping government has become extremely sensitive to perceived slights on the part of its neighbors and less likely to shy away from confronting them. Many of its diplomats have recently adopted a new style of "wolf warrior diplomacy" that hits back hard at criticisms of the CCP on social media and other public venues. South Korea can easily become the target of these kinds of attacks because its status as an outpost of liberal democracy and American influence so close to the Chinese mainland remains a sore point for Beijing. In recent years, China's keen sensitivity toward South Korea's allegiances has been readily apparent from both its strong protests against the deployment of the THAAD

missile defense system on ROK territory and its efforts to woo South Koreans upset with the Trump administration. Thus far, the wolf warriors' bark has generally been worse than their bite and China has not sought to ratchet up military tensions. But the escalating rhetorical clashes between Washington and Beijing will likely remain awkward for Seoul which values its relations with both sides.

China's increasingly harsh rhetorical tone has been accompanied by efforts to project its influence and improve its reputation. Beijing has turned its initial mishandling of the coronavirus into an opportunity to rebuild its image through vaccine diplomacy and information campaigns. China's new narrative about Covid-19 is that CCP officials and public health workers struggled heroically and managed to contain it while Western leaders who unfairly criticized the PRC failed. Many will continue to point the finger at China for not preventing the virus from spreading beyond its borders but the CCP's new narrative has considerable appeal to both domestic audiences and some foreign leaders who are eager for Chinese help. The ultimate goal of proliferating this narrative while offering aid to fight Covid is to encourage countries in Asia and Africa to strengthen bilateral ties with the PRC. This approach is paradigmatic of how China will compete with the US for the foreseeable future. It will not directly attack the United States or get involved in tit-for-tat quarrels but more subtly seek to elevate its own influence at America's expense. The impact of these efforts on South Korea will not be immediate, but if more countries in Asia and Africa come to see the PRC as an appealing model, South Korea may find itself as one of a few increasingly lonely democracies outside of the

United States and the West.

Yet perhaps the most important way that Beijing will influence developments on the Korean peninsula is through its distinctive relationship with North Korea. Many experts in the United States believe that China and North Korea actually detest each other and that expressions of goodwill between them are a façade. Recent developments have called these assumptions into question as the two allies who like to say they are “as close as lips and teeth” have moved even closer together. Aside from the high-level summitry between Kim Jong Un and Xi Jinping in 2018 and 2019, warming relations have been evident in numerous other gestures of friendship made by both sides. Beijing and Pyongyang have commemorated the 70th anniversary of China’s intervention in the Korean War with an array of films, art exhibitions, and other activities. Chinese documentaries showed scenes of the volunteers and North Korean People’s Army fighting together against the United States while Kim Jong Un’s visit to the Chinese People’s Volunteers’ cemetery in Hoech’ang received significant attention in the Chinese media. Moreover, Beijing has increasingly looked the other way when North Korea has evaded UN sanctions. While the Sino-North Korean relationship has always been closer than many Western observers have understood it to be, during the last two years the two have come to share a growing number of ideas and objectives.

China’s successful efforts to pull North Korea more closely into its orbit has clear implications for inter-Korean relations. Beijing will have greater clout in Pyongyang and this means greater influence on when and whether the Kim regime decides to resume summitry with Seoul

and Washington. Economic aid and sanctions relief have been two of Pyongyang's key motives for responding to American and South Korean peace initiatives but if Chinese trade and investment increase this will be a far less important incentive. More broadly, in the current climate of confrontation between Beijing and Washington, the PRC will likely find little reason to rein in North Korea's hostility toward the United States. Indeed, some Chinese officials might even subtly encourage Pyongyang to be defiant and confrontational in order to bolster overall resistance to American influence in Asia. The new geopolitical reality may well be that if Seoul wants to pursue meaningful engagement with Pyongyang it will have to avoid alienating Beijing. Stronger Sino-North Korean solidarity will make the Kim regime less likely to deal with a South Korea if it continues to draw China's ire.

South Korea will face significant challenges during and after the Covid era but opportunities nonetheless abound. If the South Korean government can wisely manage its relations with its neighbors while harnessing the soft power and goodwill that it has earned through its embrace of science and democratic culture, it can emerge as a more important and respected player in world politics. Such a development is more than just something that would be nice and beneficial for South Korea. Now more than ever, the world needs South Korea to step up and play an expanded role in the Asian region and the international community. It may well have a greater capacity to promote liberal democratic values and contribute to the improvement of the human condition than any other country in Asia.

One key reason that South Korea has gained so greatly in

international stature during the last year while the United States and other major powers have struggled, is its relative success in containing the pandemic. Although it has been disappointing to see Covid cases in South Korea creeping up during the last few weeks, Moon Jae In's government has still fared much better than most other industrialized democracies at limiting the damage done by the virus. Moreover, it managed these impressive results without the kind of draconian lockdowns that were imposed in China and other places. This success has established South Korea as a global leader in epidemic prevention and control with many countries even pointing to the South Korean "model" as the most effective and desirable method of handling Covid. Moreover, South Korea has begun to play an expanding role in supporting other governments in their efforts to contain the pandemic. It has quietly provided aid to a number of countries in the Middle East and Africa to improve testing and train medical personnel.

Covid-19 has above all made governments and international organizations realize how poorly equipped they were to handle pandemics and the urgent for a more robust infrastructure for dealing with future infectious disease outbreaks. As the world retools to deal with what will be a critical security challenge for the foreseeable future, South Korea will have a very important role to play. Whether or not the rest of the world will emulate the South Korean approach is still far from certain. The ROK must convince other democracies that the limited surveillance entailed by its system of intensive testing, contact tracing, and data mining ultimately results in fewer infringements on human freedom than the confused mixture of sweeping lockdowns and limited mandates that

has characterized the United States and much of Europe. Yet even if other countries are not interested in making the technological investments necessary to follow the Korean model in the future, they will nonetheless have much to learn from South Korea about preparedness and the rapid deployment of testing and other critical measures. South Korea will be in a position to capitalize on this attention and admiration and carve out a more central place for itself in the WHO and international organizations devoted to global public health.

As the world recovers from the pandemic, stimulating a global economic recovery will take on a growing urgency. Here too, South Korea has a chance to lead. Virtually no national economy has been left unharmed by the pandemic and the vast majority of political leaders are hoping to engineer “V-shaped” recoveries that swiftly restore pre-pandemic levels of prosperity and growth. Helped by their more effective responses to the pandemic, several Asian countries including China, South Korea, and Vietnam, have started to race ahead of Europe and the United States in getting their economies on an upward trajectory. Yet even among these relatively successful Asian countries South Korea has stood out. The Moon Jae in government has not only managed to restore GDP growth but also articulated a forward-looking plan for South Korea’s future that can transform the country into an economic role model for the rest of the world. More than its Asian neighbors, South Korea has turned the crisis into an opportunity to for lasting and meaningful change. Under the auspices of the K-New Deal, the Moon government will increase investment in digital infrastructure and artificial intelligence while placing an emphasis on environmentally

sustainable growth. Some officials have raised important questions about some aspects of the K-New Deal and pointed to problems-especially the potential costs of its energy initiatives-that will need to be resolved. Nonetheless, even if the plan achieves part but not all of its ambitious agenda it can transform South Korea from a country that has mainly thrived by rapidly adapting innovations first developed elsewhere to one that sets the benchmarks for global innovation.

As South Korea pushes ahead with its economic recovery, it is likely that much of the rest of the world will not be able to immediately follow in its footsteps. Reliance on exports has sometimes been a liability in the past but many of South Korea's high-tech products have remained in high demand during the pandemic, giving its economy an advantage over those that depend more on other sectors. The post-Covid era seems likely to continue to favor globally oriented economies like South Korea's. We have thus far seen most Asian countries seek to stimulate growth through new trade agreements such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Prior to the pandemic, South Korea had implemented a very successful Free Trade Agreement with Vietnam and had begun discussions about similar agreements with other Southeast Asian countries. While American political leaders have been increasingly hostile toward free trade in recent years, South Korea is poised to thrive in world where trade barriers continue to fall. If South Korea is able to recapture its economic dynamism in the coming months then it should be able to gain greater influence in international economic organizations and make a strong case for admission to the G7 if this remains an objective of the Moon government.

There will, however, be obstacle that South Korea will face in the realm of economic policy: its ongoing trade feud with Japan. There can be little question that Japan's persistent and pernicious inability to acknowledge the horrific atrocities it perpetrated in the first half of the twentieth century are the underlying reason for this conflict. At the same time, Japan and South Korea have a great deal in common in terms of both their interests and values. Cooperation and the restoration of trade ties would benefit both countries. Right now, time seems to be on Seoul's side when it comes to this dispute. Economically, the dispute threatens to hurt Japan more than South Korea as Samsung and other Korean companies have already begun to find alternatives to Japanese supplies. The Biden administration will likely try to remain impartial in the dispute but Biden himself has a much deeper awareness of the historical issues at play. He tried to persuade Shinzo Abe not to visit the Yasukuni Shrine in 2013 and may have had a hand in Washington's subsequent expression of disappointment after Abe went ahead with the visit. Hopefully, the dislike for insensitive Japanese conduct that Biden expressed in the past will inform his administration's approach to the dispute. Under such circumstances, South Korea's interests will be best served if it is firm enough not to accept a resolution to the dispute that enables Japan to continue to evade historical reckoning but flexible enough to work with the Suga government if it shows contrition.

Perhaps South Korea's greatest opportunity in the post-Covid era will come from the massive international appeal of its culture and the increasing soft power that goes with it. Korean movies, dramas, and

music have taken the world by storm during the last decade creating legions of passionate fans in Asia, Europe, and the United States. Yet K-Pop and K-Drama represent more than simply forms of entertainment. They have become an important democratizing force because of their distinctive ability to simultaneously make skillful use of social media platforms and encourage different forms of civic engagement. K-Pop fans around the world have made their influence felt in different ways and political leaders have been unable to deter or control them. The power of K-Pop manifests itself differently in different countries but the one constant is that it has been virtually irrepressible.

It is not entirely inconceivable that K-Pop will one day have an influence in China that resembles that of rock music in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War. In 2014, the drama *My Love from the Star* became so popular in China that it caught the attention of CCP officials and was discussed in the highest levels of the government. Some CCP officials saw the popularity of the drama as a potential threat to Chinese culture and the party placed new restrictions on the amount of foreign content that streaming services and television networks could include. None of this made a dent in the demand for Korean dramas among Chinese young people, however. South Korea's latest international hit, *Crash Landing on You*, has also been widely watched and discussed on the Chinese mainland. Efforts to stifle the popularity of the most loved K-Pop artists in China have been equally unsuccessful. Recently BTS drew the ire of the Chinese state-run media and ultra-nationalist citizens for honoring the Korean War sacrifices made by US forces and praising the history of US-ROK friendship. But

this was met with angry criticism from the group's legion of fans in China. Official Chinese media quietly deleted some articles they had posted attacking the group and the controversy seemed to disappear almost as quickly as it had emerged. This is not to say that the position of the CCP or the Chinese government is seriously threatened by Korean dramas and music right now. The CCP has been far more successful at utilizing nationalism to maintain the support of its subjects than the communist regimes in Eastern Europe were. Nonetheless the Chinese government is clearly anxious about the influence of K-Pop in part because it is something that the CCP cannot control.

Young people inspired by K-Pop have also become increasingly engaged in political activism in the United States. This was most evident last summer when low turnout at one of Trump's rallies in Tulsa was attributed by many to K-Pop fans who had mobilized and registered for tickets they did not intend to use. Of course, it is often the fans rather than the artists themselves who make their influence felt most directly. Nonetheless, the presence of millions of devoted K-Pop fans around the world who are strongly committed to various social causes can easily become an important mechanism for South Korea to sustain its soft power while promoting a favorable image of itself.

Ultimately, while the post-pandemic world will bring new challenges for South Korea and might force it to make some very difficult choices, it will also bring important new opportunities for the country to prosper and enlarge its influence. Although South Korea will never be a military power on par with the United States or China, in the coming years other forms of power such as economic and cultural power will also

become more important. With the prestige that it has gained because of its relatively successful response to Covid, its strong economic recovery, and the burgeoning popularity of its music and films, South Korea is well positioned to thrive. At the same time the world will desperately need South Korea's expertise and leadership. If South Korea can provide this leadership, it will immensely help the cause of democracy worldwide while boosting the prospects for a swift global recovery from the pandemic and the recession that accompanied it. By making judicious and farsighted policy choices in the months ahead South Korean leaders can assure that their country will become major force in shaping the post-Covid era.

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