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Belt and Road in the New Geo-Political Competition: China, the United States, Europe and Korea

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Abstract

China under Xi Jinping is seeking to reshape international rules, norms, and institutions to gain political and economic influence under the guise of providing global public goods for mutual gains. Meanwhile, democratic and like-minded countries will need to compete in some areas and cooperate in other areas with China—a feat that is far easier said than done. The United States, Europe, Korea, and Asia must engage and compete with China on their terms, based on mutual respect and understanding without compromising values such as democracy, rule of law, and human rights as well as best practices including fair and open trade and reciprocity. These are certainly challenging tasks whose playbook and manual need to be written along the way. The United States, Europe, and South Korea must navigate uncharted territory, which China seeks to create in its image. They must identify ways to not only defend the rules-based international order but prevent their respective economic interests from colliding with their shared interests, values, and purposes.

Key Words

Belt and Road Initiative, United States, Europe, South Korea, Quad

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Introduction

China under Xi Jinping is seeking to reshape international rules, norms, and institutions to gain political and economic influence under the guise of providing global public goods for mutual gains. Beijing's official narrative of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is that it is a "generous gift to humankind, with China not seeking unilateral gains but rather working for common prosperity and shared benefits" (Rolland 2017, 93). Behind the official rhetoric, however, is a country that "forcefully asserts its presence on the global stage," notably through one of its most ambitious and signature foreign policy by providing infrastructure and economic development around the world (Economy 2018). Domestic aims are certainly central to BRI with Beijing determined to boost its own economy to achieve a "moderately prosperous society" by 2021, which is the centennial anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party (USC 2017). Beijing has in effect revived its historical Silk Road and updated it to fit the 21st century context to create external conditions favorable to its rise. Its global aims are to secure energy resources, mitigate terrorist threats, strengthen its influence in the region, and counter U.S. presence in Asia (Rolland 2017, 94). In doing so, China is undermining the rules-based liberal international order and rewrite codes of conduct.

In June 2020, China's Foreign Affairs Ministry announced that the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic "seriously affected" about 20 percent (or one-fifth) of BRI projects, citing travel and border restrictions disrupting supply chains as well as "local measures" to combat the pandemic (Reuters 2020). In many countries, medical systems have collapsed or neared the brink of collapse while medical supplies have depleted, compounding increasing debt levels among many BRI partners that were already at high risk of debt distress before the pandemic (Bandiera and Tsiropoulos 2019, Nolan and Leutert 2020). The pandemic might have slowed down the BRI, but Beijing has also accelerated its Health Silk Road (HSR) and Digital Silk Road (DSR) to expand and promote BRI (Lee 2021). China has also reportedly surpassed its pre-pandemic economic activity after the country's own vaccines last year, self-reported at a 79 percent efficacy rate, enabled daily life to return to mostly normal (Dou 2021, Kuo 2020).

Against this backdrop, the United States, Europe, and South Korea must navigate uncharted territory, which China seeks to create in its image. They must identify ways to not only defend the rules-based international order but prevent their respective economic interests from colliding with their shared values and interests. The BRI particularly challenges South Korea's hard-

won democratic values that Seoul continuously pursued and promoted after transitioning from its own military dictatorship. Under its current leftist government, South Korea's democratic liberal values already clash frequently with its deferential approach to China, hoping to score foreign policy gains and avoid Chinese economic backlash (Easley 2020). Seoul's choices regarding BRI could either exacerbate or mitigate this phenomenon over time. Such prospects are not exclusive to South Korea, but one that could reverberate globally and determine the codes and standards that govern international relations and world order.

This chapter begins with a brief discussion on the BRI's implications for the economic interests, security, and values of the United States, Europe, and South Korea. The second section narrows the lens on South Korea by analyzing the benefits for Seoul if it joined the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue as one way to deal with China's rise and associated assertiveness. This chapter concludes by highlighting the need for the United States, Europe, South Korea, and Asia write large to work together to achieve shared interests, purposes, and goals.

Belt and Road Initiative: Effects on Economic Interests, Security, and Values

Indo-Pacific and Trans-Atlantic allies and partners are facing similar dilemmas with China's rise: how to cooperate with Beijing to reap economic benefits while maintaining strong security ties with the United States. However, doing business with China comes at a cost, which is a shared challenge among allies and partners: coercion, unfair trade practices, disinformation, cyber insecurity, and Beijing's pursuit for geopolitical and technological dominance. China's Belt and Road Initiative in particular—as well as signing up for the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership and expressing interest in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership—has economic, strategic, and political implications for the United States, Europe, and South Korea.

Rather than helping to close an infrastructure gap in developing countries and contributing to global economic development, BRI in practice undermines macroeconomic stability, promotes exclusive dependence on Chinese technology, favors Chinese companies in major markets' playing field, contributes to environmental problems, and draws countries into its economic and political orbit (Sacks 2021). China's apparent goal to dominate digital networks and technology increases the chances of its surveillance on states, companies, and individuals. BRI further helps Beijing take advantage of its economic influence to punish countries that are at odds with Chinese interests while convincing countries to promote its positions on the global stage. China has already been attempting to peel European Union members away from the unity and cohesion of the Union while trying to lure the EU away from the United States.

Many challenges await as the EU navigates its complex yet vital partnership with China and its position amid the U.S.-China strategic competition. The EU (as well as Australia) has already proven to be a good example for other countries to follow in standing up for shared values and interests. The EU raised human rights at EU-China summits and should continue to do so to not only stand up for democratic values, but to take steps to prevent becoming a pawn between the U.S.-China power game as well (Novotna 2019). The 2020 EU-China Investment Agreement, however, will pose challenges for, if not entirely prevent, Brussels to continue to voice human rights and fully protect its sovereignty, even though the agreement must still be ratified by the European Parliament. Beijing is widely expected to, for example, break its pledge to “work towards” ratifying international labor conventions as free trade unions, for example, are unimaginable in China’s system. The investment agreement handed Beijing a diplomatic and strategic victory, which has prompted widespread criticism that it allowed China to drive a wedge between the United States and Europe (Ewing and Myers 2020, Rachman 2021).

This game of “divide and conquer” is all too familiar for Asian countries. China has long sought to divide the United States and its Asian allies and partners while taking a confrontational approach through economic and political coercion when it feels provoked (Pak 2020). For example, Beijing imposed economic sanctions on South Korean companies in retaliation against Seoul receiving the U.S. High Altitude Area Defense batteries (Lim and Ferguson 2019). In response, Seoul agreed to refrain from participating further in America’s regional missile defense system. At the same time, Beijing has also regularly enjoyed exploiting perceived fissures between the United States and its Asian allies (Pollack 2016, Glaser and Mastro 2019). For example, China hosted a trilateral ministerial meeting with South Korea and Japan in Chengdu in 2019 (Li 2019). China’s hand is particularly evident in the incumbent South Korean Moon Jae-in government as it refused to join the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” during the Trump administration as well as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue among the United States, Japan, India, and Australia. Seoul does not want to antagonize China by joining these initiatives among democracies. Beijing has also reportedly nudged Seoul to support its national security law for Hong Kong (Baek and Kim 2020).

The United States has a critical interest to not only encourage and pressure Beijing to improve BRI governance standards, but to also provide an alternative, more appealing economic vision to China’s ambitious foreign policy initiative. It is in America’s interest to foster stability and peaceful change. The Biden administration’s first choice of conduct will likely be stable, predictable, and peaceful methods.

Beijing, meanwhile, will likely further accelerate its BRI efforts amid its competition with the United States, which is expected to also intensify over the coming years. It is only natural and

understandable that some countries, particularly middle powers in Asia and Europe, feel pressured to choose a side between the United States and China and are concerned about potential repercussions if they do so. It would certainly be the wish of many countries to maintain a degree of ambiguity and foreign policy autonomy, so that they can enjoy and benefit from sound relations with both the United States and China and avoid retaliation from Beijing. South Korea is a prime example of a country that maintains “strategic ambiguity” in its relationship with China (Kim 2021). The reality, however, is that countries will need to take a stand—however big or small the degree of the direction that needle points to—for their respective national interests and to strengthen their national security.

The BRI, South Korea, and the Quad Plus

China’s Belt and Road Initiative places South Korea in a precarious situation both domestically and internationally. It provides South Korea with many business opportunities but it also entails significant geopolitical, security, and values risks. While there is no explicit mention of Korea in BRI documents, it can conceptually connect Korea to Europe. The BRI’s China, Mongolia, and Russia Economic Corridor, or the Heilongjiang Silk Road Belt, can parlay Korea’s New Northern Policy, Russia’s new East Asian Policy, and “maritime logistics connectivity of ports and shipping networks in the East Sea Economic Rim... in which development of trade transit transport corridor is critical in [the] northeast Asian region” (Lee 2018). As such, some experts see three conceptual ways the BRI can connect China, Korea, and Europe: through southwest bound maritime routes, the Trans-China Railway and Trans-Siberian Railway, and China’s Polar Silk Road (Lee 2018).

South Korea is one example of a country experiencing predicaments amid China’s rise and U.S.-China strategic competition. It faces a consequential decision: whether to join the Quadrennial Security Dialogue or Quad Plus. It is a question that is perhaps harder for the current progressive Moon Jae-in government whose ideology and national identity, supported by its domestic constituents, are underpinned by its quest for greater autonomy from big foreign powers, particularly the United States and Japan.

South Korea’s choice will be a decisive factor in determining both the future of U.S.-South Korean relations and South Korea’s standing in East Asia. South Korea would benefit from joining the Quad Plus for three main reasons. First, it would help protect South Korea’s survival and security amid future uncertainties as the strategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific region evolves. This is especially important for a country that has historically faced threats to its survival by a rising power. The U.S. alliance is surely the bedrock of South Korea’s security and growth, but the Quad would reinforce and strengthen it.

Chinese economic retaliation is always a concern for South Korea, understandably so. However, membership in the Quad would actually strengthen South Korea's leverage vis-à-vis China. It will be more difficult for Beijing to coerce and economically retaliate against South Korea if Seoul stands with the Quad (Chun 2021). It is much easier for Beijing to coerce and divide and conquer when countries act alone. As such, it is important for allies and like-minded countries to work together and formulate joint responses to common challenges with common purposes. Standing up for one's values and interests, rather than hiding them, signifies one's strength and power.

Second, joining the Quad early would provide Seoul a chance to voice and reflect its positions as the Quad makes decisions on its detailed objectives, principles, and modus operandi. While the Quad is still in its nascent stage, it is expected to be the centripetal force that leads the future security order in the Indo-Pacific region. South Korea has a vital interest in the sea lanes that cross through the South China Sea and Indian Ocean as they are integral to the country's economy. This alone should be enough reason for Seoul to want a seat at the table. At the same time, South Korea's participation in the Quad could also be an opportunity for Seoul to promote and garner support for its foreign policies.

Third, the Quad would help temper excessively confrontational behaviors by any of its members while competing with China (Chun 2021). Quad participants certainly share a common interest to keep China in check, but none of them would desire being pulled into a major conflict. As such, instead of viewing the Quad as a gateway to major confrontation or even conflict with China, South Korea would benefit by regarding its participation in it as an opportunity to contribute to ensuring regional stability.

More importantly, however, the objectives of the Quad transcend far beyond checking just one country. They stand to support and protect a free and open, rules-based Indo-Pacific. It is a grouping of shared values and interests. As a vibrant democracy, South Korea has every reason to join the Quad. It would be another opportunity to demonstrate in action, its country's hard-fought values and system boasted by South Korean leaders. The three reasons outlined above may resonate for other countries as they too grapple with similar dilemmas when figuring out their own future course and global standing.

Conclusion

China is undeniably a major global player. An individual and global strategy based solely on containment is certainly not the answer. Democratic and like-minded countries will need to compete in some areas and cooperate in other areas with China—a feat that is far easier said than done. The United States, Europe, and Asia must engage and compete with China on their

terms, based on mutual respect and understanding without compromising values such as democracy, rule of law, and human rights as well as best practices including fair and open trade and reciprocity. These are certainly challenging tasks whose playbook and manual need to be written along the way.

For the next four years, the U.S.-China relationship is set to be complex. In contrast with the former Soviet Union and other European partners, mechanisms of crisis prevention, confidence building, and habits of cooperation are not built into the U.S.-China relationship, which transcends the political-military arena to involve every aspect of American life. Decades of habits of cooperation with Europe and Asian allies and clear codes of global exchange while further strengthening U.S.-EU cooperation will be vital in ensuring that Beijing does not threaten the prosperity and security of Americans, Europeans, and South Koreans any further. In particular, such cooperation can help defend a rules-based international order and human rights as well as strengthen areas of trade and technology. In these senses, Transatlantic partnerships with Asian allies and like-minded partners will be just as important. It is essential to connect European allies and partners with Asian allies and partners, which will serve as a multiplier effect in defending and promoting common interests, purposes, and values.

There are certainly innate cultural differences between Asia and Europe. It will take time to not only connect but familiarize Asian and European partners with each other. A coordinated response and system can be constructed thanks to shared interests and values. At the same time, a sharper focus on shared interests and goals could drive cooperation with like-minded countries that are not full-fledged democracies. Economic reliance on China will likely cause states to become more vulnerable to Chinese pressure. A global consensus seems to have already formed that economic overdependence on one country can actually constrain states that seek a more autonomous foreign policy.

The economic reasons with security implications should be enough cause for the United States, Europe, Korea, and other Asian countries to, for example, work together to diversify supply chains and business activities. The United States could also partner with advanced economies and strengthen multilateral organizations to meet the needs of BRI and developing countries. For example, they could provide affordable interest rates for governments in debts due to BRI, and offer technical support for BRI countries to better vet projects related to environmental sustainability (Ratner 2018, Lew et al. 2021). They could also work together to develop digital technology partnerships and trade to reduce and mitigate vulnerabilities to national security and personal privacy posed by Chinese technologies and digital networks while working to ban and eventually replace Chinese digital and telecommunications technologies. These are just a few examples of potential areas of cooperation and partnerships from a list that is undoubtedly extensive because of the expansive, dense, and intricate web of economic

interconnections BRI has already and will continue to create. The task at hand may be daunting and challenging to say the least, but it is one that is necessary to prevent a revisionist power from dictating the terms of international trade and relations.

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