



Evaluation and Implications of the Indo-Pacific Regional Security Environment

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The recent security environment in the Indo-Pacific region is facing additional variables beyond the existing competition for hegemony between the United States and China. These variables include North Korea's declaration of a complete change in its policy toward South Korea, its continued strengthening of military power including nuclear weapons, and the direction of the 2024 U.S. presidential election.

Given this context, South Korea needs to closely monitor the U.S.-China hegemonic competition and changes in the security environment in the Indo-Pacific region. Based on clearly established national goals, South Korea must establish a hierarchy of national interests, make strategic trade-offs, and secure and enhance the diversity and flexibility of South Korea's foreign policy strategies. In addition, South Korea should develop response strategies for various future scenarios in the Indo-Pacific region, such as the continuation of U.S. hegemony, U.S.-China conflict, and the restoration of U.S.-China cooperation. Regardless of how the security landscape and environment in the Indo-Pacific region change and how North Korea's policy toward the South unfolds, South Korea must actively work on strengthening its self-defense capabilities and developing alternatives to realize the U.S. extended deterrence commitment.

1. Security Landscape and Dynamics of the Indo-Pacific Region

The "Indo-Pacific region" is a geopolitical division and concept arbitrarily delineated by the United States. The U.S. has exerted its utmost effort to prevent the emergence of a regional hegemon on the Eurasian continent. With China's rapid rise, the United States, to justify its intervention and maintain hegemony in the eastern Eurasian region, renamed the area the "Asia-Pacific region." During the Trump administration, following the recommendation of Japanese Prime Minister Abe, who emphasized the necessity of India's participation to contain China, the region was renamed the "Indo-Pacific region." The current Biden administration has continued this designation. The most important issue concerning the security of the Indo-Pacific region is the protection of U.S. hegemony in the area.

Over the past few decades, China has achieved continuous economic growth, resulting in the world's second-largest economy. Based on its powerful economic strength, China has also made remarkable advancements in its military capabilities. Leveraging its newfound power, China has declared its intention to realize the "Chinese dream (中國夢)" and make the 21st century the "Chinese Century." As a justification for challenging the existing U.S.-led order, China emphasizes the protection of its "core interests." In response to China's core interests, the U.S. prioritizes maintaining the status quo in

the Indo-Pacific region and addressing China's challenges, focusing on key national interests such as managing U.S.-China relations and containing China, stabilizing and protecting the Taiwan Strait, safeguarding freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, denuclearizing North Korea, maintaining and strengthening regional alliances, and establishing a free and fair-trade order.

Various regional countries are involved in the competition between China and the United States. Russia and North Korea align with China, while South Korea, Japan, Australia, and India are major allies of the United States. The U.S. utilizes regional multilateral security frameworks such as QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), ANZUS (Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty), and AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, United States) to contain China.

During the U.S.-China summit in San Francisco last November, a consensus was reached to prevent further deterioration of the situation. However, recent security developments in the Indo-Pacific region introduce new variables, namely North Korea's declaration of a complete policy shift towards the South and the outcome of the U.S. presidential election.

2. Recent Security Environment Trends in the Indo-Pacific Region

1) North Korea's Trends

At the end of last year, North Korea declared a complete shift in its policy toward the South. This shift can be summarized as follows: 1) the declaration of a hostile two-state relationship; 2) the declaration of Korean unification as "impossible"; 3) designating South Korea as the "invariable principal enemy"; 4) the issue of completely occupying, subjugating and reclaiming the Republic of Korea and annexing it. If North Korea's policy shift towards South Korea becomes a reality, it will overturn the South Korean policy that has been maintained for over 30 years since the signing of the Inter-Korean Basic Agreement in 1991.

There are two opposing views on North Korea's declaration of a policy shift toward South Korea. First, it is argued that after reassessing the U.S. and world situation, North Korea has completely shifted its strategy toward confrontation with South Korea, considering a war of armed conquest against South Korea as a viable option. The second analysis offers a different interpretation, suggesting that North Korea is unlikely to initiate a war and that this declaration is merely a defensive tactic to navigate and mitigate the current situation. Understanding North Korea's true intentions behind this policy shift requires insights from these two contrasting analyses.

2) The Direction of the U.S. Presidential Election

If Biden wins this election and forms his second administration in the White House, it is expected that there will be no significant changes in U.S. foreign policy. However, if Trump wins, U.S. foreign policy will be extensively revised, causing significant turbulence in the global and Indo-Pacific security environment.

Walter R. Mead, an American foreign policy expert, classified the forces influencing U.S. foreign policy into four factions named after historical political figures: Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Woodrow Wilson, Thomas Jefferson, and Andrew Jackson. The Jeffersonian faction argues that excessive

intervention in foreign affairs only leads to the risk of war and that the U.S. should focus more on strengthening democracy at home than spreading democratic values abroad. The Jacksonian faction, the most populist, maintains that the highest priority for U.S. national interest is national security and the economic well-being of Americans, and thus intervention in foreign issues should be minimized. Trump's foreign policy is based on the Jacksonian line of thought.

Trump's foreign strategic stance is located between strategic restraint and offshore balancing, tending to focus solely on America's short-term economic interests. The concern is that even if Trump loses this election and disappears from the scene, a second or third Trump could emerge. Particularly noteworthy is the changing landscape of American voters.

3. Direction of South Korea's Response

South Korea should closely monitor the U.S.-China hegemonic competition and changes in the security environment in the Indo-Pacific region while refining its response strategies. It is essential to clearly establish national goals, set priorities among national interests, and develop strategies to flexibly respond to changes in external conditions.

Firstly, South Korea should establish security, prosperity, and unification as our national goals and ensure that both the government and society clearly understand these objectives. Secondly, under the three major national goals of security, prosperity, and unification, South Korea should prioritize its national interests. Third, given our geopolitical characteristics of being surrounded by major powers, securing flexibility in our foreign strategy is crucial.

Based on these three principles, South Korea must actively respond to changes in the environment of the Indo-Pacific region. The future outlook for the Indo-Pacific region suggests a high possibility of continued U.S. hegemony. Under the assumption that U.S. dominance continues in the region, South Korea should pursue an engagement strategy with China while maintaining the ROK-U.S. alliance as its cornerstone. South Korea needs to maintain a cooperative stance with China to ensure stability and peace on the Korean Peninsula and in East Asia, secure the Chinese market to sustain the growth of the Korean economy, create an international environment conducive to pressuring North Korea and promoting unification, and prepare for the strengthening of China's regional position. However, if China threatens the existing order in East Asia and overtly expands its power and hegemonic actions, South Korea should promote a balancing strategy against China in cooperation with the U.S. and Japan.

With regard to North Korea, our immediate task is to prevent war on the Korean Peninsula, and our ultimate goal is unification led by South Korea. South Korea should employ a strategic mix of deterrence, assurance, and compellence against North Korea.

To do this, South Korea must strengthen its defense capabilities and maintain its security commitments from the United States. South Korea must enhance its missile defense and offensive systems, build nuclear submarines to strengthen naval power, expand air force capabilities to strike across Northeast Asia, and improve intelligence, communication, reconnaissance, and surveillance capabilities.

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