



Aligning the U.S.' Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy and South Korea's New Southern Policy

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The Asia-Pacific is experiencing a rapid shift in the balance of power and wealth. The rise of China challenges the US' primacy in the region and beyond. India is increasingly becoming wealthier and stronger. Southeast Asia is emerging as one of the fastest growing regions in the world, creating attractive business opportunities for external powers. As the region's economy has grown, the Indian and Pacific Oceans have become two of the world's busiest

shipping lanes. Accordingly, the strategic importance of the South and Southeast Asian region is also on the rise. Accordingly, states have adopted policies and strategies to maintain and/or expand their interests in the region, including the United States' Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) Strategy and South Korea's New Southern Policy (NSP). These two strategies are complementary, and there is substantial room for cooperation.

Both policies are products of the great power competition between China and the US. Originally

1) The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

proposed by Japan and later adopted by the Trump administration, the US' FOIP Strategy is designed to defend the existing rules-based international order established and maintained by the US from challengers, namely China. On the other hand, the NSP was proposed by President Moon Jae-in in 2017, and is aimed at diversifying South Korea's diplomatic and economic relations traditionally focused on four Northeast Asian countries, namely the US, Japan, China and Russia, by boosting ties with Southeast Asia and India. South Korea felt the urgent need to broaden its economic relations after China imposed economic sanctions in the wake of the US' 2016 deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system on South Korean soil, which dealt a serious blow to the South Korean economy.

One of the major differences between the two policies, however, is that the FOIP is a grand strategy in that it is a broad, overarching policy direction encompassing various realms, including diplomatic, military and economic, whereas the NSP is primarily focused on the economic realm. Although the NSP addresses some non-traditional security issues, such as narcotics, climate change, etc., South Korea deliberately leaves out traditional security and geopolitical issues so as not to irk China. This is in line with South Korea's reluctance to join the the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), a group of four countries, the United States, Japan, India, and Australia.

Of course, the US hopes that South Korea will support FOIP to the fullest degree, including in the military domain by conducting freedom of navigation exercises like other US allies in the region, and more recently the US' European allies, such as the United Kingdom,

France and Germany. The maritime rules-based order is important for South Korea, as well. Over 90% of its oil imports pass through the South China Sea. Also, China is increasingly claiming rights over the Yellow Sea. More importantly, South Korea is one of the US' strongest allies, with which the US shares democratic and liberal economic values, so South Korea's absence from the FOIP in the region is conspicuous.

However, Seoul is reluctant to alienate Beijing, as it needs China's cooperation to solve the North Korea issue, which is Seoul's foreign policy priority. The Biden administration has declared that it will not force US allies to choose sides against China.

No allies have perfectly aligned interests, and their interests can diverge. However, there is still significant overlap between the FOIP and the NSP. China's increasing economic clout and its willingness to weaponize that clout for strategic gains are concerns for both Seoul and Washington. There are areas where the two allies can cooperate to reduce China's economic influence in the region.

The NSP's infrastructure development in Southeast Asia and India serves just this purpose. There is strong demand for new infrastructure that presents untapped business opportunities in these regions. China is seeking to fill this gap under the banner of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and if successful, the BRI would further increase China's already strong economic clout. South Korea's contribution to infrastructure development could challenge China's BRI.

Of course, the BRI is a vast umbrella initiative that

includes a significant number of projects. While it would not be possible to counter every project under this umbrella, it would be particularly beneficial for the FOIP if South Korea could counter the BRI in strategically important areas, such as the digital economy and energy. China's increasing digital dominance in Southeast Asia will make countries in the region vulnerable to China's cyber espionage, surveillance, and bullying. For example, China could threaten network shutdowns in countries that do not accede to its future demands. In thwarting China's digital dominance in the region, South Korea is an ideal partner. Samsung is one of the world's top 5G equipment providers, and unlike Ericsson and Nokia, which have significant manufacturing operations in China that are vulnerable to Beijing's sanctions, Samsung's plants are located in South Korea and India. South Korea would also benefit from U.S. companies' advanced digital technologies, including software and operating systems, self-driving vehicle technology, and satellite-based technologies.

The nuclear industry is another strategically important area where the two countries can collaborate. The Nuclear Belt and Road, which represents China's ambition to export its nuclear power plants abroad, is an important part of the BRI. If successful, the Nuclear Belt and Road would enhance China's influence in global nuclear governance, which will challenge existing nonproliferation and nuclear export norms maintained by the US and supported by South Korea. Furthermore, China's nuclear exports will increase recipient countries' reliance on China for many decades to come, which may expedite a shift in the balance of power in the international system in favor of China. Thus, it is imperative for the US to thwart the Nuclear Belt and Road. In this endeavor, South Korea will be a valuable partner. South Korea is the world's sixth largest nuclear power producer and has the capability

to build nuclear power plants on time and within budget. US nuclear firms do not build power plants any longer, but they have comparative advantages in safe operation and management of nuclear facilities. The two countries have already cooperated in building four nuclear power plants in the UAE, and can replicate this success in South and Southeast Asia.

Lastly, South Korea is a great partner in the US' efforts to diversify China-centered supply chains and decouple from China. Supply-chain vulnerabilities have been exposed first by the US-China trade war and then the pandemic. Addressing this vulnerability has been President Biden's top priority. To that end, the US is trying to bring its manufacturing back to the US from overseas. Cooperating with South Korea to build domestic supply chains for semiconductors and advanced batteries is of enormous help. In addition, the US is also pursuing friend shoring, relying on its allies and partners for supply chains, because the US cannot build out every supply chain onshore. The US can also work with South Korea on this endeavor since South Korea already has manufacturing bases in Vietnam, India and Indonesia, and is expanding its base elsewhere.

Given the convergence of interests between the US and South Korea in South and Southeast Asia, Presidents Joe Biden and Moon Jae-in have already agreed to work to align the NSP and the FOIP in pursuit of economic prosperity and security in the region during the May 2021 Washington Summit. The two countries now need to implement the agreement between the two leaders and generate synergy between the two policies. Reducing China's economic influence has been one of the US' goals,

which coincides with South Korea's goal of reducing its vulnerability to China's influence. The two countries can cooperate to meet this common goal. The US cannot do this alone. The US does not build a wide-range of infrastructure and equipment anymore, which is necessary to challenge the BRI. The US has withdrawn from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and due to domestic political reasons, it will be difficult for the US return to the agreement. Given these limitations, the US needs its allies and partners to step up their efforts to counter China in the Indo-Pacific, and it is critically important to work for the US with South Korea.

Covid-19 in North Korea

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All countries have been impacted by Covid-19, whether or not they report cases of the disease. North Korea, among some Pacific Island nations, continues to present as having no cases of the virus.¹ But, as the saying goes, the devil is in the details. If you don't test for Covid-19, it is very easy to say no cases have been detected. And even if a country doesn't have cases, the global nature of the disease means all of us are, to some extent, negatively impacted. And the impact will be felt most by the most vulnerable.

Nevertheless, it is possible that North Korea managed to close its borders, ban domestic and international travel, and lockdown activity in time to prevent the virus from entering and spreading. But even if this did occur and there are no cases inside the country, North Koreans are—as people the world over—still greatly impacted by what is happening globally. There are two primary ways this impact occurs.

The impact of Covid-19 is felt by the people of North Korea in terms of continued lockdowns and social control put in place by the regime. These negatively impacting livelihoods. Second, the extreme reduction in trade with China, along with the near total elimination of illicit trade, has decimated access to basic resources such as food, medicine and information which came through these channels.

As to whether or not there are indeed cases of Covid-19 in North Korea, chances are high that the disease did enter the country. North Korea shares a long border with China, the country-origin of the disease. China is North Korea's closest political, economic and ideological partner in the region. Furthermore, by the time the disease was detected in Wuhan, it is likely that it had already reached far beyond the city. Covid-19 has a high reproduction number; anything above one is considered dangerous. If no action is taken against the disease each person with it can infect three others.² Thus the reproduction number

of the disease is shaped by how countries take action against the disease such as imposing mask wearing mandates, increased social distancing, and limiting social gatherings.

While North Korea has long been an isolated country, Covid-19 created an opportunity for the leadership to justify entirely closing itself off from the rest of the world and cracking down on the social activities of its people further. When news of the virus was announced, North Korea was one of the world's first countries to seal its borders. It did so at the end of January 2020. Since then, authorities have installed concrete barriers and high-voltage cables along the border with China. Soldiers along the border have live rounds in their pistols. Closure of the border has meant that legal and illegal trade has all but stopped. This has had a negative impact on market activities, access to market goods and resulted in higher prices, increased crime, and the development of "secret" markets in houses. Defectors in South Korea who still have contact with family in the North convey stories of hunger and starvation. Prices of oil and rice have risen. While we cannot be sure that the food insecurity situation exists throughout the country, there are strong indications that there are areas and populations that are suffering with food insecurity.³ Due to the clampdown on the border, it is more difficult and dangerous to send remittances back into North Korea from South Korea. It is also more difficult to make phone calls.⁴ The nation has entered an effective state of "martial law" where individuals caught bringing anything into the country from abroad will face strict punishment under military law.⁵

Domestically, the regime is spreading information that

1) Zoe Stephens, "List of Countries Without Coronavirus" Koryo Tours, December 23, 2021, <https://koryogroup.com/blog/are-there-countries-without-coronavirus>

2) BBC, "Coronavirus: What is the R number and how is it calculated?" March 26, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/health-52473523>

3) Katsuhisa Furukawa, "Food Insecurity in the DPRK in 2021" One Earth Future, August 2021.

4) Asia Press, "Nationwide Medicine Shortage Results in Rising Deaths Among Infants and Elderly, Rimjingang, November 8, 2021. <https://www.asiapress.org/rimjin-gang/2021/11/society-economy/medicalcollapse/>

5) Ibid.

“the enemy’s [ROK, USA] fierce maneuvers to spread the coronavirus among us.”⁶ At this juncture it is important to note that discontent should not be impulsively interpreted as discontent towards the regime, governing leadership, or even North Korea’s style of politics. Lacking any framework of comparison or critical context, the vast majority of North Koreans operate within the regime’s ideological limits when they interpret life’s difficulties. Research with survivors from the 1990s famine indicates that despite difficulties, people were not angry or upset that the government had failed to fulfill its promise to provide food through the Public Distribution System, none reported that they had felt anger, upset or criticism towards the government.⁷ Instead, the famine difficulties were, people believed, due to the limits placed on the North Korean government by the international community - primarily South Korea, Japan, and the United States. Given how strict current controls are on information today, possibly more intense than during the famine years, it is possible that North Koreans could interpret the current situation within the ideological framework provided by the regime. In other words: our current difficulties are the result of outside, nefarious forces and we have to band together to survive.

Authorities throughout the country are focused on maintaining order and regulating economic activity by cracking down on unauthorized business activity, workplace departures, and the use of foreign currency. In the midst of this, ordinary people are trying to make ends meet. According to Asia Press’ Rimjingang, a Japan based organization that teaches clandestine journalism to North Koreans, and has the best access to information inside the country, reports that a new wave of speech control is spreading throughout the country as day-to-day life has become more difficult.⁸

Word hunt, or “Mal-Pandong” in Korean is a practice that existed during the famine of the 1990s – punishing anyone who expressed words such as famine, starvation, hunger and related terms. While the crackdown on critical expressions wound down at the end of the 1990s it has seen a resurgence with the extreme difficulties of life in lockdown since 2020. It is expected that North

Koreans will wish to express dissatisfaction with life. Often the critique is not directed towards the regime. Rather it is more of a general critique of life’s difficulties and local officials tasked with enforcement. The contact based in North Hamkyung Province, reported to Jiro Ishimaru at Asia Press, the following observation about life in the “before times.”

“Until last year [pre-2020], it was common to hear old ladies doing business in the vicinity of the market cursing the officials in response to the crackdown, and residents criticizing the officials, saying that ‘we can’t afford to eat because the officials are bad’ and that ‘no measures are being taken.’ In many cases, when officials confiscated the goods of vendors in the alleys, the people around the protesters would join in and attack them.”⁹

Since the borders closed in early 2020, life has become increasingly difficult. As the situation has worsened so too has the natural desire for people to complain. In late 2020, North Korea rolled out a new law. The law is aimed at strengthening control over “capitalist tendencies.”¹⁰ The start of the campaign is said to reach back to the early days of Kim Jung Un’s leadership, but under Covid-19 and with the border lockdowns it seems to have taken on a new strength.¹¹ Asia Press’ contact, along with several other reporting partners, said that the “word hunting” was announced at a gathering of women’s organizations under the Labor Party, at other labor organizations, at youth leagues and at workplaces in early December 2021.

The new controls on language were announced as: condemnation of policies will not be tolerated; spreading of rumors or false information will not be tolerated; the young and the elderly are particularly instructed to avoid saying “strange” things outside.¹² Of course, word hunting would be possible without hunters. Reporting on other people’s behavior that is considered “non-socialist and anti-socialist acts” is incentivized through tip-off rewards.¹³ Because prices for basic foods such as rice and cooking oil are increasing, many people are desperate for the

6) Asia Press, “The Real Coronavirus Situation in North Korea (Part 2): Kim Jong-un Criticizes His Country’s Poor Quarantine System,” October, 30, 2020. <https://www.asiapress.org/rimjin-gang/2020/10/recommendations/real-covid-nk2/>

7) Sandra Fahy, *Marching through Suffering: Loss and Survival in North Korea*, Columbia University Press, 2015

8) Asia Press, “Growing Radicalization in People’s Control (2). The Revival of the Fear of ‘Word Hunting’: One Word of Complaint or Dissent Leads to Arrests and Expulsions,” December 24 2021, <https://www.asiapress.org/rimjingang/2021/12/politics/tousei-2/>

9) Ibid.

10) Benjamin Katzeff Silberstein, “North Korea’s Anti-Capitalists’ crackdown: old roots but new vigor,” 38 North, November 5 2021. <https://www.38north.org/2021/11/north-koreas-anti-capitalist-crackdown-old-roots-but-new-vigor/>

11) Asia Press, Rimjingang, “Growing Radicalization in People’s Control (2). The Revival of the Fear of ‘Word Hunting’: One Word of Complaint or Dissent Leads to Arrests and Expulsions,” December 24 2021, <https://www.asiapress.org/rimjin-gang/2021/12/politics/tousei-2/>

12) Ibid.

13) Asia Press, Rimjingang, “Growing Radicalization in People’s Control (1). A sharp increase in revelations due to the implementation of the ‘tip-off reward’ system. Many reports are coming in due to living difficulties. Mutual distrust spreads.” December 22, 2021. <https://www.asiapress.org/rimjin-gang/2021/12/politics/reward/>

financial “awards” for reporting the anti-socialist activities of others. This has generated widespread suspicion between friends, acquaintances and even family; this mutual suspicion is leading to increased isolation.¹⁴

The system of reporting on others’ behavior was implemented in September 2021 and has been, according to in-country contacts, very “effective.” The financial reward for snitching is between 5,000 to 200,000 won (1kg of rice is about 4700 won, 1 USD is about 4800).¹⁵ To safeguard and support snitches, their anonymity is protected. Rumors alone will not suffice, however. Informants must have concrete evidence such as “photos, recordings, and scene observation.”¹⁶

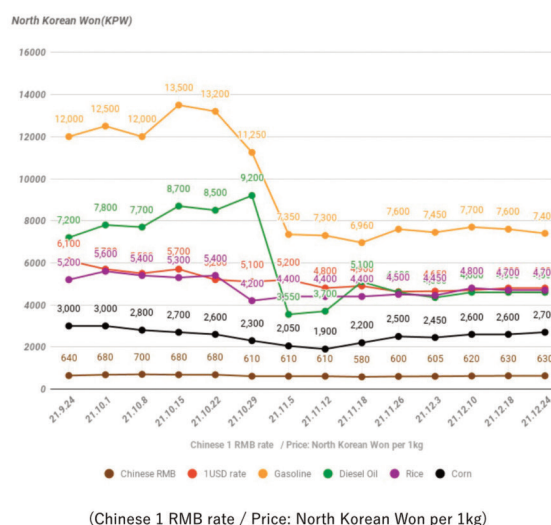
The regime has responded to the Covid-19 situation by operationalizing the lockdown to ensure the population is even more cut off from the international community than ever before. Here a natural question arises as to how well the people are coping with the lockdowns and restrictions. Since the lockdowns, communication between activists in China and third countries, with contacts on-the-ground in North Korea is becoming far more difficult, and in some cases it has become impossible. Contacts living in the border areas with North Korea are fearful to inquire about conditions on the ground through domestic phone lines for fear of punishments to those on the inside. However, even when using Chinese phones people inside North Korea are unable to directly and freely communicate about Covid-19 as talk of the pandemic also meets punishment. Less information is getting in, and less information about conditions on the ground are getting out. Added to this is the situation of food in the country.

There are other indications that people are struggling with the Covid-19 restrictions and how these have impacted their lives. Market activity is restricted, food prices are rising, access to medicine is difficult, and people are hungry. On-the-ground reporting indicates that the Cooperative Farms have received ammunition and been instructed to kill anyone stealing the harvest.¹⁷ The reporting partner inside North Korea told Asia Press:

“People from the city who are tired of living in the town come to the farm, but the road to the farm is

heavily guarded, and there are coronavirus quarantine checkpoints, so they take the mountain road to get to the farm and steal. So, traps and boards with nails are set along the mountain route. The other day, some people were caught stealing unripe soybeans and selling them.”¹⁸

Children and young university students are reportedly “constantly entering the fields and stealing” grain. Because there hasn’t been an import of grain from China, or elsewhere, the prices in the markets are still high.¹⁹ For example the price of white rice went up 1.8 times, and corn rose 2.5 times in only a month’s time.²⁰ The following graph is taken from market price indexes in North Korea from the end of September 2021 until the end of December 2021.



“Latest Market Price Index Inside N. Korea”²¹

North Korea’s food supply has remained remarkably stable over the last few decades, and yet the people still struggle with food security and face several other basic human rights challenges. Food insecurity is widespread, with as many as 40% of the population being undernourished. That accounts for about 10.3 million people. Differences between the well-being of rural and urban areas exist throughout the country. Stunting, a standard measure of protracted undernourishment throughout the world, is evident in 40% of North Korea’s population in five of its provinces. More recently, as many as 12.3 million North Korean people were reported as undernourished in a State of Food Security and Nutrition 2020 report. Among reproductive age women

14) Ibid.

15) Ibid.

16) Asia Press, Rimjingang, “Growing Radicalization in People’s Control (I). A sharp increase in revelations due to the implementation of the “tip-off reward” system. Many reports are coming in due to living difficulties. Mutual distrust spreads.” December 22, 2021. <https://www.asiapress.org/rimjin-gang/2021/12/politics/reward/>

17) Asia Press, “You Must Shoot Anyone Stealing the Harvest: Live ammunition Distributed at Cooperative Farms for 24/7 guard,” Rimjingang, October 15, 2021. <https://www.asiapress.org/rimjin-gang/2021/10/society-economy/steal-s-harvest/>

18) Ibid.

19) Ibid.

20) Ishimaru Jiro, Asia Press, “The Deteriorating Plight of the People (3) Economy Reaches State of Panic,” Rimjingang, July, 12, 2021. <https://www.asiapress.org/rimjin-gang/2021/07/politics/cause-3/>

21) Asia Press, “Latest Market Price Index Inside N. Korea” December 24, 2021, <https://www.asiapress.org/rimjin-gang/north-k-korea-prices/>

anemia is at 33%. Children under five years of age are stunted at a rate of 19%.²² The issue currently is that the cost of food has risen dramatically and that there is little to buy.

The fishing industry in North Korea has also been impacted by the government's crackdowns. For example, Chongjin City is located in the far northeast of North Korea, and it is the largest fishing center on the East Coast. Residents have been banned from going to the coastline. The official justification for this embargo is Covid-19. Fishing boats have also been restricted from fishing in the area. Many who survived on fishing for their livelihoods have been thrown into extreme poverty.²³ Only large and medium, and state-run fishing boats were permitted to fish, but these had to restrict the number of persons on the ship.²⁴

Further complicating this is the actual health concerns of Covid-19 within North Korea. Though the North claims there are no cases of the disease. It is highly likely that there are cases of Covid-19 inside North Korea, but given the limited resources for testing of the disease and its treatment, the North continues to deny its presence. The North also rejected an offer of 3 million Sinovac vaccinations from China.²⁵ This leads to a natural question. Closing off the border with China effectively strangles the life-sustaining resource of cross-border trading, licit and illicit, and vaccination is a practice that could lead to borders opening up, why doesn't the North accept the vaccinations? Another question also arises. North Korea has repeatedly throughout the years insisted that sanctions are an unfair, destructive force negatively impacting the lives of its people. The current border closures are effectively the strongest sort of sanctions that North Korea has ever seen. The combined crackdown on movement and market activity inside North Korea is also at a level not seen before. Because so many people

rely on the market and illicit trading with China, these crackdowns make day to day living in North Korea extremely difficult. Yet, the government has refused the offer of free vaccinations, vaccinations which could make movement within the country safer for all. A further contradiction is that North Korea continues to claim that international sanctions in place due to its nuclear weapons proliferation makes daily living difficult, particularly for the most vulnerable. The lockdowns are in place globally to help people from catching covid, and while the impact on life in economic terms has been felt globally, in North Korea it is felt acutely in terms of people not having enough to eat.

Two months ago, in October of 2021, Asia Press reported that as the colder weather approaches in North Korea, and as access to medicine grows more difficult, infants and the elderly are dying in higher numbers than usual.²⁶ Asia Press' reporting partner relayed the following:

"Three children died in my neighbourhood in the course of one week at the end of October. I found out that they were two boys and a girl, ages 3, 2, and 1. The deaths were due to whooping cough, influenza, and tuberculosis. With no medicines or vaccinations, old people and children are dying quickly from colds and diarrhoea."²⁷

With less access to medicine and food, people's immune systems are under greater stress. The impact is that people are starving and possibly dying for want of food, and yet the government refuses vaccinations and insists that sanctions are the cause of suffering for the most vulnerable. Meanwhile financial resources are prioritized for military spending and weapons development. There is a limit to how much isolations and crackdowns can help to resolve Covid-19. Testing, vaccinations and boosters are needed. Also, North Korea is in desperate need of urgent food and medical assistance. Conditions inside North Korea appear unlikely to improve anytime soon. In fact, the opposite is likely to be the case. The international community should strive to work with North Korea to ensure careful monitoring of food and medical assistance.

22) Edith M. Lederer, "Over 43 per cent of North Koreans are malnourished: UN report" The Associated Press, Global News, March 6, 2019 <https://globalnews.ca/news/5029484/north-korea-malnutrition-food-insecurity-un/>

23) Asia Press, Rimjingang, "East Coast Ports Closed Again, Fishing Banned for 40 Days Due to Fishermen's Violation of Coronavirus Rules," December 6, 2021 <https://www.asiapress.org/rimjin-gang/2021/12/society-economy/kinryou/>

24) Ibid.

25) Reuters, "North Korea rejects offer of nearly 3 million Sinovac COVID-19 shots," September 1 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/north-korea-turns-down-sinovac-covid-19-vaccine-doses-wsj-2021-09-01/>

26) Asia Press, Rimjingang, "< Inside N. Korea > Nationwide Medicine Shortage Results in Rising Deaths Among Infants and Elderly," November 18, 2021 <https://www.asiapress.org/rimjin-gang/2021/11/society-economy/medical-collapse/>

27) Ibid.



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