Divergence in Foreign Policy Strategies Despite Shared Threat Perception: How Unexpected Domestic Political Developments Led to Different China Policy between South Korean and Japan

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Abstract: *South Korea and Japan carried out contrasting policies toward China during the Moon Jae-in and Shinzo Abe period, as South Korea implemented an appeasement policy, while Japan opted for a balancing policy against China. Although the two countries experienced a rapid deterioration in threat perception toward China following Beijing's economic coercion, the Japanese and South Korean public's demands to change the ruling party in their respective countries led to the establishment of governments with completely different policies toward China. Due to China's economic retaliation following a territorial dispute in the East China Sea in 2010 and THAAD deployment in 2017, Japan and South Korea developed shared threat perception toward China by the late 2010s. However, their China policies diverged, as Japanese public who tried to replace DPJ as the ruling party due to its policy and crisis management failures chose to elect LDP's Shinzo Abe who advocated balancing policy toward China. On the other hand, the South Korean public, who called for President Park's impeachment, elected the opposition party's Moon Jae-in, who pursued an appeasement policy toward China. This paper shows that domestic political factors, which may appear unrelated to foreign policy, can have consequential influence on the direction of foreign policy.*

Keywords: Threat perception, balancing, appeasement, domestic politics, South Korea, Japan.

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Introduction

Although there have been many ups and downs for South Korean-Japanese relations, most would agree that the Moon-Abe period (from 2017 to 2020) has been one of the most challenging times. During this period, Seoul and Tokyo had not only suffered from unprecedented levels of bilateral feuds regarding historical, territorial, security and economic disputes, they had also demon-

strated diverging foreign policies toward other countries. One of the most notable divergences in this regard could be observed in their policies regarding China. As will be explored in the following sections, while the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe insisted on establishing a coalition to counter Chinese aggression as soon as his second administration began, the Korean President Moon Jae-in had pursued a "Three No's" policy to appease China since his first year in office.

Considering that (1) both Abe and Moon were inaugurated shortly after Tokyo and Seoul respectively experienced Beijing's economic retaliation, and (2) the two countries were the closest allies of the United States in East Asia, one might wonder why Japan and South Korea had come to develop such contrasting policies toward China during the Moon-Abe period. This paper argues that Seoul and Tokyo's China policy diverged due to unexpected domestic political factors. More specifically, the paper claims that the changes in ruling parties, which resulted from the previous administrations' failures to handle crises or scandals and ensuing public disappointment, led to the divergence regarding the two countries' foreign policies.

This paper conducts comparative case studies based on a qualitative approach. The paper analyzes changes in perception and policy toward China in Japan (from 2010 to 2020) and South Korea (from 2016 to 2022) by adopting process tracing. After briefly reviewing existing literature, the paper traces how perception on China changes in Japan after a territorial dispute in the East China Sea and the ensuing export control on rare earth from China, and how the Abe administration emerges and carries out balancing policy regarding China. Then, the paper traces the shift in perception about China in South Korea following China's economic retaliation after South Korea's Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) deployment, and how the Moon administration emerges and pursues an appeasement policy toward China. Finally, the paper analyzes how unexpected domestic political developments followed by changes in the ruling party in both countries led to the diverging China policies between South Korea and Japan despite their similar threat perceptions.

Literature Review and Key Concepts

The existing literature largely focuses on how shared / different threat perceptions lead to convergence / divergence of strategies and policies. Stephen Walt explains how countries align together to balance against the state that is regarded as the greatest threat. According to Walt, the level of threat from other countries is determined based on (1) aggregate power, (2) geographical proximity, (3) offensive power and (4) offensive intentions. Based on this threat assessment, states respond by allying either against the major threat (balanc-

ing) or with the threat (bandwagoning). Walt argues that states generally opt for balancing as it can help preserve states' freedom of action.[1] In other words, countries that share perceptions regarding who poses the greatest threat align together with each other to cope with the perceived threat.

In addition, Cheol Hee Park points out convergence of threat perception between South Korean and Japan as one of the major factors of cooperation between the two countries. According to Park, "convergence / divergence of external threat perception against the third party", along with historical contentions managed by domestic politics, and the "style of U.S. alliance management" influence whether South Korea and Japan pursue cooperation or face conflicts.[2]

Furthermore, Audrye Wong raises a similar question with this paper and explores Seoul and Tokyo's relations with Beijing and Washington from 1992 to 2015. Wong explains that one of the main reasons why South Korea and Japan's strategies have diverged was the fact that the two countries prioritized dealing with "local and imminent threats" over "abstract, structural threats."[3] According to Wong, unlike Japan, which had a more heightened threat perception regarding China due to a territorial dispute, South Korea had not necessarily viewed China as a significant threat. For Seoul, a more severe security threat had been posed by North Korea, and China had been considered as a partner which it should cooperate with to deal with the substantial North Korean threat. Wong claims that these differing threat perceptions between Japan and South Korea, intensified by their national identity gaps, led to their diverging strategies regarding China and the United States. Only after reaching a moment of "disillusionment" regarding Beijing's stance toward Pyongyang following North Korea's attacks on South Korea in 2010 did South Korea decide to bolster its relations with the United States. However, the author points out that even when both countries strengthened their ties with the United States, their China policies remained different as South Korea, having a lower threat perception of China than Japan, did not keep as much distance from Beijing as Tokyo did.[4]

However, the existing literature, focusing on similar / different threat perceptions leading to converging / diverging policies among countries, may not provide sufficient explanations for Seoul's and Tokyo's contrasting policies toward China during the Moon-Abe period. As will be explored in the following sections, contrary to what these studies suggest, South Korea and Japan actually had similar threat perceptions toward China as well as North Korea during the late 2010s. Yet, the two countries had carried out strikingly contrasting policies toward China. Therefore, to resolve this puzzle, the next section traces political developments in Japan and South Korea in the 2010s, which led to their respective policies.

This paper adopts Walt's concept of threat and balancing mentioned above. It uses threat perception to mean assessment of threat based on overall national power, proximity, offensive power, and hostile intention of a state, and balancing to mean working together with other states to counter a threatening or overly assertive country. Since offensive intention and capabilities are important factors that determine threat perception, the paper focuses on changes in threat perception toward China after Japan and South Korea's respective encounters with China's economic coercion.

Also, the paper draws from and slightly modifies Normin M. Ripsman and Jack S. Levy's definition of appeasement, which is "a strategy of sustained, asymmetrical concessions in response to a threat, with the aim of avoiding war, at least in the short term." By appeasement, this paper means making asymmetrical concessions in response to threat or coercion to avoid confrontation with another country.

Case Study 1: Japan since 2010

Senkaku/Diaoyu Incident and Changes in Perception regarding China among the Japanese Public

In September 2010, a collision between a Chinese fishing boat and a Japanese Coast Guard ship took place around the Senkaku / Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea, where the two countries were facing territorial disputes. Following the incident, Japanese authorities had arrested the Chinese captain, heightening the tensions between Beijing and Tokyo. When Japan declined China's continued requests to release the captain, including Prime Minister Wen Jiabao's demand, rare earth exports from China to Japan abruptly stopped. Japan suspected that it was due to the boat collision incident, even though the Chinese government had never admitted to an embargo on Tokyo, because no change was made regarding Chinese exports to other countries, only to Japan.[6]

While the dispute and export suspension ended as Tokyo released the detained Chinese captain, experiencing Beijing's economic coercion and hostility after territorial dispute had significantly increased mistrust and concern regarding China in Japan, especially among Japanese intellectuals. According to the public opinion survey released in August 2011 by Genron NPO, in general, the percentage of Japanese respondents who said they have negative impressions of China went up from 72.0% in 2010 to 78.3% in 2011. In particular, there was a 12.4% increase in Japanese intellectuals who harbored negative images regarding China, which rose from 46.0% in 2010 to 58.4% in 2011. When asked if and how their perception regarding China changed over the last year, 33.7% of Japanese respondents answered that their perceptions on Beijing had worsened.[7] Also, the percentage of Japanese who replied that they viewed

China's economic development as a threat rose to 41.1% in 2011 from 33.8% in 2010,[8] and those who regarded China as a military threat increased to 57.5% in 2011 from 47.0% in 2010.[9] Notably, for the first time since the survey began in 2006, threat perception regarding China (80.0% of the intellectual respondents) surpassed that of North Korea (69.0%) among the intellectuals.[10] When asked about the reasons why they perceive China as a military threat, 66.4% of Japanese respondents opted for "frequent invasion to Japanese territorial waters," which 47.7% of respondents in 2010 chose, replacing the previous year's "continued military build-up" as the highest rated reason.[11] This suggests that the Senkaku/Diaoyu incident and the ensuing economic retaliation in 2010 had a significant impact on Japan's threat perception.

Japan's policy toward China began to reflect such heightened perceptions toward China. Like previous prime ministers of Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), Prime Minister Naoto Kan sought to enhance relations with Beijing following DPJ's diplomatic stance of emphasizing relations with Asian countries. However, after the Senkaku/Diaoyu incident as well as North Korea's attack on Yeonpyeong Island in South Korea, the cabinet carried out a large-scale joint military exercise with the United States in December 2010.

Decline of DPJ, Shifts in Japan's Ruling Party from DPJ to LDP, and Abe's China Policy

Japan's pursuit of a firm stance against China became highly noticeable with the change in Japanese leadership, which was prompted by the failures of the then-ruling DPJ. The DPJ became a ruling party in Japan in 2009 for the first time. However, as Yong Bok Kim points out, even though DPJ had seized power emphasizing welfare policy and appealing to the public who had been dissatisfied with Koizumi cabinet's neoliberal economic policy, the party's vision for the welfare state crumbled due to the lack of consensus on carrying out welfare policy in DPJ, the impacts of 2008 global financial crisis and the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami, and the ensuing decision to increase consumption tax.[12] Most prominently, the DPJ's incompetence in handling the Tōhoku earthquake and the Fukushima nuclear accident resulted in public anger and mistrust toward the DPJ.[13]

With deep disappointment in the DPJ's leadership among the public and the absence of alternative political options, the second Abe administration was inaugurated in December 2012 with the slogan "Take back Japan" and eager support from the Japanese people, even though the support for the administration's individual policy was not that high.[14] Unlike the DPJ administrations, which had strived to strengthen their ties with their neighboring countries in Asia including China, the second Abe administration clearly articulated its deep security concern regarding China from the very beginning.[15] In his suggestion

of creating Asia's Democratic Security Diamond, which was announced right after Prime Minister Abe was reelected, he criticized China for turning the South China Sea into "Lake Beijing" and called for the creation of multilateral initiatives to counter such attempts.[16] Furthermore, the 2013 Defence White Paper placed more emphasis on Beijing's military activities and the need for Japan's strengthened defense to respond to them.[17]

Hence, Japan under the second Abe administration actively pursued balancing policy to deal with threats from China by closely aligning itself with the United States and cooperating with other states in the region. First, in 2015, the cabinet further strengthened the U.S.-Japan alliance by revising the Guidelines for U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation and amending its security laws to enable Tokyo's exercise of collective self-defense rights.

Moreover, after China announced its strategy of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, Japan began taking strong initiatives in promoting a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP), introducing the regional initiative in 2016. Although the strategic concepts of the first Abe administration's "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity" and "Confluence of the Two Seas" were not concretely realized due to Prime Minister Abe's sudden resignation over health issue, the second Abe administration was able to embark on promoting FOIP, starting to lead it with the United States in 2017, and pursuing minilateral cooperation with India and Australia. FOIP highlights the importance of the rule of law and freedom of navigation, "Quality Infrastructure development in accordance with international standards," and "capacity building on maritime law enforcement, disaster risk reduction and non-proliferation." Considering that the initiative (1) is pursued through cooperation with three other countries that Abe named as key countries for Asia's Democratic Security Diamond, (2) emphasizes spreading important factors of the U.S.-led liberal international order such as the rule of law and freedom of navigation, and (3) the fact that Washington puts great emphasis on the security aspect of the initiative amid the intensified U.S.-China competition, it is quite clear that the initiative was aimed at curbing China's assertive foreign policy stance and BRI.

In addition, Japan readily joined the United States when the first Trump administration decided to impose sanctions on two Chinese high-tech companies, Huawei and ZTE, for espionage and illegal economic activities, with the enactment of "U.S. National Defense Authorization Act" and called for its allies to join the measure. Like Australia and New Zealand, Japan decided to implement policies to exclude the aforementioned Chinese companies from its government and Self-Defense Forces.

Case Study 2: South Korea since 2016

China's Economic Retaliation following the THAAD Deployment and Changes in South Korea's Perception on China

Amid the rising North Korean nuclear threats, the South Korean government decided to deploy Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) in 2016. After North Korea's fourth nuclear test on January 6, the Defense Minister Han Min-gu called for THAAD deployment, in order to bolster South Korea's capability from a military perspective, during his appearance on a TV program on January 25, 2016.[19] Although Russia and China had vehemently protested against this, arguing that THAAD deployment in South Korea would threaten their security, the South Korean government underscored that the purpose of the THAAD deployment was to enhance Seoul's defense capability, and it was a matter of South Korea's sovereignty.[20] In July 2016, Seoul and Washington officially announced their decision to deploy THAAD in South Korea.

Since this announcement, China has taken a series of retaliatory measures targeting the South Korean economy, imposing sanctions on South Korean commodities, restricting Chinese tourism to South Korea, breaching contracts, and boycotting South Korean companies and entertainers. Amid Beijing's economic retaliation, South Korean companies such as Lotte, which had provided the land for the THAAD deployment, had to withdraw from the Chinese market.[21]

As a series of public opinion surveys indicate, such economic coercion by Beijing had significantly deteriorated South Korea's view on China. A public opinion survey conducted by the Asan Institute suggests that the South Korean public's image on China had kept worsening since July 2016 to March 2017, with a rapid decline in its favorability score toward China from January 2017 (4.31 out of 10) to March 2017 (3.21 out of 10).[22] Additionally, the threat perception regarding China in South Korea increased as well. The 2017 joint public opinion poll by EAI and Genron NPO shows that there was a 14.3% increase in South Korean respondents who regarded China as a military threat, which went up from 36.0% in 2016 to 50.3% in 2017.[23] Another survey conducted in October 2017 by a Chinese scholar, Wang Xiaoling from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), surveyed South Koreans' security concern regarding China. In this survey, about 80.5% of respondents replied that China's military power is a threat to South Korea. The survey result also reveals that the South Korean public largely prefers the United States over China, with 39.2% replying they will support Washington in case of the U.S.-China military confrontation and only 1.1.% answering that they will support China. Even in an economic sector, the South Korean public chose South Korea-U.S. economic cooperation over South Korea-China economic cooperation, indicating that the once-advocated Anmigyeongjung (security with the U.S., economy with China) was no longer an appealing option for South Koreans.[24]

The Collapse of Conservatives, Shifts in Ruling Party from Saenuri Party to the Minjoo Party of Korea, and Moon Administration's China Policy

South Korea's pursuit of appeasement policy toward China during the late 2010s had begun with the changes in South Korea's leadership, fueled by the political scandal that led to the collapse of the then-ruling Saenuri Party. The conservative Park administration, which pushed for the THAAD deployment in South Korea against Chinese demands, plunged into a serious political crisis. President Park became embroiled in the so-called "Choi Soon-sil Gate" scandal following JTBC's "Tablet PC" report, and candlelight protests erupted demanding her ousting and igniting the spark for her impeachment.[25] As supporters of President Park also gathered to oppose her impeachment, by the end of 2016, the political situation in South Korea was highly chaotic, marked by the confrontation between Pro-Park and Anti-Park rallies.[26] Eventually, President Park was impeached in March 2017, and the 19th presidential election was hurriedly held after 60 days following the impeachment amid extreme political turbulence and virtual collapse of political conservatives in South Korea. In this election, Moon Jae-in, the presidential candidate of the opposition party, was elected in May 2017.

During this shortened presidential election, amid domestic political turmoil and rising North Korean threats, how each candidate viewed Beijing or what China policy they planned to pursue did not become a major issue of concern. Thus, it was no wonder that the newly elected Moon administration did not necessarily share the nation's shifting perception toward China. In December 2017, during his speech at Peking University, President Moon emphasized that he had a different opinion from people who claimed that the rise of China would pose a threat to the South Korean economy and underscored that he believed South Korea-China relations to be "*Unmyeong gongdongche-ui gwangye* (relationship of a community of common destiny)," in which one country's prosperity would benefit both of them. In addition, calling China "*Nopeun sanbonguri* (a high mountain peak)" while referring to South Korea as a "small but responsible middle power," he declared that Seoul would join the "China Dream." Moreover, President Moon emphasized the need for policy alignment between Seoul and Beijing, expressing his wish to link his administration's "New Southern Policy" and "New Northern Policy" with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Additionally, he underscored the shared recognition between Seoul and Beijing about how to deal with the North Korean nuclear and missile threat.[27] Furthermore, President Moon's foreign policy advisor Moon Chung-in, during his remarks at an international conference in December 2019, suggested a scenario of South Korea negotiating with North Korea under "China's nuclear umbrella" in case the U.S. Forces in South Korea withdraw from South Korea without having North Korea denuclearized.[28]

Since the Moon administration viewed China as a great opportunity rather than a threat, South Korea under the Moon administration had become extremely cautious not to get on China's nerve. To appease China, South Korea announced the "Three No's" policy, promising political concessions of not strengthening its ties with the United States to Beijing. Foreign Minister Gang Gyeong-hwa stated that (1) South Korea would not additionally deploy THAAD in South Korea, (2) South Korea would not join the U.S.-led missile defense system and (3) the South Korea-U.S.-Japan trilateral cooperation would not be elevated into a military alliance.[29] Similarly, unlike Japan and other Western U.S. allies, South Korea did not join the U.S.-led sanctions on Huawei and ZTE in 2018. In the same sense, the Moon administration had been very hesitant to join the Free and Indo-Pacific strategy despite requests from the United States.[30]

Analysis: Comparing Japanese and South Korean Cases

Shared Threat Perceptions between South Korea and Japan in the late 2010s

It is true that threat perceptions between Seoul and Tokyo had been diverging until the early 2010s as Wong mentions.[31] However, as discussed in section IV, the North Korean threats had increased in 2016, and South Koreans had become wary over not only North Korea, but also China after China's economic retaliation following the THAAD deployment in 2017. Consequently, by the late 2010s, the two countries that have respectively faced economic coercion by China as well as witnessed North Korea's increasing provocations have come to have similar threat perceptions. The joint public opinion polls by Genron NPO and East Asia Institute in 2017 and 2018 both show that the two countries indeed have highly similar perceptions regarding their top two security threats. In 2017, 79.5% of Japanese and 83.4% of South Korean respondents replied they considered North Korea as a security threat, and 46.2% of Japanese and 50.3% of South Korean respondents replied that they viewed China as military threat. Also in 2018, 75.3% of Japanese and 67.4% of South Korean respondents believed that North Korea was military concern, while 45.7% of Japanese respondents and 47.2% of South Korean respondents regarded China as a security threat.[32]

Changes in the Ruling Parties in Seoul and Tokyo and Diverging China Policy

Nevertheless, as analyzed in sections III and IV, the collapse of the then-ruling parties and the shifts in ruling party by the highly dissatisfied public in Seoul and Tokyo led to the establishment of completely different governments that had contrasting views on China and thus diverging policies toward Beijing. The ruling DPJ's failures to realize the welfare policy it promised to carry out

and poor handling of the aftermath of the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami disappointed the Japanese public. As a result, the Japanese electorate decided to replace DPJ with the LDP, led by Shinzō Abe. Prime Minister Abe, who had sought to "Take back Japan" and shared the public's skeptical views regarding China, carried out policies that aimed to largely strengthen the U.S.-Japan alliance and balance against China.

On the other hand, during the unprecedentedly short presidential election period, South Korean voters, who had been outraged by the political scandal surrounding President Park, opted for Moon Jae-in, the leader of the then-opposition party. However, President Moon and his administration had not necessarily shared the South Korean public's general opinions and sentiments regarding China and had kept their views throughout his term. Hence, regardless of deteriorating perceptions over China and dropping support for Beijing at the public level, South Korea under President Moon's leadership had sought to appease China and keep its distance from the United States. The <Table 1> below summarizes what this paper has discussed thus far.

<Table 1: Summary >

<table>
<tr><th></th><th>Japan</th><th>South Korea</th></tr>
<tr><td>Disputes with China</td><td>2010 territorial dispute and China's export control on rare earth</td><td>2016 THAAD dispute and China's economic retaliations</td></tr>
<tr><td>Country's Overall Threat perception</td><td colspan="2">Similarly High Threat Perceptions regarding China
(and North Korea)</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Domestic Politics</td><td colspan="2">Public's immense dissatisfaction with the ruling party
(DPJ in Japan, Saenuri Party in South Korea) and demands to replace the ruling party with an opposition party</td></tr>
<tr><td>DPJ's failures in policy and crisis management
→Inauguration of the second Abe administration</td><td>Political scandals and impeachment of President Park
→ Inauguration of the Moon administration</td></tr>
<tr><td>New Leadership's Perception & Policy regarding China</td><td>China as a Threat
(= Public Perception)
→ Balancing against China (and strengthening ties with the United States)</td><td>China as an Opportunity
(≠Public Perception)
→ Appeasement toward China (and keeping a distance from the United States)</td></tr>
</table>

Conclusion

This paper discussed why South Korea and Japan had developed strikingly contrasting policies toward China in the late 2010s, during the Moon-Abe period. According to the existing literature, which suggests that shared threat perception leads to converging policies or cooperation, Japan and South Korea should have developed similar line of foreign policies in this period. By the late 2010s, after having faced China's economic coercion respectively and witnessing increased provocations from North Korea, the two countries came to develop largely converging threat perceptions toward both China and North Korea. Nevertheless, Seoul and Tokyo had pursued strikingly different policies toward China despite the similar threat perception.

To solve this puzzle, the paper examined changes in public opinions, domestic political developments, and emergence of new leadership and their foreign policies around and after China's economic retaliation in both South Korea and Japan. Through these comparative case studies, the paper found that domestic political factors lay at the center of divergence in government policies despite the shared overall threat perceptions between the two countries. More specifically, the leadership changes in both countries resulting from public discontent and outrage with the failures of the previous governments had played a crucial role in their diverging policies toward China.

This paper mainly relied on sources such as pre-existing public opinion surveys, newspaper articles or government documents. Nevertheless, they may have limitations in capturing the full complexity of domestic political processes. Future research may address this problem by including interviews or new data especially to capture the party dynamics or conducting additional case studies to gain more insights on how domestic politics or party affiliation shapes foreign policy choice.

In addition, this paper has focused on the rapid rise of public wariness and threat perception over China in South Korea and Japan after China's economic retaliation, as these retaliations made Chinese economic coercion and hostile intention visibly evident to the general public. However, further research examining issues of a potential Taiwan contingency scenario and the geostrategic importance of Jeju Island and Okinawa in such a contingency case would be valuable as they might be important factors that would affect Seoul and Tokyo's threat perceptions.

Despite these limitations, this paper underscores the importance of domestic political processes in determining foreign policy choices. Indeed, considering the intensifying U.S.-China strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific region, understanding such domestic political dynamics in the regional states would become more important than ever. This is because these domestic political

elements may affect whether regional partners will cooperate or diverge in their policy coordination and ultimately influence future international relations environment.

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