

Beijing's Geopolitical Discourse and Pyongyang's Diplomatic Leverage: A Comparison of the US-China Strategic Competition and the Sino-Soviet Conflict

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This study aims to answer the question, “How could a small and weak country like North Korea achieve its diplomatic goal in its relations with China, a powerful country?” Amid the US-China competition, Pyongyang carried through its diplomatic goal of obtaining continued support from Beijing while possessing nuclear weapons. It was different from the usual circumstance where world powers attain their demands from small countries. My argument in this study is that the geopolitical discourse that emerged during China’s hegemonic competition brought about the elevated geopolitical value of North Korea for Beijing, which eventually led to Pyongyang’s strengthened diplomatic leverage. The geopolitical value of North Korea is not fixed but varies depending on the diplomatic discourses formed in the relations between powerful countries. Due to the US-China strategic competition, Beijing recognized North Korea’s geopolitical value, incurring the escalated diplomatic leverage of Pyongyang.

Keywords: US-China competition, China-North Korea relations, China, North Korea, geopolitics

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How could a small and weak country like North Korea achieve its diplomatic goal in its relations with China, a powerful country?

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I . Statement of the Problem

- ◆ How could a small and weak country like North Korea achieve its diplomatic goal in its relations with China, a powerful country? Pyongyang carried through the restoration of its diplomatic ties with Beijing while possessing nuclear weapons. The North experienced dissension with China over its nuclear weapons development program. This is because Beijing was concerned that Pyongyang's nuclear program would undermine the otherwise-achievable peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula.
- ◆ However, amid the full-fledged strategic competition between the United States and China, North Korea's Kim Jong-un regime restored its friendly relations with Beijing to be similar to what they were in the early years of Xi Jinping's rule (Revere 2019). In March 2018, North Korean leader Kim had a summit with Chinese President Xi for the first time after Xi took office. It was the first restoration of Beijing-Pyongyang ties in six years since Xi's inauguration. This was a situation in contrast with that of South Korea. In the face of intensifying US-China rivalry, Seoul deployed the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system within its territory at the request of Washington and suffered the resulting Chinese economic retaliation (Han 2019).
- ◆ In general, it is difficult for a country to exert diplomatic leverage on countries with asymmetric relations. Inter-governmental symmetric relations do not represent an absolute concept of equality. It is a relationship where the country in position B can treat the country in position A in the same fashion that the latter does toward the former; that is, a reciprocal relationship. On the contrary, in asymmetric relations, a powerful country in position A is capable of aiding a weak country in position B, while the weak one finds it difficult to pay for it. In other words, it is a non-reciprocal relationship (Womack 2006, 80-85). However, North Korea demonstrated that it could achieve its diplomatic goal for China, a country with which it maintains asymmetrical relations. This can be considered puzzling within the context of China-North Korea relations.

◆ My argument in this study is that the geopolitical discourse that emerged during China's hegemonic competition brought about the elevated geopolitical value of North Korea for Beijing, which eventually led to Pyongyang's strengthened diplomatic leverage. The geopolitical value of North Korea is not fixed but varies depending on the diplomatic discourses formed in the relationships between powerful countries. China's geopolitical discourse amid the US-China strategic competition raises the North's geopolitical value for Beijing, which Pyongyang benefits from through its increased diplomatic leverage. Previously during the Trump administration, Pyongyang had restored its diplomatic ties with Beijing, using as leverage its nuclear negotiations with Washington. North Korea, by engaging in the negotiations, failed to achieve the economic development that the US could offer, but obtained China's diplomatic support.

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◆ The preceding studies on China-North Korea relations can be divided into those that emphasize the vulnerable bilateral relations and those others that highlight the strong bond of their diplomatic ties. As Ji (2001) suggests, the relations between Beijing and Pyongyang feature vulnerability in their strategic interests. Ji claims that in the actual China-North Korea alliance, the two countries share very few common interests (Ji 2001, 387-398). According to his research, China and North Korea can hardly agree on such matters as historical ties, ideological stances, political and economic programs, and diplomatic interactions, while the perception of their historical brotherhood is only a myth. Ideologically, Beijing has considered Pyongyang's governing principle more Confucian than Marxist, and economically, the North has posed an increasingly significant burden on China. Despite Beijing's persuasive efforts, Pyongyang regards the market, globalization, and investments from the West as a snare that entraps socialism. In conclusion, Ji indicates that the relations between China and North Korea merely correspond to those between "bedfellows".

◆ A different analysis claims that China-North Korea relations changed starting from the 2000s (Goldstein 2006, 131-161). In the 1950s, Beijing considered three aspects concerning the Korean

Peninsula issues: First, a national interests issue of securing a buffer zone against the United States; second, an ideological issue of confrontation between a socialist country and an imperialist country; and third, an international structural issue of the Cold War bipolar system. The argument in the analysis is that China attempted to prove its faithfulness to the Soviet Union by bearing the burden of engaging in the Korean War and to strengthen its reliance on Moscow's security umbrella. However, it was also pointed out that given the international political conditions in the 2000s, the US was unlikely to threaten the survival of China, which eventually lowered the level of partnership between China and North Korea.

- ◆ The aforementioned pessimistic analyses of China–North Korea relations failed to explain the continued Chinese economic support to the North. Since the early 2000s, Beijing has continuously engaged in Pyongyang's economic issues and has actively promoted investment by Chinese entrepreneurs in the country, as well as economic cooperation projects. Despite the series of economic sanctions against Pyongyang, China's direct investment in North Korea has increased, and so has economic interdependence between the two (Reilly 2014). Beijing continues to engage in the survival of the North Korean regime and in its economy.
- ◆ This study features a different perspective from that of the general argument that Pyongyang builds on the momentum from the US–China competition to achieve its diplomatic goals. This is because Pyongyang does not always have diplomatic leverage over Beijing. My argument in this study is that Pyongyang exerts diplomatic leverage on Beijing when the latter perceives the former as geopolitically significant. Unlike the preceding study that focused on Pyongyang's strategic choices in the face of the hegemonic competition between the US and China (Kim 2016), this study analyzes the changing diplomatic leverage of Pyongyang depending on Beijing's geopolitical discourses. Pyongyang has fulfilled diplomatic interests from China by utilizing its geopolitical value that has increased amid the US–China competition in its relations with China, a powerful country. Although North Korea

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as a weak country is in asymmetrical relations with China, it uses its geopolitical importance to have equal diplomatic leverage over China (Kim 2002). This statement also applies to the recent US-China strategic competition.

- ◆ This study focuses on the case of China-North Korea relations during the US-China strategic competition, comparing the period with the Sino-Soviet conflict in the 1960s. Of course, the recent US-China relations differ from the Sino-Soviet relations during the Cold War. China and the Soviet Union shared the socialist system, while the US and China vary in terms of their political systems. The Sino-Soviet and the US-China relations also evolved at different times, as the first was formed before the Cold War and the latter after the Cold War. Nonetheless, the two types of relations are similar in that China reveals a certain geopolitical discourse on North Korea in dealing with other powers. This suggests that Beijing had the same perception of the high geopolitical value of North Korea in its former relations with the Soviet Union as it has in the latest rivalry against the US. Therefore, the Sino-Soviet conflict period and the US-China strategic competition period can be compared in the context of China-North Korea relations.

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II. A Theoretical Framework for Analysis: Geopolitical Discourses

1. Classical Geopolitics

- ◆ Classical geopolitics emphasizes the variable of invariant geographical factors. Specifically, classical geopoliticians view that the policymakers of a state are influenced by the country's spatial factors such as its placement, resources, and borders. Largely, they believe that policymakers make military and security policy decisions in a certain geographical environment (Kelly 2016, 62-64). Accordingly, the classical geopolitical views feature the following characteristics: First, two or more states in conflict pursue distinct policy goals of success; second, the territory of a state corresponds to its natural and historical environment; and

third, the geography of a state is interpreted as the theatre of its military actions. Geography has thus been abstracted, simplified, and schematized (Gray 1999).

- ◆ Halford J. Mackinder’s theory divides the world into geographical spaces according to abstract concepts, thereby revealing the interrelationships of countries located in specific spaces. The theory is considered the beginning of classical geopolitical thinking. Mackinder first conceived the “World Island” that connects Europe, Asia, and Africa. The “World Island” is divided into the “Heartland” and the “Marginal Land,” which is surrounded by such “Islands” as North America, South America, and Australia. A Land Power that occupies the “Heartland” extends into the “Marginal Land,” eventually threatening Sea Power (Mackinder 1946, 90–140). This represents the confrontation between the continentals and the islanders (Mackinder 1946, 28–29). Counterbalance between Land Powers and Sea Powers may lead to the continental dominance of the islanders (Cohen 1975, 42).
- ◆ Spykman’s Rimland Theory follows the perspective of Sea Power. The “Rimland” refers to an area that encircles the Heartland and borders the sea (Spykman and Nicholl 1944). The Rimland includes the Korean Peninsula, Western Europe, and East Asian countries. The region can spread geopolitical conflicts between Land Powers and Sea Powers, but can also alleviate geopolitical conflicts between them. The theory suggests that the policymakers of a state largely make military and security policies in certain geographical environments. Therefore, the actual policymaking process and geopolitics are closely related, and classical geopolitics tends to be centered on states, military, and security. Classical geopolitics focuses on solving problems and has practical aspects for policy establishment (Kelly 2016, 62–64).

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- ◆ The achievement of critical geopolitics is that it conceives of geography as an unchanged independent variable, raising a fundamental question over the presumption that geography is a factor that determines a state’s foreign policies and international

relations. This approach suggests that thinking about geographical elements is defined by human culture, concepts, etc. The state is the product of conceptualization by political elites (Dalby and Tuathail 1998, 2–13).

- ◆ Classical geopolitics focuses on state behaviors whose territories are located in a specific conceptualized space. In critical geopolitics, however, it is pointed out that there exist various actors apart from the framework of the state, such as local governments, companies, and non-governmental organizations (Ji, 2009). Classical geopolitics clearly sets the distinction and boundaries for territory, while critical geopolitics does not presume the existence of clear boundaries that divide countries. From the perspective of critical geopolitics, boundaries vary depending on cultural, economic, and social codes, and thus are multi-layered (Agnew 2010).
- ◆ Therefore, critical geopolitics is skeptical of the fundamental assumption of classical geopolitics that geographical factors influence state behaviors. The problem is that this denial of the impacts of geographical factors turn critical geopolitics into “non-geopolitics.” Nevertheless, critical geopolitics is significant in that it revealed that geographical factors are conceptually defined (Dalby and Tuathail 1998, 2–13).

3. Theories of Geopolitical Discourses

- ◆ Tuathail and John Agnew (1992) raised questions about whether geography is a fixed and invariable factor that determines state behaviors. This is because the interpretation of geographical conditions varies depending on the ideological stances taken by states. The United States put emphasis on the geopolitical values of Greece and Germany to deter the expansion of the Soviet Union, which it confronted ideologically during the Cold War. On the other hand, it is inevitable to interpret differently the same geographical space in the absence of ideological confrontation between the US and the Soviet Union in the post-Cold War era. That is, the geographical factors of a state do not determine its diplomatic stance; rather, political leaders interpret the geographical factors

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based on their ideologies and diplomatic goals. Here, a country's geopolitics corresponds to the interpretation of its geographical factors, and discourse is employed as the way in which the interpretation is revealed.

- ◆ Classical geopolitics emphasizes fixed invariance of geographical factors. However, the theoretical concept of classical geopolitics also represents the way of interpreting geographical factors from the perspective of the ideological goal of political leaders or their pursuit of national interests. Classical geopolitics conceptually interprets the geographical factors of states. Therefore, it is not possible in the first place to pinpoint a country's foreign policy tendency, given the assumption that the impact of geographical factors determines consistent state behaviors. Rather, a country's policy decisions can be elucidated through the analysis of the interpretations by political leaders. These interpretations can be found in geopolitical discourses.
- ◆ Classical geopolitics regains its significance by means of discourse. This is because classical geopolitics can be a way for humans to understand and interpret geographical elements. In classical geopolitics, concepts such as "Land Power", "Sea Power", "pivot", "crescent", and "rimland" are conceptual tools used by political elites to interpret geographical elements. Geopolitical discourse does not simply dismantle geographical elements, but suggests the importance of conceptual interpretation of geographical elements. Therefore, geopolitics, which had faded after World War II, was revived through discourse as a theory that explains international politics.
- ◆ In this research, I suggest that the relationship between the Korean Peninsula and its neighboring powers is not influenced by consistent geographical factors. My argument is that the geographical elements themselves are not a variable, but the perception of those geographical elements are a variable that influences foreign policies. This paper elucidates a country's diplomatic behaviors by analyzing the political elites' interpretation of the geographical element. In other words, it argues that it is the conceptualized elements, not the physical factors, that influences foreign policies. It explains the diplomatic relations between China and North Korea through the analysis of the political elites' discourse on the geographical factors.

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III. Pyongyang's Diplomatic Strategy during the Sino-Soviet Conflict

1. Before the Sino-Soviet Conflict

- ◆ In the late 1950s, North Korea, China, and the Soviet Union were in conflict. The relations were triggered by the Faction Incident in North Korea, where the Soviet and Yan'an factions in the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) criticized Kim Il-sung's one-man rule during the WPK Central Committee's plenary meeting on August 30, 1956. The Soviet faction consisted of those high-ranking WPK officials who returned from the Soviet Union after Korea was liberated from Japan, while the Yan'an faction was a group of those other high-ranking WPK officials who used to operate in the Communist Party of China (CPC) and returned after national liberation. Each of them was respectively supported by the Soviet Union and China, which sponsored the North Korean WPK regime but called for political system and economic reforms, criticizing the personal-worship, one-man rule of Kim, and the economic policy lines centered on the heavy and chemical industries (Person 2006). Kim Il-sung perceived their challenge as a serious threat, given the faction members' close personal relationships with China and the Soviet Union – the Soviet faction members with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and the Yan'an faction members with the CPC.
- ◆ Due to the August Faction Incident, Pyongyang was diplomatically isolated from China and the Soviet Union. On September 1, immediately after the incident, Kim Il-sung met with Vasily Ivanovich Ivanov, the Soviet ambassador to Pyongyang, and explained that some WPK Central Committee officials engaged in anti-party activities during the WPK plenary session. Kim stated, "We have a consensus and there is no more disagreement." The North Korean leader added that four of the WPK Central Committee members involved into the anti-party activities had fled to China.¹⁾

1) "Diary of Ambassador of the USSR to the DPRK V.I. Ivanov for the period from August 29 to September 14, 1956," RGANI, September 1, 1956: Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 410, Listy 319 - 21. HAPP DA, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114136>.

However, Ivanov did not agree with his statement. Based on the information collected in Pyongyang, the Soviet ambassador concluded that the WPK members' expressions of strong opinions were difficult to see as anti-party activities. He sent a telegram to his country criticizing the excessive concentration of power in Kim Il-sung.²⁾ Earlier, Ivanov met with Chinese Ambassador Qiao Xiaoguang to discuss the August plenary session of the WPK Central Committee. Qiao had heard of his government's refusal to repatriate the four WPK Central Committee officials who had crossed into China.³⁾ On September 5, 1956, Lee Sang-jo, the North Korean ambassador to the Soviet Union, delivered a letter to the CPSU's General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev through Nikolai Fedorenko, the vice foreign minister of the Soviet Union.⁴⁾ In the letter, Lee requested the intervention by the CPSU and the CPC in Kim Il-sung's crackdown on the WPK Central Committee members.⁵⁾

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- ◆ The August Faction Incident led to diplomatic pressure from Moscow and Beijing on Pyongyang. Anastas Mikoyan of the Soviet Union met with Mao Zedong on September 18 and discussed the dispatch of the CPSU and CPC joint delegation to Pyongyang, citing the need for an investigation into the August Faction Incident. Despite his consent to Mikoyan's proposal, Mao worried that Kim Il-sung might perceive it as interference in North Korea's

2) "Telegram from the USSR Ambassador to the DPRK Ivanov addressed to Mikoyan and Shepilov, 'August Plenum of the Korean Workers' Party Central Committee'," History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, GARF, September 15, 1956: Fond 5446, Opis 98, Delo 721, Listy 153-164. Translated by Gary Goldberg. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/120170>.

3) "Memorandum of Conversation with the Ambassador of the Peoples Republic of China to the DPRK Qiao Xiaoguang," RGANI, September 4, 1956: Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 410, Listy 322 - 5. HAPP DA, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113373>.

4) "Lee Sang-jo delivered a letter to Nikita Khrushchev through Nikolai Fedorenko, the vice foreign minister of the Soviet Union," RGANI: Delo 5, Opis 28, Delo 410, Listy 224-228. Obtained for CWIHP by Nobuo Shimotomai and translated for CWIHP by Gary Goldberg.

5) "Telegram from A. Mikoyan to the CPSU Central Committee," History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, GARF, September 19, 1956: Fond 5446, Opis 98c, Delo 718, Listy 35-38. Translated by Gary Goldberg. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/121799>.

internal affairs and was also concerned about the possibility that Pyongyang would demand the withdrawal of the Chinese People's Volunteer Army troops stationed in North Korea at the time. Nonetheless, Mao agreed to Mikoyan's proposal for the dispatch of the joint delegation. Mao's consent, however, was premised on the condition that the dispatch of the delegation was irrelevant to Kim Il-sung's status.

- ◆ In accordance with the Sino-Soviet Union agreement, the joint delegation consisting of Peng Dehuai and Mikoyan was dispatched to Pyongyang, the first representing the Soviet Union and the latter, China. Peng and Mikoyan pressured Kim Il-sung to cancel his decision to expel the WPK members who criticized him during the August plenary session of the WPK Central Committee, and called for reinforced democratization within the party. However, they made it clear that the request was not intended to oust Kim.⁶⁾

- On September 20, Mikoyan attended the meeting convened by the WPK presidium including Kim and criticized the decision made at the August WPK Central Party's plenary session. He also reproached the expulsion of the Central Committee members who opposed Kim's policies based on the wrongful accusation of them being anti-party elements. He called for strengthened democracy within the WPK and urged the North Korean leadership to be patient with criticism from within the party.

- Peng pointed out that no party official should refrain from criticizing the leadership out of fear.

- ◆ The WPK Central Committee's plenary meeting in August 1956 and the dispatch of the joint delegation from China and the Soviet Union in November the same year brought about a fundamental shift in North Korea's relations with the Soviet Union and China. North Korea was on the verge of diplomatic isolation due to worsening diplomatic relations with China and the Soviet Union, which were its biggest supporters. Kim Il-sung expressed his

6) "Record of a Meeting between the Sino-Soviet Delegation and the Korean Workers' Party Presidium," History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, GARF, September 20, 1956: Fond 5446, Opis 98c, Delo 718, Listy 18-34. Translated by Gary Goldberg. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/121798>.

displeasure with Beijing and Moscow, perceiving the dispatch of their delegation as interference in North Korea's internal affairs. At the time, Kim provoked China and the Soviet Union, insisting on the intervention of the United Nations (UN) in the efforts to end the division of the Korean Peninsula. Moscow and Beijing considered Kim's remarks an act of betrayal which corresponded to standing on the side of the UN forces they had fought against during the Korean War. Mao compared Kim to former Hungarian Prime Minister Nagi Imre and Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito, who took the anti-Soviet independence line (Person 2019).

2. After the Sino-Soviet Conflict

Paradoxically, North Korea's diplomatic isolation began to be resolved as relations between the Soviet Union and China deteriorated.

- ◆ Paradoxically, North Korea's diplomatic isolation began to be resolved as relations between the Soviet Union and China deteriorated. Mao saw the 20th National Congress of the CPSU as the beginning of the Sino-Soviet conflict. The conflict between China and the Soviet Union was triggered by an ideological conflict after the death of Joseph Stalin, the General Secretary of the CPSU (Cheng 2015). Mao once pointed out that the 20th National Congress of the CPSU was a turning point in Sino-Soviet relations, beginning on an ideological level (Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi 2013, 429). Nikita Khrushchev declared during the 20th National Congress of the CPSU in 1959 that socialism was victorious and the threat to socialism no longer existed. The CPSU First Secretary also stated that as a result of the victory, the autocratic state where the proletariat held power was transformed into a socialist state of the entire people (Dutt 1963, 595-596). Khrushchev's declaration is interpreted as the CPSU's determination to liquidate Stalin's reign of terror in the name of the dictatorship of the proletariat (Yang Ho-min 2004). However, Mao rejected Khrushchev's line. In the 10th plenary session of the CPC 8th Central Committee in 1962, Mao advocated the theory of continuing revolution through the dictatorship of the proletariat. In his theory, he argued that class struggle through the dictatorship of the proletariat should continue because there remained those who intended to return to capitalism (Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi ziliao 1983, 196-197).

- ◆ Mao first used the term “intermediate zone” in 1946 and suggested the theory of “two intermediate zones” with the beginning of the Sino-Soviet conflict. With a beginning in the interview by American journalist Anna Louise Strong, Mao introduced the concept of “intermediate zone” to explain the international political phenomenon of confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, referring to the vast zone between the US and the Soviet Union as an “intermediate zone”. That is, he defined the area of US-Soviet Union competition as an “intermediate zone”, which was a geopolitical concept. He stated that it would be difficult for the US to attack the Soviet Union until it subjugates the intermediate countries in the vast region between the two. By the time the concept was introduced, China was going through a civil war between the CPC and the US-backed Kuomintang led by Chiang Kai-shek. Mao presented the concept of the “intermediate zone” to relate the civil war situation in China to the international political conflict between the US and the Soviet Union (Mao 1946).
- ◆ Later, Mao developed the concept of the “intermediate zone” into a major perspective for understanding international situations. According to Mao, the US anti-communist and anti-Soviet policies were essentially devised to subjugate the economies and territories of countries in the “intermediate zone” and expand US hegemony. He also conceptualized an interpretation of the US foreign policies toward Asian countries based on the geopolitical concept of the “intermediate zone,” while viewing China’s Asian neighbors to be in the intermediate zone between the US and the Soviet Union and within a stage for geopolitical competition. In this context, he argued that China should unite with the people of the “intermediate zone;” countries on the Asian and African continents, to fight against US invasion (Ye 2001, 129).
- ◆ During the Sino-Soviet Union conflict, Mao’s theory of the “intermediate zone” was developed to introduce the concept of “two intermediate zones”. In the early 1960s, China perceived as a threat not only the United States but also the Soviet Union. Mao explained that there existed the first “intermediate zone” against the revisionist Soviet Union and the other “intermediate zone” against the imperialist United States. In order to counter China’s

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main enemies from the South and the North and escape its isolation, Mao needed to establish an international united front with countries that did not maintain friendly relations with either the United States or the Soviet Union. According to the theory of “two intermediate zones”, the first “intermediate zone” consisted of developed capitalist countries including European states, Canada, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand, while the second one was constituted of underdeveloped countries in Asia, Africa, and South America. Mao argued that China must establish an international united front with countries in the “two intermediate zones” to simultaneously respond to threats from the United States and the Soviet Union (Ye 2001, 130).

- ◆ During the Sino-Soviet Union conflict, Mao conceptually interpreted the geographical elements in the context of the “two intermediate zones”, based on which he established China’s foreign policies in the Asian region (Niu 2012). The “intermediate zones”, as Mao put it, referred to an area where the influences of two forces collided, similar to such geopolitical concepts as the “borderland” and the “rimland”. Just as Land Powers expand to the “borderland” and subsequently threaten Sea Powers, the “intermediate zones” belonged to neither the Soviet Union nor to the United States, but were located where the impacts of these two powers collided. Mao insisted that China build solidarity with countries in the “intermediate zones” against the United States and the Soviet Union.
- ◆ The geopolitical theory of the “two intermediate zones” was further strengthened in the face of improved US-Soviet relations. From July 6 to 20 in 1963, China and the Soviet Union met in Moscow for the meeting of the delegations of the CPSU and the CPC. However, Western media reported that the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Soviet Union would meet in Moscow on July 13 – during the Sino-Soviet meeting – to discuss the negotiation on the Limited Nuclear Test Ban treaty. The Chinese leadership judged that the Soviet Union had turned sharply toward a strategy to contain China by forming an alliance with the US. China was simultaneously exposed to both the threat of US imperialism and Soviet revisionism. Based on this perception of threats, Mao’s

theory of the “two intermediate zones” gained persuasive power as it was easily applicable to reality (Choi, 2009, 218–219).

- ◆ The discourse concerning China's theory of the “two intermediate zones” eventually led to Pyongyang's increased diplomatic leverage on China. This is because North Korea became geopolitically significant between China and the Soviet Union. At the 1960 Bucharest Conference of Representatives of Communist and Workers Parties, the ideological conflict between the CPC and the CPSU rose to the surface, but Pyongyang did not express a clear position concerning the Sino-Soviet ideological conflict. It took the strategy of waiting and watching rather than actively engaging in the controversy. North Korea refused to stand on one side, therefore alienating neither of the two. This is because Pyongyang believed that it needed support from both sides for national reconstruction after the Korean War (Wu 2009, 160). Kim Il-sung had no choice but to habitually rely on support from China and the Soviet Union (Chinese Embassy to Pyongyang, 1960).
- ◆ Beijing and Moscow competed to strengthen their respective diplomatic ties with Pyongyang. China invited Kim Il-sung for a summit on May 21, 1960, to take advantage of the rift between the Soviet Union and North Korea. At the time, Pyongyang was dissatisfied with Moscow due to the cancellation of Khrushchev's visit to North Korea and Moscow's passive attitude toward Pyongyang's demand for food assistance. Chinese President Mao held a summit with his North Korean counterpart Kim Il-sung in Hangzhou and denounced Khrushchev for insisting on peaceful coexistence with the United States. The CPC's General Secretary Deng Xiaoping promised Kim 400 million yuan in aid for North Korea's seven-year economic development plan and provide more food aid, as well as cotton.
- ◆ After Kim's secret visit to China, the Soviet Union pushed for his unofficial visit to Moscow on June 13, 1960. Frol Kozlov, secretary of the CPSU Central Committee, provided Kim with the minutes that contained the CPC's proposal to send agents to Pyongyang during the 1956 Faction Incident. This incident involved the coalition of the pro-Chinese Yan'an faction with the Soviet faction

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to oppose Kim. The North Korean leader reportedly expressed his anger at Mao after reading the minutes, saying, “China tried to colonize North Korea.” To strengthen relations with Pyongyang, Khrushchev promised to provide the economic aid requested by Kim (Shen 2018). According to a telegram that the Hungarian Ambassadors to North Korea sent to his home country on July 2, 1960, North Korea seemed to share a position with the Soviet Union on foreign affairs rather than China.⁷⁾

- ◆ As Pyongyang moved to strengthen relations with Moscow, China pushed for another round of economic aid to North Korea. Accordingly, a North Korean economic delegation visited China on September 10, 1960. At the time, the Chinese Embassy to the Soviet Union sent a telegram to report to the CPC leadership that Moscow had decided to write off North Korean loans worth 700 million rubles. Given the Soviet aid to North Korea, China decided to provide 420 million rubles of loans to North Korea and support the construction of light industry factories from 1961 to 1964.⁸⁾
- ◆ North Korea gained economic support by shifting sides between China and the Soviet Union while the two were in competition, which is interpreted as a result of North Korea’s geopolitical value. Declassified data from the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)⁹⁾ show the analysis that China and the Soviet Union were competing to expand their leverage on North Korea. This means that the rivalry between Beijing and Moscow began for strengthened diplomatic relations with Pyongyang because of the value of North Korea’s strategic position. In particular, Chinese aid to North Korea surpassed that from the Soviet Union despite China’s economic difficulties due to the failure of the Great Leap Forward campaign. Pyongyang remained neutral in the conflict between Beijing and Moscow.

7) *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issue 14/15 DOCUMENT No. 17 Report, Embassy of Hungary in North Korea to the Hungarian Foreign Ministry, July 2, 1960: 115-116.

8) Ibid.

9) Central Intelligence Agency, “Sino-Soviet Competition in North Korea (Reference Title: ESAU XV-61),” April 5, 1961.

- ◆ Due to the Sino-Soviet conflict, North Korea's geopolitical importance increased. Samuel Kim and Lee Tae-hwan (Kim and Lee 2002) focused on the aspect that Pyongyang used its geopolitical circumstances as diplomatic strategies. As Kim and Lee pointed out, Pyongyang gained economic, technological, and military aid from the Soviet Union and China by changing sides between them. Pyongyang was able to increase its diplomatic leverage during the Sino-Soviet conflict because of its escalated geopolitical value. China placed geopolitical significance on North Korea during its conflict with the Soviet Union. In the context of China's geopolitical discourse involving Mao's theory of "intermediate zones", North Korea was geopolitically significant as an area with which China must build a united front to counter the Soviet threat.

IV. Pyongyang's Diplomatic Strategy during the US-China Competition

- ◆ As the Sino-Soviet conflict ended in the mid-1980s and the post-Cold War era began, North Korea could no longer benefit from conflict between China and the Soviet Union. The North faced a crisis of having to come up with ways to survive based on an "external life-support system". However, it had the "power of the weak", and its geopolitical position surrounded by the world's top four powers did not weaken even after the Cold War. For China, North Korea was a "key issue" and its geopolitical importance was highlighted again in the US-China competition.

1. US-China Competition and China's Geopolitical Discourse

- ◆ In the process of the US and China rivalry, the geopolitical value of states bordering China increased. In other words, Asian countries bordering China have become important to both the United States and China. During the Xi Jinping era, the CPC continuously emphasized that the so-called "peripheral diplomacy" is the key to defending China's sovereignty and security, while the United States also established a diplomatic strategy to strengthen security

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cooperation with China's border states to keep China's hegemonic expansion in Asia in check. With the progression of the US-China competition, the states bordering China have become geopolitically important, which is linked to the rise in the geopolitical value of North Korea to the US and China.

- ◆ During the Xi Jinping era, China emphasized the importance of diplomacy with those peripheral countries adjacent to China, which began at the Conference on the Diplomatic Work with Neighboring Countries that the CPC held in Beijing from October 24 to 25, 2013. It was the most important meeting on Chinese foreign policy since 2006 and the first meeting on China's diplomatic policies concerning peripheral neighbors since 1946. Xi stressed the importance of "peripheral diplomacy" in the new international situation and stated, "Doing well in peripheral diplomatic work is necessary for China to achieve the 'Two Centuries' objective and realize the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." Additionally, he emphasized that China should "maintain and make full use of the important strategic opportunity period for China's development while striving to build close relations in terms of economic bonds, security cooperation, and cultural exchanges in order to secure the nation's sovereignty, security, and development interests" (Xi 2013). His statement revealed China's diplomatic line of "striving for achievements" that highlights the so-called "peripheral diplomacy".

China's "peripheral diplomacy" was repeatedly emphasized in Xi Jinping's later remarks.

- ◆ China's "peripheral diplomacy" was repeatedly emphasized in Xi Jinping's later remarks. In the 2018 Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs, he outlined his socialist thought on diplomacy with Chinese characteristics. "Amid the accelerating multipolarization of the international system, the coordination of major country diplomacy should be considered important," he said. He stressed the need to "form a more friendly and advantageous surrounding environment by stably coordinating balanced diplomacy with major countries and desirably managing peripheral diplomacy" (Xi 2018). Xi understood the world's reorganization into a multi-polar system amid China's rise as an international situation, emphasizing the importance of friendly relations with neighboring states in this international situation. In other words, the value of

neighboring countries has increased for China due to the US-China competition..

- ◆ China's emphasis on diplomacy with neighboring countries is analyzed to be the result of the influence by US-China relations. Under the Obama administration's rebalancing strategy, the US has become closer to those countries adjacent to China. The expansion of US intervention could have repercussions for China's neighbors because it might act as a driving force for those countries that border China to actively counter China in such issues as territorial disputes. If China fails to build more friendly relations with its neighbors, it will not be able to prevent conflicts with them as well as the expansion of US influence in the region. China's diplomatic strategies for establishing friendly relations with neighboring countries can be divided into four categories: First, China helps its neighbors to obtain tangible economic and development benefits by cooperating with China; second, China respects regional economic blocks such as ASEAN and SCO; third, China highlights as an example the specific achievements of cooperation with China; and fourth, China shares with the rest of the world the achievements of its development and Asia-Pacific regional development under the principle of open regionalism (Swayne 2014).
- ◆ The US has also strengthened diplomatic relations with China's border countries to keep China in check. The US National Security Strategy published in December 2017 after the inauguration of the Trump administration pinpointed the geopolitical competition with China in the Indo-Pacific region and recognized the US-China competition as a confrontation between freedom and oppression (The White House 2017). It revealed the judgment that given China's expansion of its influence to its neighbors through economic and military threats, cooperation with Asian countries around China is needed to block such moves. It calls for protecting Taiwan, re-establishing relations with traditional allies such as the Philippines and Thailand, and strengthening partnerships with Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia.
- ◆ In June 2019, the US Department of Defense published the

2019 Indo-Pacific Strategy Report. The report defines China as a “Revisionist Power” that threatens the liberal international order and seeks hegemony. It also explains that China pursues aggressive and coercive foreign policies based on military power and uses economic power as a strategic means. The report focuses on China’s “gray zone” strategy. The “gray zone” refers to the hostile area that is not in friendly relations with China although not reaching to the point of a military conflict. China is penetrating its influence into this “gray zone” by mobilizing various means including political warfare, disinformation, use of A2/AD networks, subversion, and economic leverage. The responsive US strategy for China aims to strengthen security cooperation with countries in the Indo-Pacific region by building a security network to conduct joint military exercises and provide advanced military weapons.

2. Pyongyang’s Elevated Diplomatic Leverage over Beijing

If a small and weak country is located in a region of strategic importance to larger and stronger countries, the weak actor will have strong bargaining power that is not commensurate with the combined power of the other countries.

- ◆ If a small and weak country is located in a region of strategic importance to larger and stronger countries, the weak actor will have strong bargaining power that is not commensurate with the combined power of the other countries. North Korea utilizes its geopolitical importance as a resource to enlarge its leverage in asymmetric negotiations with China. It is said that China re-recognized the geopolitical importance of North Korea particularly in the context of the 1999 Kosovo crisis. When NATO intervened in the case at the time, Russian troops occupied the Prishtina International Airport in the Kosovan capital, trying to maintain its leverage over Kosovo, Russia’s security buffer.
- ◆ Due to the US-China competition, North Korea was able to restore its relations with China, overcoming the conflict over its nuclear program. By that time, the US had strongly pressured China over sanctions on North Korea since Donald Trump took office, while imposing unprecedented sanctions on North Korea, such as reducing the amount of coal imports from North Korea. Under these circumstances, Pyongyang criticized China through its state media, which was not usual for it to do. The conflict between North Korea and China changed rapidly after the North began

nuclear negotiations with the United States in 2018. Beijing and Pyongyang held the first summit in seven years since Kim Jong-un took office, and relations between North Korea and China were restored at a rapid pace. In this case, North Korea's approach to the US led to China's active approach to the North.

- ◆ After President Xi Jinping took office in 2013, the relationship between China and North Korea featured more of a conflict than a friendly relationship. North Korea conducted its third nuclear test in December 2012, which was just ahead of Xi Jinping's inauguration as president. For this reason, there arose a debate in China over "inclusiveness versus abandonment", with regard to whether or not to maintain its ties with Pyongyang (Park and Lee 2015). In an interview with the Financial Times, Deng Yuwen, then deputy editor-in-chief of The Study Times published by the Central Party School of the CPC, had an interview with The Financial Times where he insisted on China's need to change its policy toward North Korea. Specifically, he called for China to reevaluate its alliance with the Kim dynasty in the wake of the North's third nuclear test. His argument was that China maintains an anachronistic alliance with North Korea from an ideological and geopolitical standpoint.¹⁰⁾
- ◆ On the contrary, Li Dunqiu, former director of the Korean Peninsula Center at the Chinese State Council's Development Research Center, criticized the theory of abandoning North Korea (Li 2014). He said if China gives up North Korea, it is the US that will eventually benefit the Korean Peninsula. His argument is that interests of China and North Korea, being sovereign states each, cannot be identical just because they are allies, and that Beijing needs to understand the difficult realities facing Pyongyang. It was hard to predict whether the CPC leaders would give up North Korea. The Chinese government took a very passive stance toward North Korea despite strong pressure from the US because China was able to gain security benefits by protecting the North. In doing so, China had to bear the cost of damaging the image of a large country (Park and Lee 2015).

10) The Financial Times, "China should abandon North Korea," *Opinion Pyongyang*, February 28, 2013. <https://www.ft.com/content/9e2f68b2-7c5c-11e2-99f0-00144feabdc0>.

- ◆ The main reason for China's controversy over its North Korea policy is that North Korea's nuclear program could have a negative impact on China's national interests. It was possible that the nuclear program would justify the US and Japan's missile defense systems. In particular, the North Korean nuclear test was a serious challenge to China's policy on the Korean Peninsula for the following reasons: First, the nuclear test violated China's maintenance of the status quo on the Korean Peninsula; second, the nuclear test would reduce the space for China to interact with the US. This is because the US would put pressure on North Korea that China was in a difficult position to oppose; third, it became more difficult for China to maintain effective cooperation with North Korea. In this regard, China was to inevitably apply tougher measures of pressure on North Korea for its denuclearization (Ji 2007). The possibility of China changing its policy toward North Korea at the time was also attributed to these reasons, as Pyongyang's nuclear program could eventually justify the input of US military power into East Asia and the strengthening of the ROK-US-Japan triangular alliance.
- ◆ The existing mainstream position of the Chinese government or academia concerning the Korean Peninsula policy can be said to be maintaining the status quo. This is a policy that prioritizes peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula in a situation where it is difficult to induce North Korea's denuclearization. China was able to maintain its status quo policy on the Korean Peninsula because it was consistent with the previous US Obama administration's policy toward North Korea. The Obama administration introduced "strategic patience" in its North Korea policy, which was interpreted as meaning that the US was virtually indifferent about resolving the North Korean nuclear issue (Kim and Guo 2017). Under the Obama administration, the US-China relations were unlikely to be greatly shaken even if China did not induce Pyongyang's denuclearization through strong pressure. After Trump took power, however, the US demanded China's pressure on North Korea, putting priority on the North Korean nuclear issue, and Trump declared that strategic patience with North Korea was over. Accordingly, if China was passive in sanctions against North Korea, it could face the problem of having to endure worsening relations with the United States.

- ◆ On February 18, 2017, China announced that it would suspend coal imports from North Korea from the following day until the end of 2017, moving to strengthen sanctions on North Korea. The Chinese government said through state media that the suspension of coal imports was aimed at deterring North Korea's nuclear program. Since North Korea relied mostly on coal exports for earning foreign currency, the suspension of coal imports was to show that China was putting strong pressure on North Korea. The US had criticized China for being passive in responding to North Korea's nuclear issue and increased pressure on China after Trump took office.¹¹⁾ Starting from February 2017, Pyongyang and Beijing were seen to be increasingly aggressive towards each other, and Pyongyang accused Beijing of "dancing to the US tune". It was an unusual scene, given that North Korea has relied on China as a loyal ally over several decades and that China has refrained from criticizing North Korea for its nuclear tests and missile threats. The US strongly demanded that China put pressure on North Korea, relating the matter to trade issues with China (Perlez 2017), the rapid deterioration of North Korea-China relations was due to increased US pressure on China since Trump took office.
- ◆ The fact that North Korea emphasized its geopolitical value for China while criticizing China's sanctions against North Korea has important implications. North Korea's Rodong Sinmun claimed in May 2017 that it had fought at the front lines against the US for the past 70 years, and as a result, it was able to defend China's peace and safety. In the article, Pyongyang said that North Korea and China are closely linked in the geopolitical sense and some Chinese arguments about North Korea are incorrect in terms of accusing North Korea that its possession of nuclear weapons results in the US expansion of its military power in Northeast Asia. Pyongyang also told China not to strengthen sanctions on North Korea and thus annihilate the noble tradition of North Korea-China relations. As North Korea fought with China in the anti-Japanese and anti-American wars (Kim 2017). It can be said that North Korea recalled its geopolitical value for China while looking back on the history of North Korea-China relations.

The fact that North Korea emphasized its geopolitical value for China while criticizing China's sanctions against North Korea has important implications.

11) The Economist, "Furious with North Korea, China stops buying its coal," Shock and ore, February 25, 2017. <https://www.economist.com/china/2017/02/25/furious-with-north-korea-china-stops-buying-its-coal> (Accessed on May 12, 2021).

◆ However, China still opposed the change in the status quo on the Korean Peninsula. Shortly after North Korea's first test launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) on July 4, 2017, President Xi said, "There have been many changes in blood alliance with North Korea, but that does not fundamentally change the relationship." He also stated, "Considering the relationship between China and North Korea, we have made full efforts and I do not agree with the international community on its criticism of China for its lack of efforts." According to the Chinese President, "the North Korean nuclear issue should be identified as a North Korea-US issue, not an inter-Korean issue, and the US should also be held responsible in that sense, so the entire international community should make concerted efforts" (Lee 2017). As the crisis caused by North Korea's nuclear program escalated, China rather criticized the US while emphasizing blood alliance with the North. It can be assumed that in the event of a crisis on the Korean Peninsula, China would try to protect North Korea and prevent the US from making any change in the status quo on the Korean Peninsula. When North Korea conducted its second test of ICBM on the 29th of the same month, China demanded the US and South Korea maintain a cautious attitude. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang also said, "China urges North Korea to abide by the Security Council-related resolutions, stop actions that accelerate tensions on the Korean Peninsula, and maintain peace and stability in the region together" (Chinese Foreign Ministry 2017).

The more competitive the US-China relations become, the higher significance the North Korean regime has for China.

◆ The more competitive the US-China relations become, the higher significance the North Korean regime has for China. This is because North Korea is China's significant ally that helps keep the US and Japan in check (Kim 2016). Relations between North Korea and China, which had been at odds over North Korea's nuclear program, reached a turning point as the US-North Korea nuclear negotiations took a radical turn. It is meaningful in that the North Korea-China summit was held at Xi's invitation when North Korea and the US were coordinating the timing and agenda for their bilateral summit. Kim Jong-un failed to hold talks with Xi for seven years after he rose to the top leadership position in 2011. Chairman Kim Jong-un purged his uncle Jang Song-taek and other executives who served as public

channels in North Korea. China despised North Korea for conducting a nuclear test in its defiance. With the North Korea-US summit ahead, however, Kim restored the formerly deteriorated relations between North Korea and China, through the North Korea-China summit, to a traditional alliance. As the restoration of North Korea-China relations is a factor that enables the North to escalate its leverage over the relations with the US, it is meaningful that the North Korea-China summit took place at a time when Trump appointed hardliner John Bolton as his aide to the US National Security Council (Myers and Perlez, 2018).

- ◆ The Rodong Sinmun's report on the North Korea-China summit (Headquarters Political Desk 2018) is considered meaningful in that it mentioned the strategic value of the bilateral relationship. According to The Rodong Sinmun, Chairman Kim Jong-un said that the friendly relationship between North Korea and China, which the senior generation had built to win the socialist feat, is a strategic choice between China and North Korea. It also reported that Kim stressed strategic communication and strategic tactical cooperation with Chinese leaders, and that the two leaders shared opinions on friendly bilateral relations and the management of the situation on the Korean Peninsula. Based on the report, it is deemed that the two counterparts might have discussed strategies for the US-North Korea summit and China's support.
- ◆ Xi Jinping's visit to Pyongyang also coincided with the US-China summit. According to a report by The Rodong Sinmun (Headquarters Political Desk 2019a), the North Korea-China summit on June 20, 2019, discussed the situation on the Korean Peninsula and international regional issues and agreed that cooperation between the two countries is necessary in complex regional situations. On June 30, the US and North Korea held a summit at Panmunjom, the first summit on North Korean territory across the military demarcation line. The Rodong Sinmun reported, "The door to the divided Panmunjom, which used to be firmly closed as a symbol of the US-North Korea confrontation and conflict, has opened wide," adding, "It is an amazing incident that created unprecedented trust between the two countries, which have considered each other as deep-rooted adversaries" (Headquarters Political Desk 2019b). During the one-month period,

North Korea held a summit with two major powers on its territory, which is meaningful in that the North demonstrated its diplomatic leverage amid the US-China competition.

- ◆ North Korea sought a new diplomatic line as the nuclear negotiations with the US stalled. North Korea set the end of 2019 as a deadline for the bilateral negotiations, but their positions on the North Korean nuclear issue failed to be narrowed. North Korea demanded gradual sanctions relief, but the US refused to accept it. As negotiations stalled, North Korea's diplomatic response featured a friendly policy toward China and a hostile policy toward the United States. With the continuously competing and conflicting US-China relations continuing, and with the continued US sanctions on North Korea, China and North Korea formed a close alliance-level relationship against the US.

- ◆ North Korea expressed its position of non-negotiation with the US at the 7th plenary session of the 5th WPK Central Committee. North Korea tried to pursue economic development through the conclusion of nuclear negotiations with the United States, but it was confirmed that the United States had no intention of abandoning its hostile policy toward the North. North Korean leader Kim said, "We will never allow the shameless US to abuse the US-North Korea dialogues to realize its impure purpose," adding, "We will now move on to shocking actual actions to fully compensate for the suffering and suppressed development of our people." North Korea has since put forward the self-reliance keynote in response to US sanctions (Headquarters Political Report Group 2020).

- ◆ North Korea actively supported China in the US-China conflict. The WPK Central Committee announced a statement on June 4, 2020, where it criticized US Secretary of State Pompeo's labeling of China as an existing threat based on communist ideology (WPK Central Committee 2020). The statement said, "Pompeo viciously raised a question of China, the leader of socialism, on such issues as Hong Kong, Taiwan, human rights, and trade disputes," and stressed that attacking socialist China is attacking North Korea. It can be interpreted that Pyongyang revealed that its relationship with Beijing is a traditional socialist alliance against the United States. Immediately after the statement of the WPK Central Committee, North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Son-gwon again published in The Rodong Sinmun

another article that denounced the US. Ri wrote, "Our top leadership discussed the national nuclear development strategies that befit the country's internal and international situations created during the historic 4th expansion meeting of the 7th WPK Central Committee, and solemnly declared to further strengthen the nation's nuclear war deterrence to cope with the US treat on a long-term nuclear war" (Ri 2020).

- ◆ In the worsening US-North Korea relations, China has begun to give significance to its participation in the Korean War, where it fought against the US in the name of supporting North Korea. President Xi defined the anti-American war for aid as a war in which China supported North Korea against unfair aggression by the US. The problem is that Xi gave present significance to the war, claiming that using the past as a mirror would reveal what will happen in the future. He stated that China has continued to develop since the Chinese People's Liberation Army won the war against the United States, emphasizing the "spirit of anti-American aid." To put it differently, Xi considered it necessary to counter the US, which intervenes in China's internal affairs by exercising unjust coercion and hegemony (She 2020). In the context of US-China competition, anti-US aid could be interpreted as an expression symbolizing the alliance between North Korea and China.
- ◆ China did not form an alliance with other countries in its foreign policy, but has especially emphasized the value of the Beijing-Pyongyang alliance. The People's Daily of China published an editorial commemorating the 59th anniversary of the Sino-North Korean Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty, where China emphasized the meaning of establishing an alliance with North Korea. In particular, the editorial noted that the North Korea-China summit took place for 15 months from 2018, commenting that the traditional friendly relations between the two have entered a new era. It also said, "The traditional friendship between China and North Korea will not be shaken by the stormy wind of the international situation" (Wu 2020), envisioning the bilateral relations in the new international situation. Although not explicitly stated, it can be interpreted as emphasizing the alliance with North Korea amid the US-China competition.

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V. Conclusion and Implications

- ◆ During the periods of the US–China strategic competition and Sino–Soviet conflict, the geopolitical value of North Korea for China escalated. In the period of the Sino–Soviet conflict, the geopolitical discourse of the “two intermediate zones” was developed, while the period of the US–China strategic competition saw the progression of the geopolitical discourse of “peripheral diplomacy”. These geopolitical discourses enabled North Korea’s geopolitical value for China to increase. Although the gap in relative national power is remarkable compared to Beijing, Pyongyang has shown diplomatic leverage over China to carry through its diplomatic goals of possessing nuclear weapons and receiving economic aid from China. It has been different from the usual asymmetric relations in which weak countries find it difficult to achieve their diplomatic goals in dealing with powerful countries.
- ◆ In the face of the US–China competition, North Korea took the diplomatic stance of gaining recognition of its leverage. North Korean leader Kim Jong–un had five summits with Chinese President Xi Jinping and three with US President Trump. This demonstrates that China and the United States are keenly aware of the geopolitical value of North Korea. As the US–China competition intensifies, North Korea, one of China’s closest neighbors, bears an increasing importance. North Korea’s summit with China, with which the relations had worsened since North Korean leader Kim Jong–un took office, was also a result of the full–fledged nuclear negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang. The active engagement of both sides in nuclear negotiations and the US’s presentation of a vision for North Korea’s economic development are also interpreted as a result of the increased geopolitical value of North Korea.
- ◆ It is projected that in the future, North Korea’s foreign relations will be influenced by the variable of geopolitical discourses. The geopolitical discourses can emerge in the US–China strategic competition. In the face of the US–China competition, if the two countries recognize North Korea’s heightened geopolitical value, Pyongyang will have geopolitical leverage over both of them. Based on this geopolitical leverage, North Korea may lead diplomatic negotiations in its favor.

◆ In this regard, there is a possibility that two conflicting scenarios will develop in North Korea's foreign relations: First, North Korea's improvement in relations with the United States amid the US-China competition. Both the Obama administration's Asia rebalancing strategy and the Trump administration's Indo-Pacific strategy presented strategic goals to keep China's expansion of influence in Asia in check. And, as a means to this end, the United States pursued strengthened relations with countries adjacent to China. This strategy continues with the newly established Joseph Biden administration's policy toward China. Biden vowed to strengthen relations with China's neighbors, including the pursuance of cooperation with Asian allies, to keep China's expansion of influence in check (Jakes et al. 2021). To this end, the US may resume nuclear negotiations with North Korea and improve relations with North Korea. As in the nuclear deal with Iran reached under the Obama administration when Biden was vice president, Washington can accept Pyongyang's request to gradually lift sanctions.

there is a possibility that two conflicting scenarios will develop in North Korea's foreign relations: First, North Korea's improvement in relations with the United States amid the US-China competition.

◆ Second, as North Korea confronts the US, Pyongyang could be backed by China and continue to possess nuclear weapons. As the US-China relations deteriorate, the geopolitical value of North Korea for China will increase. Some Chinese diplomatic and security experts described the improved US-North Korea relations as a "disaster in Chinese diplomacy." As for the US Indo-Pacific strategy, Beijing understands it as a US strategy to besiege China. Due to this "siege mentality," China tends to keep neighboring countries like North Korea as strong allies. Therefore, if the Biden administration continues to exert military and economic pressure on China, China is likely to strengthen its support for North Korea. With the support of China, it is difficult for North Korea to find a strong incentive to improve relations between the US and North Korea. North Korean leader Kim Jong-un has no reason to negotiate with the US, even giving up his nuclear weapons that are at stake in his regime's survival.

Second, as North Korea confronts the US, Pyongyang could be backed by China and continue to possess nuclear weapons.

◆ Therefore, North Korea would be able to have two opportunities from the US-China competition. Using the resumption of negotiations with the United States, Pyongyang could get an opportunity to achieve negotiation conditions in its favor. In the other scenario, Pyongyang may continue to attract China's support

while possessing nuclear weapons. Of course, there remain obstacles such as US-led sanctions on North Korea, but if the US-China competition intensifies, there is a possibility that there will be a gap in sanctions against North Korea between the US and China. It is difficult to rule out the possibility that North Korea will use its friendly relationship with China while possessing nuclear weapons to promote the survival of the regime.]

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