

Korea's three diplomatic traps

THE ASAN INSTITUTE
for POLICY STUDIES
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Chairman
2024.04.24

“Politics is the art of the possible, the attainable — the art of the next best,” said Klemens von Metternich, an Austrian diplomat famous for his role in midwifing the landmark European balance of power known as the Vienna system in 1815 following the Napoleonic Wars. He also warned against false convictions about reality. The wisdom from the 19th-century statesman is a strong message about Korea's foreign policy direction today.

A seismic change has been reshaping the international order since six to seven years ago. The United States and China, both of whom carry great significance to Korea, has entered the stage of rivalry and conflict, rather than engagement and cooperation, and poses a serious test to Seoul.

The liberal world order that has driven Korea's democracy and economy over the last six decades has been jeopardized by Russia's brazen attack of Ukraine. North Korea jettisoned its relationship with South Korea by labeling it the “principal enemy” and threatening to wipe it out in minutes with hypersonic nuclear missiles. These challenges demand a sober approach to foreign affairs.

But Korea's foreign policy is still guided by ideological reasoning, sentiment and wishful thinking rather than the thorough analysis of reality emphasized by Metternich.

The first hurdle for our diplomacy will be the overwhelming influence of rivalling political ideologies. The dichotomy of the conservative being “pro-America, pro-Japan, anti-China, and anti-North Korea” and the liberal being “anti-America, anti-Japan, pro-China, and pro-North Korea” sustains. As a result, domestic politics often move irrespective of external developments. When bilateral and multilateral issues arise, they are subject to ideological wrestling at home rather than the sober exploration of solutions to protect national interests.

The exemplary case is Korea's relationship with Japan. The pros and cons of improved relations with Japan in a fast-changing international environment should be closely examined for national interests and fully explained to the public. But the government has failed to convince the public that it needs to overcome partisanship and normalize ties with Japan. The governing party also panders to conservative

sentiment without presenting clear grounds on which to build friendly terms with Tokyo.

The second obstacle is our emotional approach to diplomacy. Many people handle foreign issues based on sentiment rather than practical interests. Korea is the only country that uses “pro” and “anti” prefixes when addressing global powers. Before judging what and who is helpful to national interests, we are being guided by whether we like or dislike them. Diplomacy ruled by passion leads up to sad consequences. Politicians ride popular sentiment instead of ushering public thoughts toward national interests. Will they take the same emotional approach if Donald Trump is re-elected?

The third trap is wishful thinking. Deals with foreign states cannot be regarded the same as relationships between individuals. In personal relationships, we can expect reciprocity when we treat the other with goodwill. A fallout will pain both parties. But a fallout with another state can damage millions of people. Therefore, it is highly dangerous to apply the code of ethics and behaviors of human relationships to those among states.

For example, our governments expected the Chinese government would respond in a reciprocal manner when treated with respect and goodwill. We overlooked the fact that Beijing regards the Korean Peninsula as a dependent variable in its strategic race with Washington. China turned a blind eye when North Korea violated international law in 2010 by firing artillery at the inhabited island of Yeonpyeong. China even slammed retaliatory economic actions on South Korea for its deployment of the U.S. antimissile system to shake Seoul-Washington ties.

We need to start serious discussions of the international challenges we face today so as to avoid misconceptions. We can borrow wisdom, not only from the 19th-century German diplomat, but also from our own statesman, the late president Kim Dae-jung, who called upon his democracy movement peers to employ a “scholarly” approach to issues and a “businessman’s senses” for the benefit of national interests. I hope I am not expecting too much.

* The view expressed herein was published on April 6 in the *JoongAng Sunday* and does not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.