

# The Great Transition of the International Peace Order in the Post-Cold War Era and the Future of South Korea

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Steven Pinker, a renowned psychologist and linguist at Harvard University, argues in his book *"The Better Angels of Our Nature (2011)"* that the history of the human species is a history towards peace. Human history suggests that violence has markedly been in decline and the world has evolved into a better place to live. Indeed, with the emergence of powerful sovereign states, individual violence has decreased, and the use of violence has tended to be limited within the public domain. Especially since the end of the Cold War, there has been no war amongst the superpowers and the death toll from inter-state conflicts and wars has dropped significantly compared to the past. On the other hand, civil wars frequently occurred in the Third World and it is difficult to say that the death toll from those civil wars has fallen substantially.

Was the 30 years of the Post-Cold War era, which began with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, truly peaceful? If so, was peace during this period intact? Civil wars are still causing many casualties in many parts of the world. With the growing U.S.-China strategic competition, it has been already years discussing the return of great power politics and geopolitics. The potential for military conflict within the disputed areas in Asia is on the rise. The so-called liberal international order, established by the liberal leaders of the United States in 1945, has expanded throughout the globe with the end of the Cold War. Has peace been fully created and sustained under the U.S. hegemony and the U.S.-led international order?

There is much controversy over whether the current international order is a peaceful order that fully carries out liberalism. It may not be so wrong to say so, if applied in a broad sense in which the liberal international order is distinguished from a system that resolves conflicts through the military power and maintains stability through the balance of power. The modern

sovereign state system, which started in Europe, is based on the so-called the organizing principle of anarchy that does not recognize authority above individual states, so the order is bound to be established by the state's power, especially the military power. The international order since 1945 goes beyond the simple balance-of-power politics to exhibit strong aspects of being driven by multilateralist agreements, norms and rules. It is also another new phenomenon in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century that the international institutions at a global and regional level have taken roots in various areas such as military, security, economy and social culture, and that the international organizations have gained power to regulate or organize the state actions. What is noteworthy is that such international order was not created solely by the superpower, the United States. In fact, it was the countries with the liberal democratic systems and those in the Free World that have stably institutionalized the international order through multilateral agreements in major areas such as international security and international economic order.

## **Liberal International Peace Order, Power Politics, and South Korea's National Interest**

The liberal international peace order does not necessarily weaken the power relationship. Rather, the United States' decision-making power as a hegemon with unequal power relations with other countries has become more institutionalized. The voices of the United States and other powerful nations overwhelmed those of the middle power and lesser power in the process of establishing and operating an international system. The United States, in particular, sometimes exercised the intermittent unilateralism or coercive hegemonistic policies that required more burdens on the other member states, because it could not cover the resources needed to maintain the liberal international order by itself. The liberal international order is based on the liberal ideology which values cooperation and compromise among the democratic countries, open trade order and coordinated financial order, integrated supply chain on top of the stable national security relations, but at the same time, it is also an order that operates through the power relations among the nations. Liberalism and realism are distinguished in the mainstream international political theory and they are at odds with each other in the debate over the liberal international order, but in reality, liberal realism or realist liberalism prevails in the

international community.

The global community is currently suffering from the civil wars that occur around the world, the widening gap between the rich and the poor in the wake of rapid globalization, the right-wing nationalism and chauvinism, populism and extreme nationalism. The long-kept international system of multilateralism has gradually lost its power, and the Trump administration of the United States has broken away from the U.S.-led global order on its own. It was the Covid-19 crisis that confirmed the weakened multilateralism. Amid the globalization, the coronavirus quickly crossed the borders, but the countries that were already in the midst of the anti-globalization wave closed their borders without hesitation. Above all, the United States and China are busy criticizing each other for undermining the fundamental norms of the liberal international order and are showing signs of returning to the balance of power system while they prioritize their own national interests. Rather than seeking to resolve conflicts based on the existing norms and principles, they are creating power struggle dynamics, bullying each other.

South Korea has shown a remarkable growth in joining the ranks of advanced nations from one of the poorest countries within just a few decades since the Korean War. Such achievement is based on the potential of Korean people, but at the same time, the fact that the economic growth and democratization have been achieved amid the U.S.-led liberal order cannot be overlooked. It is also true that South Korea now values the current liberal international order much more than the United States and has contributed greatly to the formation and maintenance of such order. The ideology that values open free trade order, the resolution of disputes based on the multilateral norms, the cooperative international order that does not depend on the power of the strong nations, and freedom and human rights are in line with South Korea's national interest and also with Korean people's identity.

## **The Limit of the Unipolar Peace Order**

The 9/11 terrorist attacks, the 2008 financial crisis, and the current Coronavirus crisis are hardly suggestive of the weakening of the liberal international peace order itself, since many states still want a stronger multilateralism. This leaves aside the question of how the post-Cold War liberalism went wrong, and what to do to create an evolving international order in the future.

It is hard to deny that the post-Cold War era was a time of the unipolar and hegemonic system led by the United States. The United States' overwhelming dominance in power had no parallel in human history, and it further strengthened its role as a provider of norms and public goods since 1945. However, the United States has pursued an aggressive liberal policy of establishing democratic regimes in the Middle East since the 9/11 attacks, pushed the globalization of neo-liberalism on its hegemonic economic basis, and, what's more, failed to exercise the necessary leadership in the event of global challenges like the Coronavirus crisis. Under the unipolar system in which the U.S. policy shapes the international political structure, the failure of the United States to create a new, far-sighted international order is causing major problems.

While it is true that a unipolar hegemonic power possesses enormous power compared to other states, it is not strong enough to present solutions to all the problems around the world. Power implies resources and means, but it ultimately depends on the ability to control the results of major international events. It is true that the United States possesses relatively enormous resources compared to other countries, but they are not enough to control the consequences of all the events around the world. Many nations in the world, as well as the United States, predicted the end of history resulting in the peace of unipolar world, the demise of wars, and the spread of democracy, but these expectations have come undone. A tighter, more inclusive and democratic international order should have been created to solve the mounting international problems.

## **The U.S.-China Strategic Competition and the New International Peace Order**

One of the most important variables defining the international peace order in the future is the strategic competition between the United States and China. However, the U.S.-China competition does not have a direct causal relationship with the weakening of the liberal international order, as witnessed over the 30 years of the post-Cold War era. The United States has pursued engagement or cooperative policies toward China since the early 1970s, and China has achieved a considerable success amid the U.S.-led liberal international order. If the current international order had resulted in a firmer liberal order without suffering from problems such

as civil wars, anti-globalization and the weakening of multilateralism, the cooperation between the United States and China may have been possible along with China's growth under the existing order. China is currently challenging the U.S. hegemony at a time when there is less room for a hegemon to flexibly embrace a rising power.

The key is whether China would deny the core values of the liberal international order: the resolution of conflicts through democracy, the emphasis on the human rights, the open and fair economic order, the multilateral system based on the principles, the restraint of the use of military force and the peaceful settlement of disputes. There needs a lot of checks and balances on China's policies if they are bound to shake the foundation of the liberal international peace order that has been put together by many countries in the world as well as the United States. However, it becomes a different story if China is expressing dissatisfaction with the U.S.-led order in the process of recognizing and internalizing the value of the liberal international order. The issue then becomes a matter of whether the upcoming international order will result in a stark confrontation of the balance of power between the superpowers or will further develop by mediating the disagreement while maintaining the existing international order.

Above all, the leadership and bilateral relations between the United States and China are of great importance. The existing theories of international politics such as Thucydides trap and power transition theory discuss the inevitability of conflict and confrontation between the hegemon and the challenging state. If the United State and China accept the assumption that the past history will be repeated in the future, they will have no choice but to prepare for a confrontation. The United States will try to restrain China before its power overtakes the U.S., and China will try to consolidate its powers and camps while weakening the existing order. Amidst the unclear trend of the U.S.-China power balance, the United States will strive to preoccupy the latest technology of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, which could become a game changer, and seize the victory in each field. The current confrontation between the Trump administration and the Xi Jinping administration is based on these assumptions. The Trump administration sees that China is a communist dictatorship, and that the nature of such a regime prescribes China's foreign policy. It is the logic of the New Cold War that the pressure of the United States and its allies on China should fundamentally change China. China, too, sees the U.S. offensive as a hostile policy to thwart China's growth and is confronting with an

offensive and extensive influence policy in order to maximize its influence as a major power.

If the history of the Cold War is to be repeated between the United State and China, the mankind will experience a fatal degeneration. The current two-way confrontation will become a confrontation between the two exclusive camps and the world will be divided into two. With both states promoting their own ideologies and identities, the space for coexistence will be reduced, the exchanges and cooperation beyond their own camps will be suspended, and the structure of military confrontation will be reinforced. If an armed conflict occurs in one of Asia's critical regions, the U.S.-China confrontation will quickly turn into a full-scale military confrontation. They may compete in proxy wars in various regions, seeking internal collapse with the aim of a complete victory over the other side. In the meantime, many problems facing the entire planet, including the environment, human rights and poverty, will worsen, and the future of mankind toward peace that Pinker mentioned earlier could end up as an empty talk.

## **Is Strategic Dilemma between the United States and China inevitable for South Korea?**

South Korea has cultivated a common identity of liberal democracy while maintaining its security alliance with the United States. At the same time, it has been in a strategic cooperation with China for the resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue and peace on the Korean Peninsula and has deepened the economic interdependence. Thus, South Korea is bound to be caught up in a tremendous ordeal in the new Cold War structure. It is also unlikely for North Korea to establish new relations with the U.S. in the short terms or achieve autonomous economic growth from China, all of which it hoped for at the 2018 Singapore Summit. Then, what should South Korea do to prevent the Korean Peninsula from becoming a venue for a showdown between the two superpowers?

Above all, the perspective limited to the Korean Peninsula should be turned to over the globe. South Korea's national interest and future are now linked to the peace order of the entire planet. We cannot afford to pursue the principle of "inter-Korea relations first" in a narrow sense. Rather, since the great powers have strong national power and policy means, they are bent on putting their own interests before the sound global order or peace. Yet the resulting

consequence is not so favorable to the great powers, either. South Korea is free from the excessive nationalism that is typical of a superpower. We must have a vision and logic for the future of the entire global order.

Second, South Korea is more sensitive and vulnerable to the U.S.-China competition than any other nation in the world. South Korea not only lies geographically between the two major powers, but also needs the U.S.-China cooperation on the issues where national fortunes are at stake. South Korea is an indicator state that can provide the guidelines as to how to deal with the U.S.-China relations for other states in the future. In dealing with the policy issues with an accurate vision between the U.S. and China, South Korea can become a standard for other nations, especially those suffering from the middle powers and the U.S.-China competition. It can demonstrate a middle-power leadership that brings together other states' powers.

Third, we need to anticipate the specific steps that will take place realistically in the U.S.-China rivalry and need to come up with a suitable alternative. There is no need to rush to talk about the strategic choices amid the U.S.-China rivalry and easily respond to premature pressure from both superpowers. It is important to maximize the policy measures that South Korea has and to secure room for maneuver.

Such a response is not enough with the government's efforts alone. The U.S.-China confrontation is a situation that entails enormous sacrifices and difficulties. Since South Korea has lived under the U.S. hegemony since 1945, it has no experience dealing with multiple great powers at the same time. While the government's leadership is of much importance, all citizens need to make efforts to acquire a high-quality diplomatic, strategic culture, minimize the sacrifices by sharing them, and pursue a long-term vision.

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