

Impact of the Pandemic on the Korean Peninsula & East Asia



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Changes Due to the Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic is bringing about various changes in our daily life. Firstly, non-face-to-face communication has become an everyday affair. From school classes to various international meetings, contact between people has switched from actual to virtual. As non-face-to-face communication has become routine, the development of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, represented by IT and AI, is spreading more rapidly. Secondly, there are changes in global value chains. Before the pandemic, we were connected by one global market, but as the pandemic continues, dependence on regional markets is rising dramatically in which distribution is easier in both human and physical terms. Thirdly, there is the strengthening of central government functions. Individual freedom and market economy-centric functions are weakening proportionally, while the role of central government budgets for epidemic prevention is expanding. Many experts predict that these three changes in configuration may possibly become established as a kind of trend even after the commercialization of a Covid-19 vaccine and curative drugs. General trends to co-exist with the pandemic emerge in different ways according to individual regional characteristics. In this paper, I will examine the impact of Covid-19 on North Korea, the Korean Peninsula, and East Asia in particular.

Pre-Pandemic North Korea

Before examining the impact of the pandemic on North Korea, I will first take a look at the situation of North Korea in the pre-pandemic era. North Korea before the pandemic can be divided into North Korea before and after the February 2019 Hanoi Summit. Since the launch of the Kim Jong Un regime in 2012, North Korea has been promoting changes with improved relations with the United States in mind. From 2012 to 2017, North Korea completely severed foreign relations and focused on the development of nuclear weapons (warheads and missiles). After the declaration of the completion of its nuclear program in November 2017, Kim declared through his New Year address his intention to improve relations with South Korea and the US. It was a so-called big deal for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in exchange for security guarantees.

Within North Korea, Kim promoted reforms and opening up. He established a socialist corporate responsibility management system, signifying North Korea's official acknowledgement of the market, as

the new basic policy for the operation of the economy in its April 2019 constitution revision. For farms, the regime implemented a field-responsibility system and started recognizing private farming. A market reform had begun. Zones open to foreign investments were also expanded. Along with four central special economic zones, 23 regional economic development zones were designated and activities to attract foreign investments were actively deployed. Additionally, Kim promoted the five-year economic development strategy established in 2016.

However, the US-North Korea summit which took place in Hanoi in February 2019 collapsed with no deal. North Korea demanded the withdrawal of five sanctions against it related to people's livelihoods in return for the complete dismantling of the Yongbyon Nuclear Scientific Research Center, but the US refused. The North Korean side did not hide its disappointment at the collapse of the Hanoi Summit, with Kim himself admitting that he had been extremely impatient to improve relations with the US.

On Dec. 31, 2019, North Korea chose a "new path" at a plenary session of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea. Because improving relations with the US will inevitably be a prolonged struggle, North Korea decided to engage in a frontal breakthrough strategy with the might of self-reliance. Kim Yo Jong revealed in a personal statement that the essence of negotiations between the US and North Korea is the "withdrawal of US hostile policies against North Korea and the resumption of North Korea-US dialogue" and that nuclear weapons would no longer be on the table for negotiation. This indicates exactly how big North Korea's disappointment was. At the same time as adopting a new path, North Korea severed relations with the US and South Korea and instead started engaging in strengthening its relations with China and Russia to enhance socialist solidarity. Acknowledging the fact of the failure of the five-year economic development strategy, North Korea announced that it will hold its eighth party congress in January 2021 and promote a five-year economic development plan centered on self-reliance.

North Korea Utilizing the Pandemic

Against such a backdrop, the pandemic seems to have worked positively for the Kim regime in North Korea. First of all, the normalization of non-face-to-face contact has proved effective in controlling North Korean citizens. North Korea completely closed its

borders at the end of January 2020, before Covid-19 spread throughout the world. Due to economic sanctions, all North Korean workers working abroad had to be sent back to North Korea by early 2020. However, due to the closing of the borders, some workers were unable to return to North Korea and still remain in third countries. Those who entered North Korea at the time could return to society after a self-quarantine period of about 30 days in a private space. However, the North Korean authorities started to actively promote policies emphasizing self-reliance instead of curbing the development of the market. In the past dozen years or so, with the expansion of the movement of residents and face-to-face contact, the market has been expanding in North Korea. This increased cooperation with foreign countries. In order to promote self-reliance, some sort of social remodeling is indispensable, but the closing of borders and control of the movement of residents due to the pandemic made it possible to block external forces naturally. North Korea asserts that it has zero Covid-19 infections to this day and lauds it as Kim's accomplishment.

Next, the trend of regionalism accompanying changes in global value chains is emerging in North Korea vividly. It is the embodiment of North Korea focusing on blocking cooperation with the external world in order to emphasize self-reliance. Recently, while strengthening the border lockdown, North Korean authorities have been clamping down on smuggling. This has led to a surge in the prices of imported daily necessities such as soy oil, seasonings, and sugar. There has also been a shortage of medicine and market activity has greatly atrophied. In order to promote a strategy of endurance for full-blown self-reliance at the eighth party congress in January 2021, North Korea is currently implementing an "80-day battle" for surveying inventory. It seems to be a campaign to check how much North Korea can endure without aid from external forces.

Lastly, the strengthening of central government functions is becoming most apparent. As North Korea emphasizes the running of the state centered on the Workers' Party, it is concentrating on organizational development for self-reliance. While it holds daily meetings of the Politburo and is inspecting what items to promote, it is equally dealing with the problem of market-linked smuggling and fraud. Before the collapse of the Hanoi Summit, smuggling and fraud, which were an everyday affair in spite of sanctions against North Korea by the international community, were methods that allowed the market to operate. Setting out to expose such smuggling and fraud is an indication of North Korea's stance on strengthening

central functions. In this way, the pandemic has had a major impact on North Korean society, but it has had a positive effect for the Kim regime, which plans to make a drawn-out struggle of the improvement in US-North Korea relations through a frontal breakthrough strategy supported by self-reliance.

Impact of the Pandemic on the Korean Peninsula

The pandemic was seen as an opportunity to resolve the stalled situation on the Korean Peninsula. The Moon Jae In administration was trying to explore a toehold to resume dialogue with North Korea through joint epidemic prevention and small-scale aid. Scarcely had Kim Yo Jong made it clear in her statement in July 2020 that abandoning hostile policies toward North Korea was a prerequisite for resuming dialogue than the Moon administration brought out its trump card of an unconditional declaration of the end of the Korean War. President Moon proposed an end-of-war declaration in a speech to the United Nations, while promoting various attempts to persuade the US administration of President Donald Trump to carry out the end-of-war declaration. However, North Korea has continued to not respond to Moon's request. North Korea trusted the Moon administration and attempted to make a big deal with the Trump administration, but it seems in the end that it felt cheated. With North Korea's method of handling the pandemic through a complete shutdown, the situation on the Korean Peninsula remains in a stalemate.

Furthermore, while the US-North Korea summit between Trump and Kim took place with a top-down approach, with the launch of an administration under Joe Biden, it is expected to switch to a bottom-up approach. Given this situation, it is expected that the stalemate will continue for the time being regardless of the situation of the pandemic. In the end, the pandemic has not had a major impact on the situation on the Korean Peninsula.

On the other hand, the Moon administration faces the issues of securing vaccines for Covid-19 and restructuring an alliance with the new Biden administration. This signifies that while South Korea's ambiguous policy was effective during conflicts between the US and China during the Trump administration, such an ambiguous alliance policy will likely be ineffective under Biden. Because securing vaccines and curative drugs that work for the pandemic will also have to take place within the framework of the influence of the US and China and a restructured alliance, the challenge the Moon

administration faces will be even more difficult. Efforts made by South Korean politicians to visit Japan to improve Japan-South Korea relations after Biden's successful presidential campaign are also seen as actions taken in anticipation of such changes.

Pre-Pandemic East Asia & the World

The impact of the pandemic on East Asia is closely related to the situation developing in East Asia due to conflicts between the US and China. Therefore, it is necessary to start by examining the historical significance of US-China conflicts from a longer-term perspective. Eurasia before the 15th century was spread across Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia. In the early 15th century, Admiral Zheng He of the Ming Dynasty mounted eight large-scale seaborne expeditions to advance to northern Africa and the Mediterranean coast, bringing Chinese cultural artifacts. It is not an exaggeration to say that China had hegemony over the world, and through these expeditions European societies started to develop illusions about China. However, Zheng's expeditions were interrupted by internal factors within China and exchanges between Europe and China ceased.

In the latter half of the 15th century, respective European countries started to target and move in on China, but the presence of the powerful Ottoman Empire in the Middle East made approaching China by land essentially impossible. In the end, European countries chose to cross the Atlantic, which led to Columbus' discovery of the Americas. From the Age of Discovery in the 16th century to the 19th century to World War I & II, the Cold War, and today, a world order centered on the West has continued.

We can define the US-China conflict in the 21st century as one between the East and West due to the rise of China since the end of the Cold War. It is the first such conflict in several centuries. China, in particular, is promoting the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to connect Eurasia based on Chinese capital and technologies. It is also exploring advancement into the Pacific. The US, which is a sea power, may be apprehensive about China connecting with Europe through the Middle East. From the perspective of the US, an Indo-Pacific strategy that blocks off the Middle East and the Pacific is an important reason for such concern. However, the Trump administration brought about many changes to the existing world order by depending on the strength and negotiating power of the US rather than on alliances, under the banner of an "America First"

policy. A Biden administration will probably place priority on realigning itself with such order. In other words, Biden will attempt to curb China's expansion with existing alliances as the main axis.

Impact of the Pandemic on East Asia

Non-face-to-face contact, which is a primary characteristic of this pandemic, is accelerating the development of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, such as IT and AI. China's technology lies at the heart of this revolution. China is trying to make the impact of the pandemic, such as lockdowns and respective efforts for survival (self-reliance) into an opportunity for the BRI to connect Europe and China. It is trying to use China's capital and technology to allay the economic difficulties of East Asian and Middle Eastern countries. The totalitarian states of East Asia are aiming to secure strong control of the central government with China's aid. The pandemic has become a trigger to increase the possibility of China and totalitarian regimes in East Asia cooperating. Furthermore, due to changes in global value chains, a movement to fill the space left by the slowdown of Western capital investment with Chinese capital has become full-blown. The BRI which connects the land and sea has started to emerge through China's capital injections.

The Biden administration is expected to counter China's expansion by strengthening existing alliances with European nations that uphold democratic values and reshaping the structure of the Japan-US-South Korea alliance, while making a move to reincorporate China within the world order led by the US. During this process, the efforts of humankind to overcome the pandemic could play the role of a catalyst or become a point of conflict. Currently, US corporations are leading the development of vaccines and curative drugs. Both China and Russia also argue that they are leading the race for development, but there are limitations to their being accepted as a global standard.

It is still difficult to determine whether the order in East Asia due to the pandemic will be an order in which China makes a soft landing under the US-China conflict and settles into a world order led by the US or whether the US-China conflict will accelerate and become a drawn-out and new geopolitical East-West Cold War. However, cooperation between totalitarian-leaning East Asian countries is sure to be strengthened due to the pandemic and the possibility of a mutual battlefield being formed will continue with the Biden administration putting pressure on cooperation between totalitarian

East Asian countries under the banner of democratic values.

Recovery of Japan-South Korea Relations

The pandemic and launch of a new US administration will be a new challenge for the Korean Peninsula and East Asian countries. It will be difficult for countries to face up to these new challenges by themselves. There are two countries whose mutual cooperation in the East Asia region is desperately needed – South Korea and Japan. After reconfirming alliances with European nations, the Biden administration will emphasize the Japan-US-South Korea alliance. There was concern by the administration of President Bill Clinton at the time of the launch of the Kim Dae Jung government, that the first liberal administration established in South Korea would lean in a pro-China direction. However, Kim placed emphasis on the US-South Korea alliance and dispelled such concerns, and at the same time secured a leading position on the Korean Peninsula problem. This made the US and Japan support Kim's Sunshine Policy and made possible the visit to North Korea by Clinton after his presidency and the visit to Pyongyang by former Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi.

However, with the inauguration of the administration of President George W. Bush, the Sunshine Policy began to lose the support of the US and Japan. US dissatisfaction reached its peak during the Park Geun Hye administration when Park participated in a ceremony commemorating China's victory in the Second Sino-Japanese War and a military parade in August 2015. Park visited the US in October 2015, right after her visit to China, and successively concluded the Japan-South Korea "comfort women" agreement in December 2015 and the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) in November 2016. Then, triggered by North Korea's nuclear experiments and test-launch of long-range missiles, THAAD missile deployment and the closing of the Kaesong Industrial Park were decided. The Lee Myung Bak administration, which implemented measures on May 24, 2010 (the South Korean government's own sanctions against North Korea), kept the Kaesong Industrial Park alone from closing, but under Park the closing of Kaesong effectively brought the Sunshine Policy to a close. This happened during US President Barack Obama's administration.

Looking at these past events, we see that the trust of the US (Democratic administrations in particular) towards South Korea is based on Japan-South Korea relations. Trump advanced individual

negotiations with South Korea and Japan based on his America First policy rather than specific alliances. With regard to conflicts between Japan and South Korea, unlike past US administrations, Trump did not actively play the role of mediator but Biden is expected to put high priority on the normalization of Japan-South Korea relations in policies targeting the East Asia region. This is because the strengthening of the valued alliance between Japan, the US and South Korea is vital for democratic values and the recovery of US leadership. Biden will hope to curb China's advance into the Pacific and pursue a strategy to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue based on the Japan-US-South Korea alliance.

In a world in which we co-exist with the pandemic, both South Korea and Japan face the possibility of a new geopolitical Cold War battlefield forming in East Asia. Cooperation between Japan and South Korea is urgently required to overcome the pandemic as well. If Trump pursued the "non-normalization of the normal", Biden will likely pursue the "normalization of the non-normal". In order to overcome the pandemic and pursue peace and stability in East Asia, it is necessary to advance endeavors to normalize the non-normal in the East Asia region as well.

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