

# Foreign Policy Dilemma in South Korean Democracy Challenge of Polarized and Politicized Public Opinion\*

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The paper empirically examines the extent to which the public's perceptions and preferences have been reflected in the official foreign policymaking process in Korea. Through this analysis, the paper discusses the relationship between democracy and foreign policy determinants, and highlights the problems that arise due to polarization of the public. The paper argues that the divided political *jinyoung nonri* (partisanship argument) within the country poses the biggest threat to Korean diplomacy, as the political polarization among both political elites and civic groups increasingly causes great restrictions in foreign policymaking. The paper demonstrates how these issues have been relevant in recent years by analyzing and comparing the foreign policy decision-making process in Korea during three diplomatic episodes: the Mad cow disease protests in 2008, opposition against the 'comfort women' agreement signed in 2015; and public debates about the deployment of THAAD Batteries since 2017. These cases demonstrate how Korean governments may be prohibited from pursuing foreign policies essential for its national interests and security due to domestic pressure from a polarized public, or promote unwise strategies based on misguided populism. In many ways, this emphasizes the need for a 'win-win' approach between the government and citizens through constructive conversations about Korea's foreign policy, especially because the public will continue to be more involved in the foreign policy decision-making process.

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Keywords: foreign policy dilemma in democratization, polarized and politicized public opinion

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<https://doi.org/10.21051/PS.2020.10.27.2.5>

\* The research is supported by the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF), NRF2017S1A3A2066657.

## I. Introduction

In the past, states acted as unitary actors to “change the behavior of other states and [adjust] their own activities to the international environment” (Modelski, 1962, 6). Naturally, domestic politics had less impact on the foreign policy decision-making process. However, the trends of globalization, democratization, and digitalization have made foreign policy relevant not only for states but also the general public. In response, civilian experts and advocacy groups have strengthened their input in the formulation and implementation of these decisions previously monopolized by the state. Consequently, officials that may have been unconcerned of domestic accountability now reflect public opinion in foreign policy more than ever before.

The issue is that public opinion may complicate diplomacy in democratic nations. For example, if the public opposes the negotiation results between countries, diplomatic compromises may be broken. In extreme cases, the public may demand the renegotiation or withdrawal from international agreements when driven by nationalism, regardless of whether these existing deals already serve the national interest.

This has been evident in Korea in recent decades. After democratization in the late 1980s, the civil society’s influence on foreign policy has gradually increased, which has made it an

important factor to include when examining the characteristics and development of Korean foreign policy. This is despite the fact that the nation continues to face external constraints given the geopolitical limitations of being surrounded by four powerful countries, the instability caused by North Korea, and tumultuous inter-Korean relations. Specifically, pressure on Seoul to ‘choose’ between either the US or China will grow as hegemonic competition intensifies. Resolving issues on the Korean peninsula will need a sustained strategy based on clear assessments of national interests. Public opinion may complicate further an already complex decision. While most people recognize the necessity of peaceful inter-Korean reunification, ROK-US alliance, and ROK-China strategic cooperation, the debate over approaches and policy priorities remains intense.

The progressive-conservative conflict has been a long-held problem in Korean society, but it has significantly worsened in recent years, and such conflicts have brought negative influence to diplomacy. Harsh words such as *bbalgaengi* (North Korean communist), *tochakwaegoo* (pro-Japanese collaborators during the colonial period time, now conflated with ultra-conservative), and ‘descendants of dictators’ have been frequently used not only in public discourse but also at the National Assembly. Such divides clearly affect the ability to form foreign policy as politicians worry about their reelection. Furthermore, shifts in foreign policy as a result of the election of the opposing party into power tends to feed back into polarization. For example,

any disagreement between Washington and Seoul on North Korea not only weakens the bilateral alliance but also worsens the existing division between the pro and anti-U.S. groups within South Korea.

In this context, this study aims to empirically reveal to what extent the public's perceptions and preferences have been reflected in the official foreign policymaking process in the history of democratization in Korea. The paper discusses why and how polarization has occurred in Korea and how it impacts the foreign policy decision process. The paper also specifically highlights the foreign policy dilemma that Korea faces.

This study argues that the divided political *jinyoung nonri* (partisanship argument) within the country poses the biggest threat to Korean diplomacy. In a realist world, foreign policy options should be objectively considered, laid out as broadly as possible, and thoroughly devised as a grand strategy from the perspective of national interest. But polarization among both elites and the general public has led to the self-confirmation of beliefs and increased demands for the foreign policy direction they desire that conforms with their needs. In this polarized environment, people unilaterally welcome any policy decision that favors the political party they support while harshly criticizing policies proposed by the opposing party. This imposes undue restrictions on officials' ability to conduct diplomacy as they base foreign policy decisions based on their political position or ideological preferences over national interest. Thus, this study

argues that extreme polarization causes great restrictions in foreign policymaking.

The study first looks at theoretical considerations on the effect of domestic factors in the foreign policymaking process. It illustrates why leaders in a democratic society, especially in the process of democratization, increase their responsiveness to popular preferences, and that this adds constraints on foreign policy. Second, the study discusses South Korea's foreign dilemma caused by polarized and politicized public opinion.

Third, the study examines three recent instances where Korean public opinion had a significant impact on her foreign policy to discuss what lessons could be learned from these experiences: i) The Mad cow disease protests in 2008; ii) opposition against the 'comfort women' agreement signed in 2015; and iii) public debates about the deployment of THAAD Batteries since 2017. All cases selected can be characterized as controversial diplomatic and security issues that have generated much debate throughout the conservative and progressive regimes. In other words, these examples have hindered Korea's diplomatic and security interests. In each case, after examining the national interest and the most rational foreign policy, the paper examines how and why public opinion nullified the proposed foreign policy.

Finally, the paper concludes by summarizing the findings and discussing its implications.

## II. Explaining Domestic Political Factors in Foreign Policy-making Process

Diplomacy serves as an official means of establishing the status and influence of a state. Realism, the dominant paradigm of post-war international politics, defines the state as a unitary actor pursuing national interest of power in the global arena. The monolithic actor assumption is central to the ‘billiard ball model’ of international relations. Similar to how an outside force dictates the direction and speed of a billiard ball, states’ foreign policy actions are determined by external situations and restrictions such as the international system and power structure, alliances and arms races. As a result, the model disregards domestic politics as secondary factors trapped in a ‘black box’ in a state’s foreign policy making process (Blarel and Paliwal 2019).

However, after the mid-1950s, research on ‘opening up the black box’ appeared in the field of foreign policy analysis (FPA), causing debate over the importance of domestic factors in foreign policy decisions. While some still disregarded domestic politics and foreign policy as irrelevant, others focused on the interconnectedness and these two factors. For this research agenda, internal factors such as history and culture, ethnicity, national belief system, economic development, political system, personality and character of the leader, interest groups,

and public opinion were deemed as important causes of foreign policy. In sum, domestic political explanations are those that include national characteristics rather than the relative power of a state in the international system (Fearon 1998).

In one of the earlier works that represent this approach, Richard Snyder, H.W. Bruck, and Burton Sapin (1954) argue that individual policymakers, working on behalf of the state, should be recognized as independent actors in the foreign policy decision-making process. But their explanation remains limited in explaining the overall impact the domestic audience has on foreign policy. James Rosenau (1966) classifies five variables that influence foreign policy, i.e. individual, role, government, society, and international systems, and incorporates domestic variables into foreign policy research. His study serves as a basis for the empirical generalization between state types and foreign policy, but has been criticized for attempting to establish a grand theory without a clear theoretical basis (Holsti 1987). Graham Allison (1962) uses the Cuban missile crisis to illuminate three models of foreign policy actions: the rational actor model defining the government as a unified, rational actor; the organizational process model that pinpoints existing organization's routines and standard operating procedures as crucial determinants in decision-making; and the bureaucratic model resulted by political bargaining among individual decision-makers that each hold different priorities and organizational positions.

Based on the theoretical foundations of these authors, recent scholarship has developed more specific theories on the relationship between domestic politics and international relations. First, scholars have argued that regime types matter and that the foreign policymaking process differs greatly in authoritarian and democratic states. Democratic states need to address various constraints due to political accountability and social pressure. This means that policy implementation in democratic regimes is sometimes ambiguous, inconsistent, and confused, but innovative and unlikely to fail. On the other hand, authoritarian leaders can conduct foreign policy more efficiently as they can make quick decisions and only have to convince a handful of elites involved in the decision-making process. An authoritative government faces little constraint from domestic groups and public opinion. Yet, in such a top-down system, there is a strong tendency to produce ‘yes men’ who unconditionally agree with the dictator’s desire. Accordingly, the lack of innovation is likely to increase foreign policy failure (Bayley 2005; Cantir and Kaarbo 2012).

Second, the scapegoat hypothesis or diversionary war theory argues that leaders choose an ‘adventurous’ foreign policy such as war when they face domestic political problems to divert public attention and hence strengthen the political position (Wilkenfeld 1980). This is particularly relevant for democratic leaders who, unlike their authoritarian counterparts, are unable to resolve domestic instability through force and internal

repression due to institutional constraints (Gelpi 1997).

Third, Robert Putnam analyzes international negotiations by dividing them into games at the international level (Level I) and the domestic level (Level II). In proceeding with the international level, the negotiating representative must first determine his or her country's position through a coordination of interests among all domestic stakeholders. The two-level game's core analytical concept is a win-set: a group of agreements that can obtain domestic ratification in international negotiations. Factors that determine the size of the win-set include the distribution of relative power, preferences, forms of ruling coalitions, political systems of each country, and strategies of negotiating representatives engaged in international negotiations (Putnam 1988). Disagreement within the nation correlates to the likelihood of negotiation.

Fourth, there are competing arguments on the impact of public opinion on foreign policy. Realists such as Hans Morgenthau, John Mearsheimer, George Kenna characterize public opinion as irrational and volatile, and thus easily manipulated by political leaders. They assert that policy makers should pursue rational choices that yield the best results: foreign policy should be made by responsible officials based on national interest and avoid the input of the incoherent public (Morgenthau 1978, Knecht and Weatherford 2006; Drezner 2008; Jentleson 2013).

Conversely, liberalists regard public opinion as relatively stable and consistent. They expound that public support

legitimizes the government within democracies (Flint 2015; Chan and Safran 2006). The more the country develops into a democratic society, the greater the influence of public opinion on foreign policy. Regarding the influence of public opinion on the foreign policy decision process, many previous studies have empirically verified the effect of public opinion on foreign policy (Hartley and Russett 1992; Sobel 2001). The primary mechanism through which public opinion affects foreign policy is through democratic accountability. Political leaders elected by election in democratic countries are obligated to collect public opinion as representatives of the people and reflect them in the decision process. The public opinion thus provides guidelines for policy-makers' policy direction and serves as a reason for favorably setting the terms of negotiations with other countries.

These studies make clear that domestic public opinion is an important factor that has a significant impact on foreign policy. They also highlight the potential dangers that democratic regimes face. Decision-makers in democratic countries who need to be aware of elections are bound to be sensitive to public opinion. Ensuring that their policies are supported by the public is not only crucial to retain power but also to ensure the legitimacy of the policy itself. This pressure causes domestic political dilemmas when the government pursues politics that are unpopular. On the one hand, policymakers may maintain their positions but will need to accept the repercussions and risk losing the next election. On the other hand, they may align their

policies with public opinion to solidify their domestic political support.

Both options have both international and domestic implications, particularly if it involves an already signed agreement. The former will allow a state to maintain an amicable relationship with the partner country and pursue national interests, but it could result in the leader losing the ensuing election. Meanwhile, the latter risks undermining the nation's relations with the partner state, but leaders can expect to increase their chances of reelection. However, there are also long-term issues with this option that leaders have to contend with. Even if they win the following election, deteriorating economic and political relations with the other state will harm national interests, which will eventually likely lead to public criticism. As officials cannot ensure both their political survival and foreign policy intended to maximize their national interests simultaneously through either option, this constitutes a genuine domestic political dilemma for foreign policy decision-making.

### III. South Korea's Foreign Policy Dilemma in Democratization

Reconciling democracy and security has always been a difficult task. Even Thucydides, author of the Peloponnesian

wars, pondered how citizen-dominated democracy would coexist with security policies that require confidentiality and agility (Park 2008). For Koreans, the dilemma of democracy and security logic stems from the authoritarian developmental state period in the 1970s. Prior to democratization, Koreans compromised their freedom and human rights for rapid economic growth and strengthened national security against North Korean threats. As Korean society became democratized, however, policymaking not only involved assessing security risks and diplomatic considerations but also entailed embracing the voices of individual citizens and civil society. As a result, foreign policymaking lacked a uniform direction and became a rather heavily debated process.

If Korea did not have to consider external pressures, it could freely debate a plethora of choices such as bandwagoning with the U.S. or China, passive hedging of neutrality, a collective solidarity strategy with other middle-power countries, and independent cooperation routes between the two Koreas. But Korea's policy options are severely limited due to historical, economic, and geopolitical reasons. In this context, some have advocated a strong national security system that should be excused from democratic scrutiny given the unstable international politics of the Korean Peninsula and the sensitive diplomatic and security issues that the nation faces. On the other hand, those that prioritize democracy assert that the security policy should be decided transparently through

democratic consensus. The debate has broader implications. Even mature democracies seldom disclose every aspect of foreign policy because it may unwittingly reveal their position and weaken their bargaining leverage. Diplomatic negotiations may also add to domestic polarization that cause severe societal division (Frankel 1963).

After the initial democratization process, the domestic elements of foreign policy became increasingly influential. Ideological or politicized perceptions have also clearly divided the Korean society, serving as a mechanism to polarize the people and the regime into progressive and conservative, or left and right. In the past, the authoritarian regime used anti-communist and '*bukpung* (northern wind)' logic to maintain social order and regime security. In contrast, today's ruling party, the so-called '*minjuhwa seryok* (democratization force),' has a strong will to control the anti-government voice as a '*chiril* (pro-Japanese)' frame. What has been worse is the fact that political leaders have not sought a solution to this problem, but rather have politicized the situation and made it into a partisan fight.

Through democratization, various pressure groups and interest groups were created, and civic movements were revitalized, and public opinion had a significant influence on policy decisions. Public opinion can not only change specific policies but fundamentally alter relationships for better or for worse. For example, the deaths of two middle school girls by US armored

vehicles in June 2002 spread anti-American sentiment nationwide and became a major driver of the election results at the end of that year; it was one of the reasons that Candidate Moo-Hyun Roh, who believed that the “biggest security threats in Asia were the United States and Japan” (Gates 2014), became president later that year.

Meanwhile, public opinion in Korea has often exacerbated the already dismal relationship with Japan. Relations between the two countries have suffered whenever nationalist sentiment over historical issues such as comfort women and forced labor and territorial disputes rises to the forefront, regardless of whether it is justified or not. Anti-Japanese sentiments among Koreans acts as a constraint that makes it impossible for politicians who are obliged to be aware of votes to make conciliatory gestures toward Japan.

It is natural for public opinion to influence foreign policy. But it can be dangerous when public opinion forces the government to promote foreign policy in a direction that is harmful to the country due to misguided sentiments nationalism or collectivism. It can also allow politicians or governments to promote wrong foreign policy by simply arguing that it reflected the will of the people. For example, when polling Koreans about some important agreements between the US and South Korea in 2013, many responded that they were unaware of those agreements. In the case of the Korea-U.S. agreement concerning the civil use of atomic energy made, only 1.8% of respondents said they knew

it, and 34% said they did not. In the case of redemption of Wartime Operational Control (WOC), 32.3% refused to answer, saying they did not know well about the issue (Kim et. al. 2013). The findings of these surveys raised concerns about how arbitrarily the government's foreign policy decisions are made by interpreting public opinion to their advantage. As democracy further blossoms in Korea, it becomes more important to understand how public opinion can influence foreign policy. The cases below examine recent diplomatic examples to discuss and analyze the negative impacts of a polarized South Korean society on its ability to conduct foreign policy and promote its national interests.

#### IV. Major Cases of Foreign Policy Dilemma in Korean Democratization

##### 1. 2008 Mad Cow Disease Wave and Candlelight Vigil

At the end of April 2008, the Lee Myung-bak administration allowed the opening of the US beef market. However, the so-called 'mad cow disease controversy' began to emerge as negotiations were signed to import beef from the United States

for '30 months or longer, including bones and intestines, and less than 30 months including most Special Risk Materials (SRM) parts.' Moreover, as misinformation and fake news about mad cow disease spread through internet media, the people who were angry with the government's negotiations started a large-scale candlelight vigil, calling out to abolish or renegotiate the hasty and humiliating negotiations that endanger their lives and health and disgrace national dignity (Kim 2008).

Although the chances of getting mad cow disease in humans are much lower than that of other daily risks, people had a distorted perception about getting mad cow disease. As a result, in late 2003, when a cow with mad cow disease was discovered in the United States, Korea stopped importing US beef. The Korea-US FTA negotiations, which began shortly after President Roh Moo-hyun came to power, did not reach an agreement because the US government demanded imports of beef as one of the prerequisites for signing the negotiations. A few years later, President Lee, who started his term in February 2008, promoted the FTA again, and in April of that year, he accepted the demands of the United States (Sheen 2008).

The government, which was in the process of negotiating with the United States in a situation where the mechanism of mad cow disease outbreak and its transition to humans was uncertain, emphasized that FTA ratification would be a shortcut to expanding its growth potential. Instead of trying to relieve people's anxiety, economic and diplomatic choices were

prioritized. In the event of continued refusal to import US beef, not only would the FTA agreement be unsuccessful, but trade friction with the US would also have been expected. As a result, whether Korea wanted it or not, the beef negotiations were inevitable. Of course, the government accepted mad cow disease as an acceptable risk based on scientifically investigated safety standards.

However, civilians questioned the scientific knowledge provided by the government and demanded abandonment of negotiations or renegotiation on the premise that a possibility of the spread of mad cow disease existed, although there was no solid basis in reality. Moreover, as the Internet and a handful of media sources continued to reproduce an unspecified sense of crisis, the people reacted with anger to the government's decision, saying that it had neglected the safety of its own people and made humiliating concessions to the United States. When the protests began, the government took a passive stance, conceding to stop imports only if a mad cow disease outbreak occurred.

The beginning of the conflict between the government and the public was unplanned. The candlelight protest was not initially planned, and it showed a different form of resistance from the previous public opposition and protests planned by professional civic groups and activists. However, the government cut off communication with its own people about the ignorance surrounding mad cow disease and instead tried to suppress the

protests by over-interpreting them as a conspiracy cooked up by opposition politicians. Meanwhile, professional progressive civic groups politically took advantage of this situation and began to put forward their anti-government agendas by placing the spotlight on US relations. Accordingly, as the candlelight vigil continued for more than 100 days, the focus of the protests expanded to other political issues such as education, opposition to privatization of public enterprises, the 'Grand Korea Canal Project,' and impeachment of the president. In the process, amid the conflict between the government and the people, the people's trust in the government collapsed and the political situation fell into great chaos. At that time, the ruling and opposition parties were unable to respond properly due to political conflict.

Ultimately, President Lee officially apologized to the public twice and promised to import only relatively safe beef for less than 30 months, excluding SRM, in further negotiations with the United States (Kim 2008). However, due to this incident, the government could not restore the people's trust in itself from the beginning of the regime until the end of the term. As a consequence of this incident, the Lee administration became more wary of the public's disapproval and it delayed the decision-making process on other key initiatives such as re-dispatching troops to Afghanistan, attempting to sign the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) with Japan, and constructing the Jeju Naval Base.

## 2. 2015 Comfort Women Agreement with Japan

The ‘comfort women (victims of Japan's wartime sexual slavery) agreement’ with Japan in December 2015 by the Park Geun-hye administration aimed to alleviate the most sensitive historical conflict and the largest pending issue between the two countries. With the conclusion of the comfort women agreement between the two countries, it was expected to enter the normalization phase, which had been in stalemate due to conflict over historical issues. However, contrary to expectations, after the agreement, the relationship between Korea and Japan worsened further.

The Park administration held high-level private consultations from around August 2014. These consultations resulted in the Korean government's withdrawal from its existing position that Japan should suggest a solution to the comfort women agreement problem. Instead, the Korean side proposed a set of conditions to Japan, seeking a bilateral agreement on these terms.

President Park's pursuit of negotiations with the aim of concluding the comfort women issue were driven by the comprehensive consideration of the ROK-US alliance and its economic dependence on Japan. As the conflict between Korea and Japan served as an obstacle in the Korea-US-Japan triangular alliance to check China, the U.S. had been encouraging the settlement of the comfort women issue whenever there was

a chance. Moreover, in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations between Korea and Japan by her father, the late President Park Chung-hee, in 1965, President Park had strong personal motivations to achieve an agreement on this issue within the year (Ward and Lay 2016).

When the two nations failed to reconcile their differences at the final bilateral meeting between the two sides held on December 15, 2015, the agreement that President Park sought seemed to be out of reach. However, two measures by South Korea appeared to prompt a change in the Japanese government's position. First, the Korean court ruled that the head of the Sankei Shimbun, who was handed over to trial on charges of defamation after raising suspicion of President Park's actions on the day of the Sewol ferry disaster, was ruled innocent. Second, the Constitutional Court dismissed the Constitutional Complaint related to the Korea-Japan Claims Settlement Agreement.

Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida visited Korea as a special envoy on the comfort women issue. The Japanese government demanded that the deal should be a 'final and irreversible resolution' or 'complete seal' on the problem. On December 28, the foreign ministers of the two countries declared that the issue of comfort women between Korea and Japan had been resolved, and President Park and Prime Minister Abe confirmed the agreement by phone. In July of the following year, the

Japanese government established the Reconciliation and Healing Foundation, which provided 1 billion yen to care for the surviving victims (Panda 2017).

This agreement was evaluated as the largest political compromise that could have been achieved in a situation where Korea and Japan held starkly opposing viewpoints. In addition, it was recognized as a diplomatic achievement that would solidify and strengthen the triangular alliance structure between Korea–US–Japan. Indeed, senior officials at the US State Department said that the agreement opened a new chapter in Korea–Japan relations.

However, contrary to what the governments of both Korea and Japan had expected, this agreement aggravated the problem rather than finally solving it. One issue was the question of the legal effect of the agreement. The consistent demands of the victims were for Japan to take legal responsibility, but as the conflict between the two countries continued, the Japanese government only offered to take moral responsibility. In 1995, there was an ‘Asian Women’s Fund’ established by the Japanese government to pay compensation to comfort women in Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia and the Netherlands (Haruki 2008). However, in the apology letter issued in the name of the Prime Minister of Japan, only moral responsibility was mentioned, so many angered Korean victims refused to receive money from the fund.

In the December 2015 agreement, the Japanese government

only used the word ‘responsibility’ without the modifier ‘moral.’ This, of course, did not mean that the Japanese government would take ‘legal’ responsibility. The only thing that changed was that it would significantly increase the size of the fund for victims of comfort women. Immediately after this agreement, Prime Minister Abe emphasized that the comfort women issue was ‘completely and finally settled’ in a telephone conference with President Park (Panda 2017).

What became more problematic was the agreement that the victims’ opinions had been excluded. Japan’s coercion against comfort women was denied, no apology was made, and 1 billion yen was paid in the form of rewards or funds rather than compensation. As comfort women victims and civil society raised strong opposition, public opinion backlash emerged as a major obstacle to improving bilateral relations. Foreign Minister Yun Byeong-se stressed that negotiations were the best result and that renegotiation was not necessary. Despite these statements, Korean public opinion only worsened.

President Park was unable to persuade the victims and civil society groups to endorse the results of the negotiations, and their antipathy towards Japan extended further towards the Park administration. Eventually, the domestic conflict between the government and civil society over the comfort women issue grew, and this caused the ‘two-level security/diplomacy dilemma’ problem, worsening the relationship between Korea and Japan at the national level. Of course, there is no direct causal

relationship between the comfort women agreement and the impeachment of President Park, but it can be seen that this agreement served as a factor in the formation of the people's resistance to the government (Shin 2018).

One thing to mention here is that anti-Japanese nationalism, regardless of democratization, continues act as a underpinning factor of the Korean diplomatic dilemma. For instance, the Park Geun-hye administration in 2015 faced severe opposition and criticism from the public, similar to the 1963 Kim Jong-Pil-Ohira memo case, in which the normalization of diplomatic relations between Korea and Japan was delayed by two years due to opposition from public opinion until finally being made by US intervention in 1965. While the political system had changed from authoritarianism to democracy, the Korean public's dissent against Japan thus remained to be a 'constant' element.

In July 2019, the Moon Jae-in administration created a Task Force related to the comfort women agreement and conducted an internal review. As a result, although it was difficult to officially cancel or renegotiate the official agreement between the two countries, the Reconciliation and Healing Foundation, which was created as a result of the agreement with Japan, was unilaterally dissolved. These measures were no different from declaring the 'virtual abolition' of the comfort women negotiations. In response, the Japanese government accused Korea of not acting responsibly. In addition, there has been a growing backlash among Japanese citizens that Korea is

continuing to break the laws agreed between the two countries in relation to comfort women and forced labor issues. Moreover, in Japan, the negative perception of “enough is enough” is expanding as voices say that no matter how much they make concessions, Koreans’ excessive obsession with the past will not solve the historical problems of both countries (Glosserman 2020).

This case illustrates the unintended consequences of erroneous negotiations in Korea–Japan relations where emotions, ideas, and domestic political factors are prominent (Shin 2018). The influence of diplomatic negotiations between the two governments on domestic social structure should have been properly reviewed. In other words, during negotiations, the Korean government should have always considered the risk of compromising public favor without Japan’s acknowledgement of its legal responsibility.

### 3. 2016–2017 Deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD)

The issue of THAAD deployment first became controversial in June 2014 as General Curtis Scaparrotti, Commander USFK/CFC/UNC, recommended it to Korea. In March 2015, the Blue House announced the position of the ‘three nos’ (no request, no consultation, no decision) related to THAAD.

However, when North Korea conducted its fourth nuclear test in January 2016, President Park announced in her New Year's address that she would consider deploying THAAD in accordance with security and national interests (ISDP 2017).

According to those who favor the deployment, North Korea's nuclear and missile threats are very serious, and a lower-level defense system against this threat alone cannot sufficiently respond. The introduction of THAAD can have a positive effect in the strategic aspect of suppressing the temptation of North Korea's nuclear preemptive strike and the conditions for a successful operation of a customized deterrence strategy (Kill Chain, KAMD) against North Korea (Chung 2015).

Meanwhile, opponents argue that THAAD's deployment in South Korea will increase military tensions in the region and worsen Korea-China relations as China believes it to be a part of the US's anti-Chinese 'siege strategy.' China opposed the incorporation of Korea into the United States' MD (missile defense) system through the deployment of THAAD. China was concerned that military exchanges between Korea, the United States and Japan were becoming active in accordance with MD's mutually integrated operation principle. This case was a setback to China's military strategy of the "minimization of US intervention and expansion of China's influence" in Asia. Accordingly, China may prepare other military responses to US pressure, sparking an arms race in Northeast Asia. On the economic front, the amount of trade between Korea and China

reached 300 billion dollars in 2014–2015 when the THAAD deployment was discussed which was significantly greater than the scale of trade with the US and Japan combined. The deterioration of economic relations between Korea and China due to the deployment of THAAD was thus viewed as a decision that would inevitably damage immensely the Korean economy and harm national interests (Woo 2015; Chung 2015).

Despite these claims that THAAD is for intercepting the ICBM of China and monitoring China's military activities, the burden of Korea on the cost of introducing THAAD, and the debate over the harmfulness of radar electromagnetic waves mostly appear to be untrue or somewhat exaggerated (Klingner 2015). Therefore, whether to deploy the weapon system should have been judged on the basis of objective facts on its impact on the security of South Korea, taking into consideration of whether or not North Korea's military aggression can be suppressed. Nevertheless, the dispute decisively divided the country into two camps.

Amidst the heated debate, the Korean government adopted an ambiguous stance between the United States and China, taking a full year to introduce and deploy THAAD. Such hesitation meant that Korea failed to gain the full trust of the United States. Meanwhile, the eventual deployment of the battery meant that it still had to deal with opposition and retaliation from China. China swiftly implemented various economic sanctions against Korea, such as the control of Chinese tourists or the targeted

crackdown on Korean companies in China, and has continued its economic retaliation over the past two years.

The deployment of THAAD was carried out continuously by both Park and Moon governments. After Park's impeachment, the first two THAAD launchers were installed in April 2017, but four additional launchers were deployed in September after President Moon took office. The problem that the two administrations faced in common is that the level of external military threats has been maintained or increased due to North Korea's continued nuclear and missile launches. The deployment of THAAD was a decision intended to further strengthen South Korea's deterrence against North Korea. However, sustained public opinion against THAAD and the resulting political tensions that continued to persist undermined the pursuit of these goals.

Those who opposed the deployment criticized the Park government's implementation of the THAAD security policy without a thorough analysis of the Chinese reaction or the regional security structure changes that occurred as a result of being incorporated into the US MD system. Critics held large-scale anti-government protests, claiming that despite the occurrence of new external threats, the government refused to lend an ear to the public opinion. The massive candlelight vigil against the placement of THAAD eventually led to a demonstration of impeachment against President Park.

In comparison, in the case of the Moon administration, unlike Park's, the issue of public acceptance related to the deployment

of THAAD did not stand out much. The THAAD debate was active from May 10, 2017, when Moon Jae-in was elected president, until October 31, 2017, when a consultation to improve relations to alleviate the ‘THAAD conflict’ between Korea and China was announced. It should be noted here that concerns about the harm of radar by local residents were still there, and the friction with China intensified (Kim 2019). Although criticism arose that President Moon, who opposed the deployment of THAAD when he led the opposition party, had abandoned his pledge (Reif 2017), the deployment of THAAD proceeded in September 2017, without much controversy. But it nonetheless served as a reminder of the role of public opinion in foreign policy decision-making.

#### 4. Discussion<sup>1)</sup>

These three cases reveal various aspects of the diplomatic dilemma that the South Korean democracy faces. What all these cases have in common is that key national interests that may have been achieved through reasonable domestic discourse were undermined. In addition, lingering skepticism regarding international cooperation among the public continued to hinder the governments even after the agreements were announced. In

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1) The author wishes to thank Dr. Dong Joon Park at Institute for Conflict and Security Studies, The George Washington University, for his valuable comments.

each case, the Korean governments were compelled to either renege on parts of the international agreements due to public pressure or governments manipulated public sentiment to promote the policies that they wished to implement.

More specifically, five observations stand out when comparing how the Lee, Park, and Moon administration responded, respectively. Each observation shows interesting variations in relations between the executive branch of the government and the civil society as it conducted foreign policy.

First, during Lee Myung-bak administration, government preference initially seemed aligned with the public's preferences. The Lee administration followed the logic of security and diplomacy during private talks between the US and South Korea. However, the public's sensitivity on health security issues resulted in greater demands for the disclosure of information and transparent negotiations. Public turned against the deal when this information was revealed, and the resulting friction ended in Lee administration's involuntary defection of the US beef imports. Involuntary defection refers to the behavior of an agent who is unable to deliver on a promise due to failed domestic ratification (Putnam 1988, 438).

The Lee administration had to pay for high political and diplomatic costs. Internally, faced with the pressure for impeachment after three months in office, the administration had to soothe people's anger that entangled with anti-US sentiment. On the diplomatic front, it made the administration's task of

reaching an agreement with the US much harder now that the win-set had been drastically reduced. It also led to increased scrutiny of the administration's foreign policy decision-making which made it more reluctant to act swiftly on key decisions that needed to be made.

Second, the government's preferences conflicted with that of the public during Park Guen-hye administration. Similar to the Lee administration and its negotiations with the US, President Park worked with a reduced win-set due to the pervasive anti-Japanese sentiment and as a result, had increased risks of involuntary defection. As outlined in Putnam's two-level game theory, the win-set of the country is reduced (e.g. 'tying-hands' to narrow the possibility of reaching an agreement) and the win-set of the other country is expanded (e.g. reverberation to directly appeal to a rival state's domestic actors) to increase bargaining power (Putnam 1988). In that respect, the reduced win-set judged by President Park could have impacted the negotiations.

However, contrary to the Lee administration, President Park chose to prioritize its security and diplomacy imperatives. The administration's impetuous conclusion of the Comfort Woman Agreement with Japan led to the 'deliver-ability' problem (Putnam 1988, 439). The president and the senior officials received severe domestic political pressure, which, by extension, hindered negotiations on GSOMIA. In this regard, the Park administration should have acknowledged the pervasiveness of

anti-Japanese nationalism in Korean society and, accordingly, designed a prudent foreign policy model that respects the public sentiment.

Third, the Moon Jae-in administration's preference corresponded to the public's preference as far as the Comfort Woman Agreement is concerned. The Moon administration prioritized domestic pressure over *realpolitik*. The international outcome ended in voluntary defection of the Moon administration. The Japanese government criticized it for violating international law and imposed economic retaliation against Korea. Though the reputational costs were high, some politicians attempted to justify the executive's decisions and chose to adopt the anti-Japanese sentiment to further their political interests.

Fourth, the THAAD issue during the Park administration was a thorny issue that divided bureaucrats and the civic society. The government preference and the public preference collided as it had on the Comfort Woman Agreement case. The conservative administration continued to follow the logic of security and diplomacy. Citizen's resistance and rage were on the verge of explosion as they did in the Mad Cow Disease case. Part of the outrage can be attributed to the issue of health security sparked by concerns about exposure to the electromagnetic radiation from the system's radar. The Park administration should have learned from the experiences of the Lee administration and have realized that the public did not wish to compromise their safety

and welfare. China's economic retaliation only made matters worse. "A withdrawal of the THAAD" was one of the slogans that the people demanded during the impeachment protests.

Lastly, the Moon administration played the two-level game of the THAAD with political agility. The unfavorable conditions for the government remained unchanged: even the progressive Moon administration understood that it was necessary based on the logic of security and diplomacy even though it clearly conflicted with the preferences of the public. The Moon administration's sought to solve the immediate problem by making substantial efforts to improve the nation's relationship with China at the expense of U.S. concerns. It is worth noting that the public's resistance was relatively weaker compared to his predecessors, even though security environments on the Korean peninsula had worsened due to intensified U.S-China rivalry and North Korean nuclear threats. The main reason was that the balance of power between the citizens tilted toward liberal political views. As discussed above, the partisanship or ideology serves as bolstering individuals' attitude who tend to avoid cognitive dissonance. In a nutshell, in the case of the THAAD during the Moon administration, it seems that the pros and cons of the THHAD deployment becomes not a matter of the issue. Rather, it shows that cognitive biases can cause polarization among both elites and the public.

One more point to note here is that conservative regimes often make policies connecting security and diplomacy. As an

exception, the progressive Roh Moo-hyun administration also decided to dispatch troops to Iraq at the request of the United States despite public opinion. The U.S. intervention in Iraq sparked anti-war public opinion worldwide and led to candlelight protests in Korea: the Roh administration, nonetheless, participated in the war. This reflects the 'two-level security dilemma' or two-level diplomatic dilemma, which is explained by Glen Snyder's security dilemma theory. Snyder pinpoints the risk of abandonment and entrapment as two important mediators that realign an alliance and alter the exchange conditions between security and autonomy. He further argues that a strong relationship exists between the two factors and defines it as a security dilemma (Snyder 1984).

In dispatching troops to Iraq, President Roh prioritized resolving the risks of 'abandonment' related to the North Korean nuclear issue and took the risk of 'entrapment' by making a controversial move. Ultimately, his decision to dispatch troops resulted in the U.S. actively cooperating with the Six-Party Talks, leaning in favor of the Korean administration's agenda. Later, in his book titled *Destiny*, President Moon also described the dispatch to Iraq as a 'painful decision,' which was necessary for greater national interest (Moon 2011).

Drawing from these case, it is possible to deduce that the public cares greatly about how foreign policy decisions will affect their lives, specifically on the matter of health and welfare. Even when the diplomatic issue at hand appears not

related to these concerns, opponents of certain foreign policy decisions will reframe it as such to raise awareness. This means that the government should think broadly about how the decision might affect the public in unexpected ways to devise plans to assuage these concerns should they arise.

The aspect unique to Korean foreign policy and the impact its democracy has on international relations is its experience of authoritarian leadership. This has made the public particularly aware of secretive decisions made by the government, even if it is sometimes vital for successful diplomacy. A more responsive government should figure out ways to share its policies with the public when necessary. On the other hand, negotiators may consider using this sentiment to increase its leverage at the inter-state level also.

## V. Conclusion

This study has examined key foreign policy decisions in recent years to analyze the relationship between Korea's democracy and its foreign policy decision-making to highlight the foreign policy dilemma. Traditionally, it was considered that foreign policy research should be handled with variables and analysis methods that simplify and intentionally overlook

domestic political factors. It remains difficult to specifically quantify how much impact public opinion has on foreign policy, and as a consequence how much attention scholars should pay on this relationship. However, it is also undeniable that the connection between domestic and foreign politics of foreign policy is stronger than ever before, and that domestic political constraints should be included when explaining and analyzing important foreign policy decisions.

In the case of Korea, since democratization in 1987, civil society participation has expanded exponentially, and the policy-making process which was previously monopolized by the president and the prevailing administration has been greatly influenced by the general public. The continuing conflict between conservatives and progressives in Korean society after *Nordpolitik* (President Roh Tae-woo's Northern Policy that reached out to the former Soviet Union, China, and East European countries for diplomatic relationships) remains a key component of the foreign policy dilemma in Korea. Despite external challenges, however, there is a clear sense that governments should avoid the authoritarian policy-making process of the past and establish a diplomatic strategy that reflects the needs of civil society. Expertise on complex foreign policy issues are essential, but policies that are not checked by civil society can be contrary to the will of the people and can be used as an excuse to realize the interests of certain political forces (Kim 2008). In this respect, the expansion of the role of

public opinion in foreign policy is quite positive.

However, what this study has demonstrated through its analysis of the US beef import decision, the comfort women agreement, and the placement of THAAD, is that the diplomatic dilemma still remains at large, and when coupled with political polarization within the public can hinder the government's ability to pursue foreign policy initiatives that enhance national interests, either by delaying important decisions or by undermining the meaning of agreements reached. In all three cases, when choosing delicate or complicated diplomatic issues, policy makers prioritized domestic political positions or ideological preferences over decisions to enhance national interests and influence, thus failing to achieve satisfactory diplomatic results. If the trends of political and social polarization intensifies, the ideological logic of *jinyoung nonri* will dominate many areas, including diplomacy, in harmful ways as it prohibits healthy deliberations that strengthen a nation's actions in international politics.

Given the complexity of foreign policy issues that are closely related to national security, like the issue of THAAD deployment, policy makers with expertise and experience should make policy decisions in the direction that guarantees the greatest possible national interests. Yet on these issues, there is also the risk that politicians will mislead public opinion to acquire the outcomes they desire. Polarization may make this easier, as people become more likely to support a politician or

political party that it supports, and to criticize and oppose otherwise, without careful judgment on the importance or implications of a specific diplomatic issue.

A specific example of this latter concern was when the Moon administration decided to install additional THAAD equipment was brought in to replace obsolete equipment on May 29, 2020, Residents and anti-THAAD groups protested that the Moon government deployed the equipment by surprise without any communication to the public. However, opposition did not spread like it originally had when President Park first announced the deployment of this weapons system back in 2016. What this shows is that division within Korean society, which is becoming more and more polarized, is resulting in the support of policies based on party affiliation rather than the issue at hand. The tendency to unconditionally favor and protect on one side and blindly oppose and criticize the other has become clearer with the current Moon regime. Therefore, it seems that the controversy of the THAAD deployment is not a matter of the issue itself, but rather the people and party that make the decisions.

It is also noted that national pride has led many Koreans to express strong dissatisfaction over the asymmetric alliance with the United States and unresolved history issues with Japan. Accordingly, when a specific incident with either country breaks out, public opinion tends to lean towards anti-American and anti-Japanese sentiment. For example, the public backlash over

US beef imports in relation to the Korea–US FTA negotiations, as well as the public demand for the abolition of the Korea–Japan comfort women negotiations, were both not only characterized by anger against the government's unilateral decision, but also negative feelings toward these two countries.

Korea's anti–Japanese sentiment due to colonial experience has been aggravated by Dokdo, comfort women, and forced labor issues. In particular, in October 2018, the Supreme Court of Korea ruled that Japanese companies are liable for compensation for damages to victims of forced labor, and the Japanese government criticized it for violating international law and retaliated economically. The Korean government responded strongly with the possibility of withdrawal of the GSOMIA. The Korean people's antipathy toward Japan escalated into the ‘No Japan’ boycott of Japanese products. To make matters worse, certain politicians have increasingly exploited the pro–Japanese frame to politically link public opinion and gain political gains, including elections.

Relations between Korea and China are also facing difficulties since Korea deployed THAAD (high–altitude missile defense system) from the United States. China is taking widespread economic retaliatory measures such as a ban on the Korean Wave, boycott of certain corporate products, and control of Chinese tourists visiting Korea. Together with the ‘Northeast Project’ (Distortion of ancient Korean history through a Chinese–leaning lens), the THAAD incident continues to

negatively impact Koreans psychologically and materially. However, the reaction of the Korean government to China seems to have been completely different from its response to Japan. President Moon focused on Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to South Korea, anticipating the lifting of the THAAD retaliation and the role of China in the denuclearization of North Korea. Even when China's COVID-19 outbreak was serious, Korea did not restrict entry to Chinese citizens, prioritizing diplomatic relations with China. Of course, there is no evidence that a total blockade of Chinese entry would certainly have controlled the spread of the virus. Still, with China's emphasis on 'quarantine' rather than diplomacy, criticism was raised that President Moon placed more importance on relations with China. In addition, the government and the Blue House continued to make remarks that seemed to support China's position, further flaming public opinion that it was taking a submissive stance toward China. This shows that it is not only the conservative administrations that have to contend with this dilemma but also that polarization of the public affects the ability of the government to conduct foreign policy.

In conclusion, it is desirable for the state and civil society to have a reasonable system of checks and balances by maintaining a healthy level of public scrutiny which will undoubtedly result in more rational and constructive foreign policy decisions. To achieve this, however, it is necessary to overcome the difference between polarized views on both conservative and

progressive sides and establish a strategic compromise that both parties can reasonably accept, particularly on issues that are central to national interests and security. The government should listen to public opinion and promote diplomatic strategies based on the consent of civil society and are accountable domestically, but also policies even if they are unpopular in a sustainable manner that puts national interests and provides legitimacy externally.

What this requires is a national debate on the overall direction of Korea's foreign policy to establish a set of principles for the pursuit of national interests set through continuous dialogue between the government and its people, regardless of party affiliations. The government needs to engage the public based on the realization that the impact of foreign policy on the public has become more diverse and wide-spread. All cases in this study highlight the need for public consultation and deliberation before decisions are made and international agreements are signed. The dialogue cannot and should not be about the specific details of any one issue but about the general preferences of the public and the direction of foreign policy it desires. This should stimulate a process of mutual learning where not only the government better understands the needs of the people, but also where the public also learns about the art of compromise common in diplomacy. This will contribute to the establishment of foreign policy principles that are accountable, responsive, and legitimate, as well as resilient against public

pressure driven by emotional reactions based on nationalism. In many ways, ‘healthy’ and constructive conversations about Korea’s foreign policy are a ‘win-win’ approach between the government and citizens as the public will continue to be more involved in the foreign policy decision-making process.

투고일: 2020년 9월 20일  
심사일: 2020년 9월 21일  
게재확정일: 2020년 10월 19일

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## 한국 민주화 과정의 외교정책딜레마: 양분화-정치화된 여론

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본고는 한국의 민주화 과정에서 대중의 인식과 선호가 외교 정책 결정 과정에 어떠한 영향을 끼치는지 살펴보았다. 특히 한국 민주주의에서 점점 뚜렷해지는 여론의 양분화와 정치화가 외교정책의 딜레마로 이어진 대표적인 세 가지 사례, 즉 i) 2008년 광우병 파동과 촛불시위로 인한 한미협상 결과; ii) 2015년 한일 '위안부합의'에 대한 여론의 반대와 그 결과; 그리고 iii) 2017년 THAAD 배치와 그에 따른 중국과의 관계에 대한 상충되는 주장을 비교 고찰하였다. 이들 사례를 통해 살펴볼 수 있듯이, 정치화·양분화된 여론이 한국 외교에 점점 큰 위협이 되고 있다. 따라서 정치지도자는 국익에 근거한 엄격한 외교 정책원칙을 준수하며 불안정하고 자칫 감정에 치우칠 수 있는 여론에 휘둘리지 않는 인지적 분별력과 강단이 필요하다. 이와 동시에 민주적 책임을 진 지도자는 국민의 일상에 지대한 영향을 미칠 외교정책을 결정하기 전에 시민사회와의 '건설적인' 대화를 지속해야 한다. 대중적 또는 당파적 선호 때문에 쉽게 흔들리지 않는 책임감 있고, 반응하고, 합법적인 외교정책을 수립·이행하기 위해 정부는 여론을 존중하고 국민은 국익이 무엇인지 이해하고 우선시하는 상호 윈-윈(win-win) 접근이 중요하다.

주제어: 외교정책딜레마, 민주화, 양분화, 정치화 여론