

The Age of Uncertainty: Reflections on Post-COVID-19 World Order and the Future of Korea¹

Abstract

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has spread rapidly around the world since it was first reported in the Chinese city of Wuhan in December 2019. As of late July 2020, the global number of confirmed cases has surpassed eighteen million, with fatalities reaching 700,000. None of the five oceans or six continents remain free of COVID-19 diagnoses. The pandemic has brought about unprecedented sudden impacts on people's economic, social, and political life. International relations have been equally devastated by the pandemic, precipitating new discourse on world order in the post-COVID-19 era. After having examined five contending scenarios of future world order (walled cities and the new medieval age, Pax American II, Pax Sinica, Pax Universalis, and status quo of asymmetric US-China bipolarity), the article predicts that the status quo order is likely to continue in the post-coronavirus era. Fierce hegemonic rivalry between China and the US will pose a serious existential dilemma to South Korea. In order to cope with the challenge of the worsening status quo order, South Korea is required to seek a sagacious and resolute diplomacy backed up by a broad national consensus.

Introduction

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has spread rapidly around the world since it was first reported in the Chinese city of Wuhan in December 2019. As of late July 2020, the global number of confirmed cases has surpassed eighteen million, with fatalities reaching 700,000. None of the five oceans or six continents remain free of COVID-19 diagnoses. The current situation can be referred to as a “sudden impact” that is analogous to that of an alien invasion of the Earth from science fiction films. The world's borders are either closed or controlled, economies are paralyzed, and unemployment rises at an alarming rate. Freedom of mobility and assembly is severely hampered, while political and social geographies

as well as international order are undergoing profound transformations.

As the pandemic heralds a “new normal” in all spheres of our lives, Thomas L. Friedman, a *New York Times* columnist, even suggested that “there is the world B.C. — Before Corona — and the world A.C. — After Corona.”³ It underscores a colossal change from before the coronavirus disease outbreak in the same way that the world's calendar era is distinguished using B.C. (before Christ) and A.D. (anno Domini), starting from the birth of Jesus Christ.

Would this hold true? The basic purpose of this article is to trace the impacts of COVID-19 on the world order and to suggest South Korea's countervailing strategies to cope with them. I will first overview the impacts of the

pandemic on economy, society, politics, and international relations. Second, I will explore five possible post-COVID-19 world order scenarios: Walled Cities and a New Medieval Age, *Pax Americana II*, *Pax Sinica*, *Pax Universalis*, and *status quo* of the US-China Rivalry. Finally, I will present the continuation of *status quo* of the US-China Rivalry as the most likely future order and delineate South Korea's strategic responses to deal with its challenges.

Human Civilization, the Pandemics, and Sudden Impacts

Humans are *Homo Sapiens*. They conquer nature through science and technology and propel the progress of their civilization. Underlying these characteristics is anthropocentrism or human exceptionalism. Starting from the first agricultural settlements, to the rises and fall of empires, the Renaissance, the birth of the modern state system, the Industrial Revolution, the Information Revolution, and even the 4th Industrial Revolution, the history of humankind has been human-centered, and the confidence and even hubris that human reason can overcome any challenges have been the driving forces of human civilization.

Human Civilization and Pandemics

However, some historians and anthropologists regard the human-centric view of civilization as being fundamentally flawed. William H. McNeill, former University of Chicago history professor, argued in his book, *Plagues and Peoples*, that human reason and will are not the only determinants of human history. Although human acts such as major and minor wars have affected the rises and falls of empires, the pandemics that began with the domestication of animals by humans have equally been influential in the shaping of human history.

He showed in his book that pandemics sometimes had a greater impact than wars on the collapses of the Han dynasty (206 BC - 220 AD) and the Roman Empire (27 BC - 220 AD). As the Black Death outbreak in the mid-14th-century Europe demonstrated, the pandemic caused 25 million deaths, which amounted to one third of the European population at the time, and profoundly influenced the transformation of European politics, economy, and society. The Spanish flu pandemic of 1918 also resulted in the deaths of 50 to 80 million people, or three to five percent of the world's population. The figure is more than three times the total number of casualties in World War I, which had a significant influence on European society.⁴ Another analysis suggests that a small number of Spanish conquistadors could easily conquer the Aztec and Incan Empires due to the spread of smallpox.⁵ As such, pandemics have had enormous impacts on human civilizations.

Nonetheless, human beings tend to forget the repetitive nature of pandemics. In a recent *Foreign Affairs* article, Michael T. Osterholm and Mark Olshaker pointed out that human beings are faced with the current situation because they overlooked the multiple warning signs of a potential pandemic and catastrophic effects prior to the COVID-19⁶ outbreak. Different types of novel

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1. Prepared for the *Jeju Forum Journal*, July 26, 2020.
 2. Distinguished University Professor, Yonsei University and Vice Chairman and Executive Director, Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament (APLN).
 3. Thomas Friedman, "Our New Historical Divide: B.C. and A.C. — the World Before Corona and the World After Corona," *New York Times*, March 17, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/17/opinion/coronavirus-trends.html>.
 4. William McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2010).
 5. Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (New York: Norton, 1999), pp.195-214.
 6. Michael T. Osterholm and Mark Olshaker, *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2020. <https://reader.foreignaffairs.com/2020/05/21/chronicle-of-a-pandemic-foretold/content.html>.

contagious diseases have continued to break out on a regular basis, as shown in recent pandemics, including AIDS in the 1990s, SARS in 2003, MERS in 2012, and Ebola in 2014-2016. Still, human beings have long engaged in a panic-neglect cycle with diseases, in which times of acute panic alternate with long stretches of carelessness. It is an error that derives from underestimating the incessant transformation and evolution of viruses, due to excessive confidence in the power of human exceptionalism.

COVID-19 and Sudden Impacts

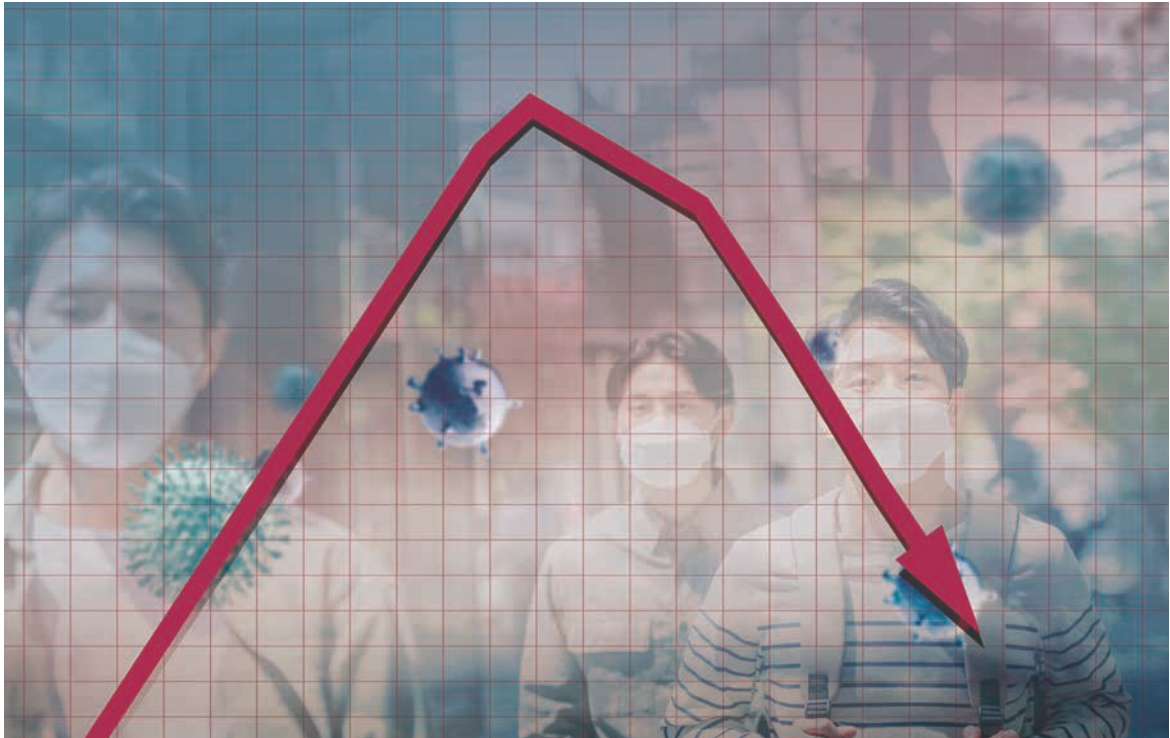
The recent failure to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic through effective disease prevention and control has brought about fatal sudden impacts. Most shocking is that COVID-19 threatens local communities, states, and even the very survival of humanity. Up until recently, most contagious diseases belonged to the arena of public health. The outbreak of plagues such as SARS, Ebola, and MERS notwithstanding, pandemics remained in the public health domain because they were effectively treated through the development of vaccines and remedies in a relatively short period of time. Moreover, the previous cases of contagion broke out only in China and Africa or other Third World regions.

However, the COVID-19 case is different. Starting from February 2020, the coronavirus disease has spread across six continents in a “faster, further, deeper, and cheaper” way than ever before. And advanced countries such as the US, the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, and Japan also fell prey to the pandemic with more confirmed patients and deaths than those in other countries. It is noteworthy that the US, the world’s most powerful nation, has suffered the most damage due to COVID-19. Twenty-five percent of the world’s confirmed cases have occurred in the US, with the largest number of confirmed deaths. More problematic is the distinct possibility that

the COVID-19 pandemic has yet to reach its peak, and there may potentially be a second or even third wave of COVID-19 infections. In fact, in the US, the number of confirmed deaths has already surpassed the number of those who died in the battles of World Wars I and II. That is why the ongoing pandemic is even worse than wars.⁷ The current uncertainty has heightened concerns about the biological security of human beings, namely “human security.” The reason for the existence of a state lies in the protection of the lives, safety, and properties of its people, as evidenced by the heads of states’ daily briefings about COVID-19. Such scenes prove the gravity of the pandemic.

The economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis is as dangerous as its threat to human lives. The COVID-19 pandemic in the past six months has brought unparalleled economic spill-over effects. Economists forecast that the Great Lockdown (or Shutdown) of 2020 will outstrip the Great Depression between 1929 and the mid-1930s and the Great Recession between 2008 and 2010.⁸ The impacts of COVID-19 on economic conditions

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7. Felix Salmon, “How pandemics are worse than wars,” *Axios*, April 2, 2020, https://www.axios.com/coronavirus-pandemic-worse-than-war-8cada36c-3deb-4335-8863-0fc3b394bbcf.html?utm_source=P%26S%3A+Test&utm_campaign=4a40f76f35-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2020_04_09_02_41&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_475e439b36-4a40f76f35-391812689.
 8. Gita Gopinath. “The Great Lockdown: Worst Economic Downturn Since the Great Depression.” *IMF Blog*. April 14, 2020. <https://blogs.imf.org/2020/04/14/the-great-lockdown-worst-economic-downturn-since-the-great-depression/>; Martin Wolf. “The world economy is now collapsing.” *Financial Times*. April 15, 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/d5f05b5c-7db8-11ea-8fdb-7ec06edeef84>.
 9. “OECD World Economic Outlook June 2020: World Economy on a Tight Rope” *OECD*. 2020. <http://www.oecd.org/economic-outlook/june-2020/>; Gun-taek Kang, “The World Economy under the Worst Record... Recovery in the Third Quarter is also Uncertain,” *Yonhap News*, July 31, 2020.
 10. Jang-hoon Lee, “Shadows of the Great Depression Cast by COVID-19,” *Dong-a Ilbo*, April 5, 2020.
 11. Yuval Noah Harari, “The world after coronavirus,” *The Financial Times*, March 20, 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/19d90308-6858-11ea-a3c9-1fe6fedcca75>.



are immense, such as in growth rate, unemployment rate, service industry, manufacturing industry, trade, etc. According to the June 2020 Economic Outlook released by OECD, the economic growth rates of OECD countries contracted due to the first COVID-19 shock, hitting -7.3 percent in the US, -2.6 percent in China, and -6.0 percent in Japan. South Korea also recorded the growth rate of -1.2 percent, though relatively better among worse figures. Figures for the second quarter of 2020 are much worse. The US recorded -32.9 percent, worst since 1947, whereas Mexico, Germany, and Hong Kong marked -17.3 percent, -10.1 percent, and -9.0 percent respectively. Should the second COVID-19 shock occur in the fall this year, however, the situation will be more catastrophic. It is predicted that the growth rates of the US, China, Japan, and South Korea will plunge to -8.5%, -3.7 percent, -7.3 percent, and -2.5 percent, respectively, while the global annual growth rate will plummet to -4.9 percent.⁹

The dismal economic growth performance also has a direct negative impact on employment. The International Labor Organization (ILO) forecasts that in this year alone, up to 24.7 million people will become jobless.

The U.S. Congressional Budget Office (CBO) foresees that the nation's unemployment rate will remain at a 9 percent-level until late 2021.¹⁰ On top of that, the COVID-19 pandemic hit the service sector most severely, and the manufacturing and trade sectors have also suffered a severe setback. Rampant expansionary fiscal and monetary policies to boost the faltering economy, employment, and consumption, have led to an unprecedented increase in government debt across the world.

The COVID-19 pandemic as 'a new normal' is likely to have a great impact on society as well. Economic hardship followed by the pandemic has precipitated social dislocation and a widespread sense of helplessness. As Israeli historian, Yuval Noah Harari, predicted that social distancing has been transforming the current "face-to-face" contact society into a "virtual" one, precipitating an increase in work-from-home jobs. Colleges and universities will also face fundamentally transformative forces as distance learning is routinized. Harari further expresses a worry over the possible advent of an authoritarian surveillance society.¹¹ Many advocates of civil liberty share this concern. There exists a real

concern that systems of state surveillance developed for contact tracing and public health purposes may be repurposed into a “Big Brother” agency, as described in George Orwell’s novel 1984. For example, the Chinese government has extensively employed the use of iris and face recognition techniques in monitoring and tracking people’s activities. The Chinese state can possess all available data on its individual citizens. This can severely violate the freedom and privacy of citizens. Economic downturns and long-term massive unemployment, social dislocation and despondency and the rise of a surveillant society, all imply that a post-COVID-19 society will become completely different from that of the past.

The COVID-19 situation has also triggered an intense debate on the relationship between individuals and state authorities in the context of political and moral philosophy.¹² In the US, the virus outbreak stirred a massive clash between the Democratic Party leadership, which urged Americans to wear protective face masks for public interest, and citizens with libertarian perspective who call for “liberty or death” refuse to agree on face coverings and lockdown. Political confrontations between the Trump administration and the Democratic Party have also been acute. President Trump is trying to revive

the economy by easing the lockdown early to secure an advantageous position for November’s presidential election, whereas Democratic politicians and state governors insist on continuing the lockdown for public interest.

In the early stages of the COVID-19 crisis, the United Kingdom and Italy adopted a utilitarian approach that aims to prioritize saving younger patients over those who have less chance to live. Eventually, the approach of advocating “the greatest happiness of the greatest number” ended in failure, but there remains room for conflict on that view. Japan has taken somewhat a different approach. The Japanese government and the public brought misfortune on themselves by downplaying the COVID-19 crisis in the early phase in order to save the Tokyo Olympic Games. This can be seen as an excessively communitarian approach in which individuals are sacrificed for community interests. In the cases of China and Taiwan, despite their successful disease control, the exercise of overwhelming state power such as the forceful lockdown of Wuhan and heavy penalty caused international outrage. South Korea, by contrast, has been praised by the international community for its exquisite fusion of John Rawls’ liberalism and Michael Sandel’s communitarianism. As such, the COVID-19 crisis is raising a controversy on the mode of governance in dealing with the pandemic.

Another political ramification is growing tensions between globalism and nationalism. Economic hardship followed by the COVID-19 can easily breed a fertile political ground for nationalism, populism, and xenophobic sentiments, while rejecting globalism and international cooperation.

The pandemic is also likely to have an immense impact on international relations. First and foremost, it questions the validity of the traditional concept of “security,” which is based on military security aiming to protect the territory, sovereignty, and people of the state from

12. John Authers, “How Coronavirus Is Shaking Up the Moral Universe” *Bloomberg News*, March 29, 2020. <https://www.bloombergquint.com/business/coronavirus-pandemic-puts-moral-philosophy-to-the-test>.

13. Lisa Monaco, “Pandemic Disease Is a Threat to National Security”. *Foreign Affairs*. March 3, 2020. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2020-03-03/pandemic-disease-threat-national-security>.

14. Barry R. Posen, “Do Pandemics Promote Peace? Why Sickness Slows the March to War” *Foreign Affairs* (April 23, 2020) <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-04-23/do-pandemics-promote-peace>

15. Stephen Walt, “Will a Global Depression Trigger Another World War?,” *Foreign Policy*, May 13, 2020.

16. Nahal Toosi, “Coronavirus rattles America’s national security priesthood.” *Politico*. March 28, 2020. https://www.politico.com/news/2020/03/28/coronavirus-rattles-national-security-priesthood-152988?utm_source=P%26S%3A+Test&utm_campaign=4a40f76f35-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2020_04_09_02_41&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_475e439b36-4a40f76f35-391812689.

external physical threats. However, the COVID-19 crisis shows that biological security is even more salient than military security because the pandemic threatens the organic survival of the people.¹³

The ongoing pandemic and the resulting crisis entail profound implications for war and peace. Barry Posen, a MIT political science professor, argues that the pandemic can be beneficial to peace by coining the term *Pax Epidemica*.¹⁴ It is not only because social distancing associated with pandemic impedes the process of military mobilization, but also because economic hardship followed by the pandemic slows military build-up. And less trade in light of the pandemic reduces chances for inter-states conflicts. Nevertheless, it is also possible that unstable domestic politics and economic insecurity caused by the pandemic could drive political leaders, especially authoritarian ones, to look for external scapegoats, leading to inter-state or intra-state conflicts.¹⁵ The current crisis also signals the urgency to strengthen

global security, rather than national security. In an era of interdependent globalization, the permeation and spread of contagion are difficult to be prevented by the efforts of individual countries alone. This is why a multilateral joint response at a global level is needed.¹⁶

Despite the crucial need for human security at a global level, the international community is faced with a dismal reality. International leadership has evaporated amidst growing uncertainties. The United States, the country that the whole world counted upon, has become one of the countries that has suffered the greatest damage due to COVID-19, in parallel to serious domestic issues such as an economic downturn and racial conflicts. Moreover, the US decided to eliminate its \$450 million contribution to the World Health Organization (WHO), claiming that the world body has forgotten its neutrality and is trusting China too much. The country even announced that it will withdraw from WHO next year. These actions hardly seem consistent with the image of the United States as



creator and protector of the liberal international order. European countries seem no different. They partially closed their borders due to COVID-19 and economic hardships, eventually compromising the Schengen Treaty. Thus, it is difficult to depend on European leadership. Japan is also obsessed with a Japan-centric perspective, showing no signs to contribute as it did to lead world's human security campaign in the late 1990s. China succeeded in controlling the disease relatively early and has since been actively involved in COVID-19 diplomacy dispersing face masks, personal protection equipment, and ventilators. China even dispatched its medical teams to assist other countries. However, China has fundamental limitations in securing international legitimacy due to its original sin of being the country of COVID-19 origin. Furthermore, international organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and WHO also remain powerless because they are pushed around by the politics of big powers and are unable to fulfill their commitments. As such, the nation-centric and fragmented diplomacy of leading countries has made it difficult to seek international cooperation to tackle the COVID-19 crisis.

A possibility of a clash of civilizations is also looming in the wake of a COVID-19 crisis. Some argue that a "new Yellow Peril" thesis is being recalled.¹⁷ With the global COVID-19 pandemic spreading, western countries

made China the first scapegoat. "China-bashing," which began with calling COVID-19 a "Chinese virus" or "Wuhan virus," now extends to all of the "yellow" race, that is, the Asians. In the US, Australia, and France, "white" people frequently commit collective harassment of Asians. There are signals that racism, populism, exclusive nationalism, and other old vicious habits of the West are reviving through the foothold of COVID-19. Ostensibly, Western society emphasizes such universal values as liberal democracy, human rights, and denial of racism; but it is difficult to rebut the claim that there exists a hidden racial prejudice and wariness of Asians. Clearly, the West kept the Qing dynasty in check late in the 19th century, and again, it tried to contain the rise of Japan in the 1920s, on the grounds of the Yellow Peril. In response, Japan developed the logic of the Greater East Asia Co-Prospersity Sphere, claiming that the "yellow" Asians should be united to stand against the West. The logic was one of the factors that caused the expansion of Japanese imperialism and the onset of the Pacific War. "Japan-bashing," which took place in the US in the 1980s, can also be understood in a similar context. The recent invocation of the "China Threat" upon the China's rise has prevailed for the same reason. In the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, there is a growing concern that a clash of civilizations, warned by Samuel P. Huntington, may take the form of a racial conflict.¹⁸

Post-COVID-19 World Order: Five Contending Scenarios

The COVID-19 crisis has caused unprecedented shocks on the entire human society. The issue here is what influence it will have on the world order. Scholars have presented contending pictures. I see five major scenarios on post-corona world order: Walled Cities and a New Medieval Age, *Pax Americana* II, *Pax Sinica*, *Pax Universalis*, and *Status Quo*. Prior to the detailed

17. The Yellow Peril is a claim that there will emerge an era where the 'yellow' race threatens 'white' Western society. Wilhelm II, the last German Emperor, made the first claim in 1895, and early in the 20th century, the claim aroused hostility against Chinese- and Japanese-Americans who were considered to be taking the jobs of 'white' Americans. https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yellow_Peril.

18. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Re-making of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007).

19. Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), p.9.

20. Ibid, pp. 49-90.

21. David A. Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

discussion of each scenario, concepts of “world order” are explained.

The Concept of World Order and Historical Evolution

By definition, an order generally refers to “the sequence or turn that smoothen something to be free of chaos.” When this definition is applied to international politics, an international order is understood as “an arrangement of international reality.” But such an arrangement is not random but determined by a set of principles, norms, and rules underlying. Henry Kissinger wrote in his book *World Order* that the world order of today was established with the birth of the modern state system after the 1648 Westphalian treaty, and power and legitimacy have since shaped its changing nature. The distribution of power among states sets the basic frame of the world order by defining the principles and rules of its arrangement, while a sense of legitimacy is necessary for an order to be accepted and sustained by the world community.¹⁹

The world order can be viewed as anarchical, as realists have expounded. Anarchy in this sense does not necessarily mean chaos, but another form of order in which there is no central government with legitimate coercive power. It simply signifies a self-help order for individual states. An anarchical order can easily become replaced by a balance of power among individual states. According to realists, international relations is the system based on the law of survival of the fittest. To survive or secure a dominant position in that order, they need to strengthen their national power, particularly military power. However, the survival and dominance of an individual state may require more than any one nation’s national power. That is why individual states ally with each other, irrespective of the size of national power – weak states for survival and powerful states for predominance. States that are antagonistic to each other also reach the balance of power by building up national

power and seeking alliance in a similar manner. The order based on this balance of power has served as the basis of the European order since the 1815 Vienna System, which was established after the end of the Napoleonic Wars.²⁰

A hegemonic order can also replace the balance of power system when and if one single state possesses a preponderance of power. The hegemonic order is hierarchical in which the relative position of a hegemon, its supporters, spoilers, and free riders are arranged in an orderly manner.²¹ Generally speaking, the hegemon institutionalizes the norms, principles, and rules that it aspires to, through which it governs the international order. The Versailles Treaty, adopted as the result of the Paris Peace Conference on June 28, 1919, provided a new framework for Europe and the world order after World War I. Based on the framework, President Woodrow Wilson explored a new world order based on the principle of national self-determination and the League of Nations. That order did not last long because America itself did not join the League of Nations due to congressional opposition. The League of Nations that was not backed by the newly emerging hegemon was bound to fail. However, the US enjoyed a greater hegemonic status after World War II, and a new US-centric world order was established. The UN was founded based on the principle of collective security, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) was launched to revitalize international free trade, and the Bretton Woods International Monetary System was created to secure the liquidity of the international trade system and the stability of the international monetary system. The US also built the US-centric alliance system to protect the liberal international order of market economies in the West. NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) was formed in Europe, CENTO (Central Treaty Organization) in the Middle East, SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organization) in Southeast Asia, and ANZUS (Australia, New Zealand, US Security Treaty) in the South Pacific.

In addition, the US formed alliances with Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan as a way of containing the Soviet Union. This “liberal international order” was a product of American hegemonic leadership.²²

Another form of world order is the Concert of Power or the Concert of Europe. The European leaders, particularly Austrian Chancellor von Metternich, ended the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 and formed the Holy Alliance of Russia, Austria, and Prussia, as well as the Quadruple Alliance of the three nations and the United Kingdom. The post-war regional order was designed to manage stability and build lasting peace in Europe. Although it was based on the balance of power, the order has been highly praised because big powers of Europe at that time worked together to prevent wars and seek peace through mutual consultation. The system of concert contributed greatly to maintaining peace in Europe for almost 100 years until World War I began in 1914.²³

The discussion of world order has been very much Europe-centric. However, major civilizations in history have had their own versions of the world order. China had the Sinocentric world order composed of the Heavenly system (or the all under heaven system) and the tributary system that were characterized by tribute, suzerainty, and reciprocal return. Until the introduction of modern state system after the Opium War in 1840s, the tributary system served as a major world order in East Asia. The Islamic world has its own view of international order that was primarily composed of Darul Islam (Land of Islam) and Darul Harb (Land of War) during the 7th and 9th century. Later, Islamic international law (*Siyar*) added other areas such as *Darul Sulh* (Land of Tentative Peace), *Darul 'Ahd* (Land of non-Muslim countries with treaties), and *Darul Hiyad* (Land of Neutrality).²⁴ Likewise, different civilizations have envisioned and practiced divergent patterns of world order.

What does the current world order look like? The US-centric hegemonic system should be seen as the

foundation of the current world order. The liberal international economic order and the alliance system established by the US remain very much intact, although there are signs of turbulence that come primarily from China’s rise. China claims that it is not a revisionist power to replace or alter the liberal international order created and sustained by the US and that it wants competition and cooperation with the US within the international system the US established. But Washington has a different perception. In its view, China’s intention goes beyond a mere strategic competition with the United States. China will dominate Asia first, and will vie for world domination by 2049 when it celebrates its 100th anniversary of founding of the People’s Republic of China.²⁵ Today’s China is often likened to Germany under Wilhelm II in the early 20th century. The rise of China as a challenger, the fear of hegemonic US, and the resulting rivalry, define the basic feature of the current world order. But objectively speaking, power disparity between China and the US is quite huge in favor of the latter. Thus, the current world order can be defined as an

22. John Ikenberry, *After Victory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp.163-212.

23. Henry Kissinger, *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace 1821-1822* (New York: Friedland, 2017).

24. Chung-in Moon, “Peace Ideology of Islam,” in Young-sun, Ha *Theory of Peace in the 21st Century* (Seoul: Pulbit, 2002), pp.47-51.

25. Michael Pompeo and Mark Esper’s remarks at the Munich Security Conference, February 16, 2020.

26. Henry Kissinger, “The Coronavirus pandemic will forever alter the world order,” *The Wall Street Journal*, April 3, 2020. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-coronavirus-pandemic-will-forever-alter-the-world-order-11585953005?mod=searchresults&page=1&pos=2>.

27. Mireya Solis, “The Post COVID-19 World: Economic Nationalism Triumphant?” *Brookings Report*, July 10, 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/07/10/the-post-covid-19-world-economic-nationalism-triumphant/>.

28. Seth J. Frantzman, “Coronavirus Is Empowering Dictators And Changing The World Order,” *National Interest*, April 4, 2020. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/coronavirus-empowering-dictators-and-changing-world-order-139127?page=0%2C1>.

asymmetric bipolarity with a weakening multilateralism. The problem is that the US-China rivalry has become severely aggravated since the COVID-19 outbreak. The US intends to encircle and contain China, whereas China tries to avoid it and create a new space for survival and prosperity.

Post-Corona World Order: Five Scenarios

What changes will be brought to the world order by the COVID-19 pandemic? Generally, the transformation of world order is thought to come after a large-scale war. When a peace treaty is signed after the end of a war, new institutions and underlying principles, norms, and rules are created, according to which the world order is established. The Westphalian System was created in 1648 after the Thirty Years' War, the Vienna System after the Napoleonic Wars, the Versailles System after World War I, and the liberal international order and the San Francisco Treaty System after World War II. This time, however, the calamity involves a plague, not a war. Still, could there be a major shift in the world order? With regard to this, five contending scenarios are discussed.

Walled Cities and a New Medieval Age: The first scenario predicts the end of globalization and the advent of walled cities. Former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger wrote in his April 3rd column in the *Wall Street Journal* that “the pandemic has prompted an anachronism, a revival of the walled city in an age when prosperity depends on global trade and movement of people.” His statement suggests that a “New Medieval Age” may be about to begin. It is truly a grim scenario where each country bars their doors and seeks austere self-reliant survival strategies.²⁶ Should the coronavirus pandemic persist, international exchange and trade will be suspended and countries are likely to move toward an autarkic economic system. It is also predicted that due

to the difficulties with travel and migration, elements of the global supply chain such as production plants will experience contractions and the opportunities for trade and investment will be drastically reduced. Meanwhile, if populist nationalism sweeps domestic politics and revives a beggar-thy-neighbor policy of the 1930s in Europe, it will be difficult to rule out the possibility of the re-emergence of figurative walled cities- isolated polities in varying states of constant conflict with each other. In fact, European countries underwent a “tariff war” in the 1930s when they pursued national wealth through a widespread protectionist policy at the expense of neighboring countries. The regional economy further contracted, ultimately leading to World War II. The recent COVID-19 crisis is worrisome in that it could create a similar political and economic soil in which such policy can easily resuscitate.

Economic nationalism will accelerate the demise of globalization, while weakening multilateral institutions such as the UN.²⁷ Let us suppose that an interdependent world of a population of 6 billion regresses to a self-reliant, exclusive economic system. Under the current circumstances, democratic politics will be paralyzed, and dictators will further strengthen their power and status. And there will be a higher probability of war. Leaders of fortified walled cities are able to easily initiate a war even for a trivial cause.²⁸ This is a nightmare scenario that nobody wishes. However, the scenario has one critical condition: a prolongation of COVID-19 pandemic. If the pandemic continues for five years or longer with the failure of timely development of vaccines and remedial medicine, the world order of “Walled Cities” might become a reality.

Pax Americana II: The second scenario is the re-emergence of world order based on benign American hegemonic leadership. Should the COVID-19 pandemic continue in the mid- or long-term, the most critical issue



will be which country will best survive the economic crisis. If COVID-19 entails an economic impact that surpasses that of the Great Depression in the 1930s, the final winners and losers will be distinguished by whether they succeed or fail in managing the crisis. Considering all of the conditions, the US is most likely to succeed in managing the current and future pandemic-related economic downturn. Its free-market economy, competitive edge in science and technology, population growth and a stable supply of qualified human resources, robust financial and capital market, and energy self-sufficiency will make the US the ultimate winner. For this reason, the “unipolar moment” of the 1990s will return, and if the new world order is established based on that moment, Pax Americana II is not necessarily unrealistic.

This scenario presupposes a pessimistic assessment of China’s rise. It is true that China has been catching up with the US, but the scenario assumes that the gap of national power between the two will get even larger after the pandemic.²⁹ According to the scenario, China will quickly sink into the trap of middle income countries after the coronavirus crisis because of insolvent state-owned enterprises, large-scale non-performing loans and the vulnerable financial sector, excessive investment and surplus production, and the widening gap between the rich and the poor. In addition, corruption of party officials, complacency and rent-seeking behavior of the vested interests, popular pressure for Westernization emphasizing democratic governance, and secessionist movements of ethnic minorities will be highly likely to degenerate China

into the status of “sick man of Asia.”³⁰ Thus, China’s national power will draw a downward curve under the law of diminishing return, while the economies of Japan, the European Union, and other members of the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India) are not likely to be new leaders of the world economy. After all, the US is the only country that can regain the sole hegemonic status in the post-COVID-19 era.³¹

Of course, this scenario is predicated on a provisory clause. *Pax Americana II* will be realized only when and if the US returns to its liberal values, provides public goods to the international community, and shows moral leadership.³² The US should end its America first policy, unilateralism, and “deal or no deal attitude.” This is likely if the Democratic Party nominee wins the presidential election. G. John Ikenberry cautiously predicts that Joe Biden, if elected president, will seek the revival of liberal international order by restoring the US-centric alliance system, which was nearly collapsed under the Trump administration, and strengthening a multilateral approach.³³ Under these circumstances, power and legitimacy will favor American leadership, thus heralding the second phase of world peace through the US, *Pax Americana II*.

Pax Sinica: The third scenario is *Pax Sinica* or world peace achieved through China, which has been argued by Kishore Mahbubani at the National University of Singapore. He recently published a book titled *Has China Won?: The Chinese Challenge to American Primacy*, arguing that all kinds of structural absurdities and contradictions in the US could hamper the American leadership role. American society is considerably fragmented as evidenced by its economic inequality, racism, bipolarization, the friction between Congress and the administration, and the seemingly insurmountable conflict between the Republican and Democratic parties. Mahbubani cited George F. Kennan and concludes

that if the US-China rivalry is determined by domestic spiritual vitality, China is clearly outperforming the US.³⁴ America, lacking such internal spiritual driving force, will not be able to lead the world. The European Union and Japan also have no such driving force, intention, or will to lead the international community. Thus, he makes a cautious conclusion that China is highly likely to lead the post-COVID-19 world order.

It is risky to forecast the future of a country’s national power based only on its domestic variables. Still, China has recently received undeniable praise for its smart power, which can be characterized by a centralized but flexible and swift decision-making process, consistency in policymaking, and effectiveness in policy implementation. Based on crisis management of the coronavirus pandemic, this argument seems convincing. China is where the coronavirus first appeared, and it had huge negative economic impacts with the first-quarter growth of this year recording the first negative growth since the reform and opening in 1979. However, China quickly managed the crisis and posted a positive growth rate of 2.6 percent in the second quarter of 2020. Of the

29. Salvatore Barones, “In the Post-Coronavirus World, Chinese Power Is Overrated”. *Foreign Policy*. April 14, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/14/in-the-post-coronavirus-world-dont-write-off-american-leadership/>.

30. Walter Mead, “China is the Real Sick Man of Asia,” *The Wall Street Journal*. February 3, 2020. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-is-the-real-sick-man-of-asia-11580773677>.

31. Stephen M. Walt. “The United States Can Still Win the Coronavirus Pandemic,” *Foreign Policy*. April 3, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/03/united-states-can-still-win-coronavirus-pandemic-power/>.

32. Joseph Nye Jr., *Do Morals Matter* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2020), p.199-201.

33. G. John Ikenberry. “The Next Liberal Order,” *Foreign Affairs*. July/August 2020. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-06-09/next-liberal-order>.

34. Kishore Mahbubani, *Has China Won?* (New York: Public Affairs, 2020); “China: Threat Or Opportunity?,” *Noema Magazine*, June 15, 2020, <https://www.noemamag.com/china-threat-or-opportunity/>.



world's top twenty leading economies, China is the only country that reported positive economic growth. This is in stark contrast to the US which has suffered from a high unemployment rate and negative growth while failing in its struggles to prevent the spread of the virus. Mahbubani places a greater emphasis on the future rather than on the present US-China contrast. Should the trend continue, the US will show a relative decline, whereas China's rise will be faster and more formidable, implying a China's hegemonic leadership.

Diplomatic actions of the Chinese government after the pandemic seem to exemplify this trend.³⁵ China has sent protective face masks, anti-contamination clothing, testing kits, and respirators to over 100 countries. It even dispatched Chinese doctors. And this move targets not just less-developed countries but also Italy and some other European countries. On the contrary, the US is at its wit's

end. For its part, the US announced its withdrawal from the World Health Organization (WHO), claiming that WHO is taking China's side. This proves the weakening US international leadership and the Chinese leadership replacing it.³⁶

Nevertheless, the Chinese government does not appear to have the same grand strategy of dominating the world as the UK and the US did in the past. It is even more evident considering its visions, such as completing the building of a moderately well-off (xiaokang) society by 2021, the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party, and the China Dream, a plan to incorporate China into the ranks of the advanced countries by 2049 in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of its founding. The One Belt One Road Initiative and the New Type of Great Power Relations scheme do exhibit China's intention to expand the sphere

of its influence. But they are short of reviving its old tributary system. The new sphere of influence is likely to be complementary to the existing U.S. centered order. No doubt, China could be placed in a position to determine world peace and prosperity; while the dream of Pax Sinica may be achievable at an Asian regional level, it may not be possible at a global level.³⁷

Pax Universalis: In September 1991, US President George Herbert Bush coined the term Pax Universalis for the first time in his speech to the UN General Assembly, commemorating the victory of the coalition forces in the first Gulf War. The term literally means “peace through universality,” that is, peace achieved through the UN and multilateralism. Contagious disease such as COVID-19 cannot be handled solely by individual countries. Multilateral coordination and cooperation are essential for controlling the pandemics. In light of the today’s reality, Pax Universalis can be viewed as an appropriate and desirable post-COVID-19 world order. COVID-19 pandemic is not the only existential risk threatening today’s world. Nuclear proliferation and climate change are equally challenging, and equally difficult for any single actor or stakeholder to resolve. They require resolution by the entire global village, going beyond that of the individual nations. Multilateral cooperation is vital to the resolution of these challenges. Even if a state might succeed in managing COVID-19, it cannot secure safety as long as it engages in exchange and cooperation with other countries. As people and goods move across the globe in large quantities, COVID-19 is bound to resurge. Nevertheless, multilateralism in today’s world has shown its inherent limitations. No form of multilateralism will be effective without the structure of “two plus multilateralism” in which the U.S. and China bless multilateral cooperation. Conflict between the two big powers is likely to undercut chances for multilateralism.³⁸

From a normative and functionalist perspective,

Pax Universalis is a desirable scenario. However, multilateralism in this scenario does not necessarily mean solving issues through the UN or other international organizations. Local governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should also play critical roles. Late May of this year, the Seoul Metropolitan City government hosted a very meaningful event. In a video conference for the mayors of 40 cities around the world, such as Moscow and Jakarta, Seoul shared its examples of tackling the COVID-19 crisis and discussed measures for cooperation in the future. Likewise, global issues need to be addressed more actively at the local government level. The South Korean central government has responded well to COVID-19, but in fact, it was local governments that took the proactive initiative in coping with the disease. In that sense, the world order of *Pax Universalis* becomes possible when international organizations, regional organizations, local governments, and NGOs build close horizontal networks and seek mutual coordination and cooperation. At the current stage, however, the consolidation of such “global governance” appears to be far away.

35. *The Economist*. “Who Runs the World? As America Gets Tired, China Gets Busy.” June 18, 2020. <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2020/06/18/who-runs-the-world>.

36. Kurt M. Campbell and Rush Doshi. “The Coronavirus Could Reshape Global Order,” *Foreign Affairs*. Mar 18, 2020. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-03-18/coronavirus-could-reshape-global-order>.

37. See special issue on China’s Push for a New Global Order, *Global Asia* 15:2. June, 2020. www.globalasia.org.

38. Kishore Mahbubani. “Why China and the US must set aside their differences to tackle the coronavirus crisis,” *SCMP*. March 13, 2020. <https://www.scmp.com/print/week-asia/opinion/article/3075083/why-china-and-us-must-set-aside-their-differences-tackle>; Amitav Acharya. “How Coronavirus May Reshape the World Order”. *National Interest*. April 18, 2020. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-coronavirus-may-reshape-world-order-145972>; Kevin Rudd, “On America, China, and Saving the WHO,” *The Economist*, April 15, 2020. <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2020/04/15/kevin-rudd-on-america-china-and-saving-the-who>

Status Quo: Finally, the status quo scenario assumes the continuation of world order characterized by China-U.S. strategic and even hegemonic rivalry. Professor Joseph S. Nye Jr. and Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations echo this view. “The world following the pandemic is unlikely to be radically different from the one that preceded it,” Haass argues. He also states that “COVID-19 will not so much change the basic direction of world history as accelerate it.”³⁹ Haass believes that not every crisis brings an inflection point, and predicts that the existing order surrounding the US leadership, unstable multilateralism, and challenges by China will be maintained.

Nye also forecasts that no change will be made in the existing international order because the COVID-19 situation will stabilize relatively quickly⁴⁰ In fact, international order is determined by the distribution of power among major actors. Should the pandemic stabilize in a short period of time, it will have no significant impact on the dynamics of the current power landscape between the US and China. Even with the assumption that the crisis will end after six months, one year, or even two years, the current US-China rivalry will continue to exist. It is because the COVID-19 will not quickly destroy the existing economic, military, and scientific and technological capabilities of the US and China. The weapon systems of the two will also remain intact. Despite the severity of the pandemic, the US-China military confrontation in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea has exacerbated the strategic

competition, and even the hegemonic competition. The intensification of current confrontation is most likely to bring about a New Cold War. If this happens, the world will be again divided into the two blocs led respectively by the US and China, with an even fiercer rivalry over politics, military, and economies.

Planning for the Future: The Status Quo World Order and South Korea’s Strategic Choice

The most desirable of the five contending scenarios examined seems Pax Universalis (peace achieved through multilateralism). But it appears to be less viable because of intense rivalry between the US and China. The worst scenario is the advent of Walled Cities. Closure of borders, evaporation of inter-state exchanges and cooperation, and fragmented international society will be unimaginable to people who are well accustomed to globalization. But it will depend on how soon countries overcome the pandemic crisis. If it is resolved in one to two years, there may be an increasing global demand for multilateral cooperation, but if the pandemic continues in the mid- and long-term, the scenario of Walled Cities cannot be ruled out. Under this development, populism, nationalism, chauvinism, and xenophobia could also concomitantly rise, undermining the process of globalization and widening the distance between countries and people. Nevertheless, it seems premature to declare the end of globalization. Inter-connectedness firmly established through globalization, an immensely dense network among the world’s people, enterprises, governments, and NGOs, and forces of globalization are likely to resist temptation to return to the medieval age of walled cities.

Based on current American domestic politics, the world order of *Pax Americana* II also appears to be less feasible. A large portion of the American public supports

39. Richard Haass. “The Pandemic Will Accelerate History Rather Than Reshape It,” *Foreign Affairs*. April 7, 2020. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-04-07/pandemic-will-accelerate-history-rather-reshape-it>.

40. Joseph Nye Jr., “No, The Coronavirus will not change the global order,” *Foreign Policy*, April 16, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/16/coronavirus-pandemic-china-united-states-power-competition/>.

Trump's "America First" policy, and thus it will not be easy for the US to restore its new liberal world order that requires its provision of immense public goods. Pax Sinica is also highly unlikely to be realized not only because of China's own internal challenges, but also because of new American containment strategy. The US would never allow China to emerge as a new hegemon in world politics; thus, the only likely scenario is the *status quo* that can be characterized by asymmetric bipolarity between China and the U.S., weakened multilateralism, and fragmented regionalism.

South Korea will encounter daunting challenges under the *status quo* scenario. The US has recently not been shy of keeping China in check. American pressure on China

has been mounting. They include a wide range of issues such as transparency regarding COVID-19, denunciation of Beijing's Hong Kong Security Law, critique of China's unfair trade practices and industrial policy, national security concerns over such cutting edge technologies as 5G, quantum computing, artificial intelligence, and space technologies, and even sabotaging China's soft power diplomacy. The recent executive order aimed at banning the Chinese tech companies Tencent and Bytedance similarly reflects a flailing American response to the growth of Chinese economic and technological capability, as well as growing Chinese soft power. The biggest concern is geopolitical rivalry. The coronavirus crisis notwithstanding, the two have intensified military



confrontation in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea. As Graham Allison pointed out in his book *Destined for War*, the rise of China on the challenger side and the fear of the US with the hegemonic power have brought the Thucydides Trap into reality.⁴¹

The US-China rivalry is not confined only to the two parties. It also drives countries in the region to face the dilemma of strategic choice. While seeking an overt strategy to suppress and contain China, the US has been asking its allies and friends to take side. For example, it has been urging South Korea to join its Indo-Pacific strategy that aims at containing China geopolitically. America's pressure on South Korea to join the US-led Economic Prosperity Network (EPN) is another example. Washington requires Seoul to decouple from the China-involved supply value chain by means of readjusting its trade and investment to and from China. It is indeed a dilemma for South Korea where China accounts for 25 percent of total trade. Furthermore, the American government has made an explicit demand that South Korea's LGU+ give up Huawei's 5G equipment. Put bluntly, South Korea is being pressed to take side with the U.S. in isolating and containing China. The logic of a new Cold War-style bipolarity is ushering the Korean Peninsula to a future of uncertainties.

What choices should South Korea make? Five options are available. The first is the "pro-American balancing" strategy that strengthens Seoul's alliance with the US for the purpose of restraining the rise of China. Considering the real threats from North Korea and the potential threats from China, there may be a strategic advantage in standing on the American side. The strategy claims that it is better to maintain the alliances with distant superpower following the advice of an ancient Chinese strategic thinking "befriending distant countries and

antagonizing neighbors." It is more so in dealing with powerful neighboring states such as China. The policy is deemed necessary in managing North Korean threats and escaping the fear of Finlandization under the Chinese influence. In addition to strategic interests, its proponents argue, Seoul and Washington share common values of market economy and liberal democracy. Thus, solidifying its alliance tie with the U.S. is the right path to take.

The second option is "bandwagoning with China." Its proponents posit that the US is a "declining hegemon," whereas China is a "rising challenger," in which case it is beneficial to the nation's future interests to join hands with China. Before the Second Manchu Invasion of Korea – one of the most humiliating scenes in Korean history – the Korean dynastic kingdom of Joseon ignored the new international order, adopting the policy of befriending the Ming Dynasty, while antagonizing the Jin Dynasty. Due to the resulting Second Manchu Invasion of Korea, King Injo of Joseon had to complete three sets of kneeling and bowing his head down to the ground for nine times in honor of Hong Taiji, emperor of the Later Jin Dynasty. Based on the lessons it has learned from history, South Korea should remain making choices carefully. Particularly, by joining the American bloc, South Korea will be placed at the forefront of a New Cold War framework and will likely face unbearable threats from China. The option of "bandwagoning with China" is based on the strategic calculation that China, unlike in the past, can now pose a formidable military threat to South Korea, and the US would find it difficult to protect its ally from such threats.

The third is the "stand alone" option in which Seoul goes its own way since it has suffered enough hardships at the hands of powerful neighbors. There are two ways to employ this strategy. One is that South Korea declares permanent neutrality just as Switzerland did, while the other is to arm itself with nuclear weapons and become a middle-power nation. Neither of the two seem easy

41. Graham Allison. *Destined for War* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

to agree to. It is hard to imagine the Korean Peninsula as a permanently neutral country because its southern population alone surpasses 50 million people, and if reunited, the entire population would reach 80 to 100 million people. The insistence on hard balancing with the U.S. and China, not to mention North Korea, by arming South Korea with nuclear weapons may satisfy the South Korean public sentiment. But the option seems neither viable nor desirable. If Seoul seeks a nuclear path, international community including the UN Security Council will impose sanctions instantly, and its export-oriented economy will suffer immense damages. In addition, its nuclear industry will be devastated, and even the ROK-U.S. alliance will be critically jeopardized. And South Korea will be trapped in intense conventional and nuclear arms races with North Korea, China, and Japan. It may sound ideal in theory but is not a realistic option.

The fourth option is the “muddling-through” strategy, which was once suggested by former South Korean President Kim Dae-jung. Imagine how a cow will look when it passes through a rice paddy. If the grass on the right side is available, it will turn right. If it finds grass on the left side of the paddy, it will now turn left to eat it. The core of the “muddling-through” strategy is to doubt the wisdom of grazing on only one side of the paddy, instead embracing flexible pragmatism. It suggests that South Korea cooperates with the US for security, while working with China for economy. However, this is only possible when the US and China maintain a friendly relationship. It is not a viable option when their relationship remains as tense as it is now.

The final option is to create a new order for Northeast Asia. This idea urges South Korea to avoid domination by powerful states, and instead, take the lead in creating a new regional order, while decoupling from bloc diplomacy. Its proponents insist that South Korea should go beyond the US-centric alliance and establish a multilateral security cooperation regime as well as an economic community in Northeast Asia. This strategy

goes in line with the strategic plan toward a Northeast Asian Cooperation Initiative, which former South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun proposed.

Personally, I believe that the final option is the most desirable one because South Korea can avoid having to pick sides. Without creating a new order, South Korea will be forced to choose one of the two sides, or walk a tight rope between them at all times. If South Korea arms itself with nuclear weapons, it will end up with the same fate as that of North Korea. The “muddling-through” strategy seems ideal, but it is deemed that Seoul has no space for it. Thus, South Korea needs to take a proactive stance in creating a new order of peace and prosperity. What should not be missed in the process is inter-Korean relations. If Seoul succeeds in building friendly relations with Pyongyang and thus brings peace to the Korean Peninsula, it will not have to line up with the US or China any longer and finally escape from the diplomacy of taking side. This will allow expanded room for Seoul’s autonomous diplomacy and Seoul will be able to take a neutral stance and play a leading role in creating a new regional order. Improving inter-Korean relations is not a mere policy option but a matter of existential choice.

South Korea is also required to build new diplomatic capabilities. First, it needs a “sagacious diplomacy.” It refers to a smart diplomacy in which South Korea sharpens its priorities for national interests and makes level-headed judgments about changing internal and external environments, while wisely combining ends and means. The second requirement is “principled resolute diplomacy.” This means to engage in bold diplomacy according to national interests, while adhering to principles. Lastly, South Korea need to achieve “national consensus.” Diplomacy without public support is nothing more than a “sand-castle” diplomacy. When fulfilling the three requirements of sagacious diplomacy, principled resolute diplomacy, and national consensus, South Korea will be able to overcome the riptide of US-China rivalry in a post-COVID-19 era