

# Xi Jinping's Geopolitical Framework for Northeast Asia

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When Xi Jinping's strategizing in East Asia is discussed, attention centers on the southern tier, stressing the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Policies toward Northeast Asia have been treated mostly as ad hoc responses to specific countries in shifting circumstances. The prospect that Xi has in recent years adjusted his overall approach toward this region has scarcely been explored. Unlike Southeast Asia, however, Northeast Asia is a geopolitical hotbed, with Russia and North Korea as military threats to the international community beyond any threats present to the south. At the same time, Japan and South Korea are U.S. military allies incomparably more significant than U.S. partners in Asia's south. Given the legacy of the Six-Party Talks, focus on the strategic battleground here would seem desirable in its own right and as a key indicator of Xi's evolving strategic thinking.

It is the thesis of this chapter that – whether a predictable outcome or an opportunistic revision – Xi Jinping has adjusted course in important respects at the end of the decade of the 2010s. If his approach to Northeast Asia in 2012 to 2016 is labeled Xi 1.0, then the approach he increasingly has taken from 2017 should be treated as Xi 2.0. Shifting direction, Xi has responded to changes in China's external environment as well as to challenges at home, beginning with new economic pressures. Abroad, he has faced the abrupt transformation in U.S. foreign policy under Donald Trump, the dramatic arrival on the diplomatic stage of Kim Jong-un, the intensified appeals by Vladimir Putin to boost bilateral relations toward an alliance, and the unexpected opportunity to find room to maneuver as Moon Jae-in and Abe Shinzo drove ROK-Japan relations to their nadir. Amending his policies in the face of these developments, Xi has, arguably, settled on a geopolitical framework not at odds with the core of Xi 1.0 or with the thrust of Chinese history from late imperial Sinocentrism to Mao's anti-imperialism. Doubling down on pressuring Moon at the same time as he is wooing Abe is emblematic of the dual nature of his new orientation. Also dualistic in nature is Xi's support for Kim Jong-un while claiming to back denuclearization.

In 2019-20, against the backdrop of Sino-U.S. geo-economic and geopolitical polarization, Xi Jinping has refined his approach to Northeast Asia. There were many steps along the way, and here I concentrate on those that followed two seminal events by mid-2019: the failure of the Trump-Kim Jong-un summit in Hanoi and the setback to Sino-U.S. trade talks finalized a few months later. By the time Trump and Xi Jinping met at the Osaka G20 at the end of June, Xi could have no doubt that the upbeat mood surrounding Trump the "dealmaker" cozying up to Kim Jong-un and him was a thing of the past. He needed to strategize about a new, adversarial environment. The question to be answered was would Xi be more unfettered without having to look over his shoulder at the U.S. response or would he see an opening to woo countries by taking a softer line when most were trying to avoid the polarization some may blame on Trump. Xi's summits with Abe and Moon on December 24 delivered a mixed message, while early in 2020 the accelerating impact of the coronavirus epidemic added an unexpected twist for China.

In 2019, Xi Jinping engaged in tests of new strategizing as he met with Vladimir Putin in early June to mark the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment by Moscow of diplomatic relations with the PRC, then with Kim Jong-un in Pyongyang at mid-month, and after that, with Abe Shinzo later in the month, in the resumption of normal summitry eschewed by Xi until 2018. Would he double down on relations with Russia, as Putin beckoned to more adamantly fight against the U.S.-led order, and with North Korea, in defiance of U.S. pressure despite Trump's dalliance with Kim, or would he woo Abe, taking a softer line in the hope of driving

a wedge between Japan and the U.S. over economic matters? Could he succeed in doing both, by assuming that China was indispensable to Russia and Japan at the same time that he positioned China to gain from Trump's failure with Kim Jong-un? Hanging in suspense was how Xi would deal with Moon Jae-in, desperate for Xi's support in restraining Kim Jong-un but also wary of risking Trump's ire by either pulling troops if burden-sharing payments were not raised exponentially or reverting to talk of "fire and fury."

## The International Relations Legacy Inherited by Xi Jinping

To the surprise of many, Xi is more the heir of imperial China's Sinocentrism and Mao Zedong's Sinocentric socialist ideology than of Deng Xiaoping's "reform and open door" worldview (at a pause in 1989-91) or Hu Jintao's first-term "harmonious world." The much-ballyhooed soft-line approach by Deng faced an uphill battle in the 1980s and was often eclipsed in the 1990s. The promising start by Hu proved halting, as in his oft-interrupted overtures to Japan, before Xi's ascent to the Political Standing Committee in late 2007 accompanied a hardening of policy. In Xi's worldview, as in late imperial China and Maoism, there is a strong ideological component, a deep sense of historical guidance, a powerful civilizational rationale, an intolerance of interference by societal forces in state control, and an abiding confidence in the righteousness of Sinocentrism.

Imperial China lurched toward xenophobia in the six centuries prior to the opening of Qing China by Western military forces.<sup>1</sup> Three dynasties were not remotely faithful to the humanistic traditions of Confucianism due to the following factors: suspicious outside forces, whether conquering minorities or peasant rebels; authoritarianism centered on an unchecked ruler wary of meritorious officials; alarm about external forces overthrowing the dynasty; and the spread of ideas incompatible with openness to outside influence. Chinese expansionism had peaked with the annexation of much of Central Asia, albeit without pressure for assimilation. Foreign trade was eschewed, as ports were closed to foreign ships. There was no openness to foreign thinking or publications.

The Maoist legacy drew also on Leninism and Stalinism in perceptions of imperialism and the inevitability of a new world order hostile to the West. Whereas the Soviet Union interpreted its ideology as hierarchical, with China destined to follow the country ahead on the path to the goal of communism, Mao appropriated the ideology to put China ahead, thus opening the door to Sinocentrism. Compromises with the Soviet Union in the 1950s, Japan in the 1960s, and even the United States in the 1970s did not signify abandonment of anti-imperialism or Sinocentrism. but means to those ends. Support for this legacy was tested over a third of a century between Mao's death and Xi's rise to the leadership elite, but two figures loomed as symbols of its hold: Nikita Khrushchev and Mikhail Gorbachev. Despite Deng's reform thrust, Khrushchev remained a villain whom reformers in the mid-80s could not succeed in rehabilitating, and Gorbachev has been demonized as a traitor for more than three decades.<sup>2</sup> Their purported failings start from domestic policies but are heavily associated with foreign policies at odds with the right legacy.

Xi has doubled down on symbols of the foreign policy legacy of imperial China and Maoism. If the obsession with Gorbachev's "treachery" (including on foreign policy) was already intense in the 1990s-2000s as the glorification of China's past was gaining prominence,

these themes soon gained unprecedented ideological significance, reverberating in foreign policy, notably toward Korea. Xi has turned China back to glorification of the Korean War fought to back the North and defeat the South, as if the South had no right to turn away from rightful subservience to China.<sup>3</sup>

## Xi 1.0

In dealings with Barack Obama, Abe Shinzo, Vladimir Putin, Kim Jong-un, and Park Geun-hye from 2012 to 2016, Xi had followed an agenda rather different from that emerging in the Trump era, especially in 2019. It could be summarized as: demarcate with the U.S. a separation of spheres of influence, gradually through summits and G2 negotiations; pressure Japan, a weaker, regional rival, against becoming an active, geopolitical force; welcome Russia, the resentful, regional outlier, not denying Russia's budding, regional framework; suppress a disruptive North Korea, through both trade ties and warnings, from disrupting Xi's regional plans; and blow hot and cold toward a vulnerable South Korea depending on its alignment in the U.S. alliance system. This approach could be simplified as: keep the U.S. engaged, Japan under pressure, Russia in tandem, North Korea isolated but beholden, and South Korea mindful. Under strain already in 2016, as ties with both Koreas worsened and U.S. and Japanese suspicions of China were mounting, China was busy forging a broader strategy through the BRI, even if its thrust proved much greater in Southeast and South Asia than in Northeast Asia. Yet, extending the BRI to Northeast Asia was increasingly on Xi's agenda, seen in policy shifts toward three countries. Russia, South Korea, and North Korea were on notice that they should soon accept its strictures.

In 2017, Xi Jinping faced new challenges which threatened his agenda. As a disrupter, Trump required special handling, leading to more flexibility to accommodate U.S. concerns over trade and North Korea even as the outcome remained uncertain. Provocations by Pyongyang led Washington to threaten "fire and fury," Tokyo to redouble its "proactive" defense role, and Seoul's new leader, Moon Jae-in, to pursue both tougher sanctions and Xi Jinping in order to get past China's acrimonious response to THAAD deployment in 2016. Xi adjusted by approving UN resolutions that gave sanctions a greater bite, while tightening his coordination with Putin, whose sympathetic relationship with Trump could have transformed Russo-U.S. relations but, ultimately, failed to overcome the worsening divide reminiscent of the Cold War. By 2018, the framework pursued by Xi during his first five-year term unmistakably demanded adjustment.

Xi Jinping's growing confidence in the mid-2010s could not be sustained in new circumstances. He was pushing harder: against Narendra Modi in India as Pakistan became the primary target in BRI, against Park as South Koreans grew alarmed at the North's nuclear weapons obsession, and even against Putin, who was dragging his feet on Sinocentric regionalism, while Obama and Abe were pushing back more actively. As Kim Jong-un raised his bellicosity to a new level and Xi agreed to put more pressure on him, a new environment took shape when Kim, encouraged by Moon Jae-in, shifted course. Diplomacy intensified – on North Korea as world leaders vied to meet with Kim Jong-un, and on trade, as the Trump obsession with deficits drove unilateral tariffs and bilateral talks under duress. Xi responded by improving ties with Kim Jong-un without removing pressure on him, and taking advantage of Japan and India's economic dependency on China. Limiting Moon Jae-in's options by getting him to promise the "Three Noes" on missile defense and ties to

Japan, Xi resisted critical U.S. trade demands and expected a U.S.-DPRK impasse to assert China's indispensable leadership. With his economy growing wobbly, Xi awaited Trump's moves, tightened ties to Putin, wooed Abe, and kept the pressure on Moon.

## Xi's Framework for Sino-U.S. Relations

China was shocked by the collapse of the Soviet Union, expecting more equidistance in the great power triangle as it rapidly boosted its comprehensive national power. It was alarmed by rising U.S. triumphalism and unilateralism in the 1990s and again in 2001, upset in particular that the U.S. was leaning on Japan to constrain China regionally. After 9/11 and notably in the second term of George W. Bush, China took satisfaction that the U.S. strategic focus had been diverted from East Asia, but its posture changed at the end of the decade and at the beginning of the 2010s before Xi was in command – however much he may, as a Standing Committee member when Hu Jintao was weakened, have pressed for the shift. More confident after the global financial crisis demonstrating the failings of the U.S. economy and U.S. world leadership and more concerned that a new president was turning U.S. attention back to East Asia, China adjusted its regional policy. Xi 1.0 reinforced the ongoing strategic shift toward boldness in facing Washington in North Korea and the South China Sea as well as in advancing a narrative about Chinese history and international relations more assertive than what had preceded.

China's narrative became more ideological – reasserting socialism versus capitalism, raising anti-hegemonism more emphatically as the modern version of anti-imperialism, and envisioning China as the center of an exclusive region while challenging the longstanding U.S. presence and recent deference to ASEAN centrality. As head of the Central Party School prior to assuming the top post, Xi pressed this more ideological approach. Historical narratives became polarized between an idealized Chinese past (ethnic harmony, no expansionism, benevolence toward neighboring states, etc.) and a demonized history of the West (obsessed with expanding state boundaries, racist toward those deemed to be different, fighting internecine wars, etc.).<sup>4</sup> The United States came to embody the worst of Western history, while Xi's China absorbed only the best of Chinese history. The implications for foreign policy were that China's neighbors should trust it as a rising power, while they ought to be alarmed by U.S. intentions in pivoting to Asia.

Document #9 issued in 2013 reflected the ideological and historical worldview embraced by Xi. Specifying seven perils, it separated China's course of development from that of the West, treating constitutional democracy as a scourge with only dangerous consequences for China, denouncing human rights and media independence as alien to China's national identity, and rejecting coverage of Chinese history including that of the Chinese Communist Party if it did not stick to hagiography. Xi's framework allowed no room for convergence even in economic ties, since a neoliberal market framework was seen as anathema, complicating further reforms.<sup>5</sup>

Xi's overtures to the U.S. were encapsulated in his proposal for a “new model of major power relations,” assumed to mean agreement on a dividing line across the Pacific separating two spheres of influence. Lower tolerance for U.S. alliances was reflected in greater assertiveness toward allies in East Asia. Yet, when the Trump administration increased the pressure on Xi, he both tried to alleviate the pressure and improved ties to states in all directions:

Russia, India, Japan, and North Korea, among them. Simultaneously, he was putting more pressure on Taiwan and maintaining pressure on South Korea, both of which were seen as challenging China – the one by rejecting “one country, two systems” and the other by allowing U.S. missile defenses on its territory. Neither was seen as sufficiently distant from the U.S. to warrant China’s overtures.

If in Xi 1.0 the emphasis was on working out a deal with Obama for a division of labor, in Xi 2.0 the focus shifted to carving out a path in Northeast Asia that would keep the U.S. at bay. More attention was put on extending BRI to the north and on solidifying alliance-like ties with Putin, steering Kim Jong-un into a partnership without him accepting ROK or U.S. overtures, upping the pressure on Moon Jae-in, and neutralizing Abe on economic matters. Trump’s pressure on Moon and Abe, his naivety on Kim Jong-un, and his incoherence on Putin, abetted Xi’s strategic moves.

## Xi’s Framework for Japan

Since 2017, under the weight of growing pessimism about Sino-U.S. relations, Xi has more energetically sought to open a divide between Japan and the U.S. Economically, this is eased by Japan’s concerns about U.S. protectionism and Japanese companies’ aspirations to join China in building infrastructure linked to BRI. Politically, this is more complicated, given Japan’s firm support for the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” initiative, which China saw as a counterattack on the BRI and the “community of common destiny,” and its refusal to treat Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Taiwan in a way China could accept (unlike Moon Jae-in’s silence on such sensitive issues, which the Chinese were able to twist to claim that Moon told Xi that these were China’s internal affairs).<sup>6</sup> Yet, Xi may be pressing to include certain wording in the “fifth political document” that he was seeking for a planned state visit to Japan in April, wording that would reflect on such a shared destiny or on support for a lifting of some sanctions on North Korea in order to recharge diplomacy. Japanese seem uninterested in going beyond the language of the fourth document of 2008, which more simply called for a “strategic, mutually beneficial” relationship. The fact that in Xi’s December meeting with Abe he raised issues that could lead to sensitive wording in a new political document shows further desire to drive a wedge in Japan-U.S. relations, going beyond gains through economic ties.

At the root of Xi’s approach to Japan is the assumption that no matter how committed it is to the alliance with the U.S. it is searching for more autonomy, and there is no way to achieve that just through closer security ties to countries such as Australia and India.<sup>7</sup> Through overtures to Abe, Xi can forge closer economic ties and limit security challenges, but he will push for more, applying military pressure and coordinating with Russia, or even winking at North Korea’s deeds.

## Xi’s Framework for North Korea and South Korea

Before Xi took charge in 2012, Chinese were instructed to view China’s foreign policy as reactive, responding to Obama’s policies such as the “rebalance” to Asia. As Xi asserted his will, each neighbor became a target for triangular strategizing in order to limit U.S. success or to enable Sinocentrism. The idea that China was defensive faded. North Korea epitomized

the reactive state of foreign policy: treating its nuclear weapons as a U.S. problem, engaging in diplomacy as a favor to the U.S., and insisting China's aims were limited to prioritizing peace and stability – for example, preventing war or an exodus of refugees. There was much talk that the alliance on paper with the North was no longer operable. When Xi and Kim Jong-un did not meet for five years, this reinforced the impression that China prioritized denuclearization plus U.S. and ROK ties.

The underlying reasoning was that if U.S. ties to China stabilized, China's maneuvering in the triangle would be more cautious, but when tensions with Washington rose, China would act assertively, at times increasing pressure on the third party and at times trying to drive a wedge. Three low points in Sino-US relations, seen from China, were 1999-2001, 2010-12, and 2018-19. Early in the administrations of Bush, Obama, and Trump, China perceived itself as a subject of more targeting.

In the 1990s China was too eager for U.S. support to offer North Korea more than minimal aid, but when the ROK's Sunshine Policy brought diplomacy to the foreground, and Sino-U.S. ties hit a rough patch, China's ties to the North were boosted. A similar result followed from the periods starting in 2010 and 2018. The geopolitical framework prioritized North Korean stability and leverage in pressing the U.S. and South Korea to weaken their alliance over denuclearization. When it was convenient to keep Sino-U.S. relations on track, China could press the North to engage in diplomacy or impose sanctions on it after voting at the Security Council to keep them from getting too drastic while buying time for the North to increase its threat capacity and making sure it could survive.

Apart from viewing North Korea through the lens of great power relations, Chinese sought to shape it into a critical piece in Sinocentrism, both for its own sake and also to bring South Korea along. In the absence of North Korean economic opening and denuclearization, China gained a growing share of the North's trade, outmaneuvering South Korea. The North's options were narrowing in accord with China's patient strategy, given its significance for China's security, national identity, and even a regional economy. It serves four "bs": a buffer zone, a socialist "brother," a balance of power shift, and a border area vital to the prospects of China's Northeast provinces. Whereas in the 1980s U.S. hopes had rested on China disavowing its reckless behavior, leading to regime change, Sino-North Korea ties were expanding after stabilizing in the 1970s, despite the sense of betrayal in Pyongyang over first Sino-U.S. normalization and then Chinese reforms.

In the 1990s, with economic development the overwhelming priority, and with Pyongyang incensed over Beijing's normalization with Seoul, China kept a low profile in this relationship. U.S. ties were prioritized and, despite downslides at the start and middle of the decade, did not result in much movement toward the North. At the end of the decade, however, triangularity acquired importance. The Sunshine Policy raised the profile of the North, U.S. interest intensified, Sino-U.S. relations were troubled (more in Bush's opening months), and Sino-North Korean ties came alive. High-level visits resumed with diplomatic, economic, and national identity significance.

Xi holds Kim Jong-un on a short leash, keeping his economy on the edge while making sure that his regime can survive. If Xi truly prioritized denuclearization, economic pressure would be greater. If Xi really backed Kim's agenda, pressure would be reduced. As in the

case of Sino-Russian relations, the aim is to increase dependency on Beijing in order to strengthen Sinocentrism. In both cases, the partner is valued for its role in rolling back U.S. power, but that is insufficient for ambitions to expand Chinese power. To serve as a strategic buffer is just the starting point for North Korea's value. To limit threats to China's historical identity embracing brotherhood is another objective, reflecting not only the "honeymoon" in 1950-54 but also the socialist narrative later.

When Sino-North Korean relations soured, as in 2013, China kept the North's economy from reeling while refusing political contacts. As the North intensified its provocations against the warnings of China, relations reached their nadir in 2017 with Beijing agreeing to sanctions to the point of embargo. Yet, the turnabout in 2018-19 was remarkable. It revealed a calculus of managing diplomacy once it began, responding to a downturn in Sino-U.S. relations, and still keeping pressure on Kim by relaxing China's economic stranglehold only slowly.

Xi's interest in North Korea is based on at least three assumptions: 1) the U.S. is the main threat to China's national security and national identity; 2) North Korea is a valued ally critical to China's Sinocentric ambitions; and 3) the legacies of socialism and the Korean War demand that support for North Korea be sustained. Yet, as sporadically occurred from the 1960s, North Korea defied China's intentions, leading to measured pressure to alter the North's calculus without risking the North's survival. There was even doubt in the 1990s that China would rescue North Korea's economy under extreme duress, and in the 2000s that it still adhered to the "lips and teeth alliance." When Xi was on the Standing Committee from the end of the decade, economic ties were boosted and the valor of standing with the North in the Korean War was reaffirmed. This was neither unconditional support for an ally nor an open and direct rebuke to the United States, but it tilted the balance in China's policy toward enablement of North Korea's survival at a time of leadership transition in that country even after it had broken away from the Six-Party Talks.

Xi 1.0 gave the impression of tilting toward South Korea, increasing pressure on North Korea, and conveying the message that cooperation with the U.S. on denuclearization was agreeable. If Xi prioritized both peace and stability in Northeast Asia, and China's national development, then Kim Jong-un's refusal to satisfy China's interests and provocative behavior appeared to justify a tougher Chinese line. If in 2009-11, as in 1999-2001, tensions in Sino-U.S. relations may have led to a tilt toward North Korea (with a big step-up in visits) along with greater pressure on South Korea, the atmosphere during Xi's first years as party secretary favored a tilt away from the North. This was when Xi was hopeful about Obama's agreement to a "new model of major-power relations." Seeking to boost ties with Trump in 2017 and responding to Kim's rush to test nuclear capability, Xi did not shift back away from pressure. Only in 2018 did Xi 2.0 become manifest.

The new policy toward North Korea made clear that China would help address legitimate security and development concerns. It was reflected in repeated summits between Xi and Kim Jong-un and in indications of increased smuggling to aid the North in evading sanctions. China had changed in response to the following factors: Kim's switch to diplomacy; an impression that Trump's policy toward it had hardened (especially in a trade war); and, arguably, a different calculus of how to pursue Sinocentrism. It is not surprising that a more emboldened Xi Jinping would stand more firmly behind Kim Jong-un, but there were at least three caveats. First, Xi did not endorse Kim's pursuit of nuclear weapons, even if

this was secondary to other objectives. Second, Kim did not go for an “open door” with China or reforms in line with China’s guidance, although he encouraged Chinese tourism. Third, Xi’s resistance to Trump favored a “good neighbor” policy toward countries such as Japan, which would have seen a sharp turn toward North Korea as alarming. UN sanctions remained, calls continued for denuclearization, and Xi awaited Trump’s next move.

With Moon Jae-in as president and already willing to defer to China with his “Three Noes” of 2017, with his restraining military cooperation with the U.S. and Japan, and with his pursuit of diplomacy with Kim Jong-un along lines sought by Xi, conditions existed for boosting Sino-ROK relations. Xi had shunned Kim for years, had just approved tough UN sanctions, and had reason to drive a wedge between Moon and Abe given the hostile start to their relationship. Yet Xi chose to turn directly to Kim without coordinating with Moon, considering Beijing and Seoul at odds in their aspirations for Pyongyang. Moon was insufficiently deferential to Xi in how he approached Kim, while Xi was confident that he had ample cards to keep Moon and Kim apart and to press Moon when needed. This attitude found expression in December 2019 when Foreign Minister Wang Yi traveled to Seoul in advance of a trilateral summit with Abe and Moon and a possible trip by Xi to Seoul in the spring of 2020. China sought at least four things: 1) a fourth “no” driving a wedge between Seoul and Washington by promising not to deploy intermediate-range missiles on Korean soil (unnecessary since neither ally had that intention but reinforcing the point that China has the right to infringe on South Korean sovereignty in this manner); 2) support from Moon for triangular economic projects with Kim such as joint support for tourism, in place of North-South economic integration and insistence on wide-ranging sanctions with the U.S.; 3) a triangular FTA with China and Japan, which would be on the agenda at the December summit even if Moon and Abe were both wary of extending economic dependency on China, given how China has wielded informal sanctions against both for non-economic policies; and 4) increased high-tech cooperation, whether via acceptance of Huawei 5G in their countries or via transfer of the most advanced technology by firms such as Samsung electronics and Hyundai automobiles, if they do not want to risk their market shares inside China. The impact of Wang’s visit was a sign that Seoul could no longer assuage Beijing, which would step up pressure on a beleaguered Moon.

Chinese thinking about South Korea is revealed in a late-2019 article,<sup>8</sup> which indicates demands for bolstering relations and indirectly threatens what otherwise might happen. In the dialogue on the nuclear crisis, which makes Sino-ROK security relations urgent, especially in the face of the impasse in U.S.-North Korean talks, Moon aims to avoid regression on the peninsula and a new regional cold war. Implicit is the idea that China and South Korea will be on opposite sides since joint pressure on North Korea would hardly be called a cold war. Arguing that the two share an interest in achieving denuclearization through peaceful means and cooperating on behalf of regional peace and stability, the author alludes to the need to stop “maximum pressure” and to give Kim Jong-un what he requires to avoid renewal of a crisis atmosphere. Seoul is urged to further clarify that it is against U.S. alliances becoming more multilateral and will not participate in the U.S. missile defense system, as it already had done by eschewing a trilateral alliance with Japan. On the South China Sea, Seoul’s caution in supporting freedom of navigation, except in principle, is welcomed; yet it is warned not to take a public position that might lean toward the U.S.<sup>9</sup> and told that it is time to reach a consensus with China precisely on freedom of navigation, to increase mutual trust. Any sign of support for the position of Japan on the Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute

with China would show a lack of respect and lead, it is hinted, to retaliation. While the New Southern Policy aligns with the BRI, the author warns it is aimed at decreasing economic dependence on China and competing with China in Southeast Asian markets, as if those are dubious aims, and adds that domestic political change in Seoul may cause problems ahead.

The same article accuses Moon of rejecting China's repeated calls to work together to advance denuclearization by insisting on Seoul taking the lead and pursuing trilateralism with the U.S. This is seen as posing a test for the ROK-China security relationship already tested by THAAD. By equating the two, the author makes clear the intensity of China's opposition to how Moon has dealt with Kim Jong-un, adding that THAAD deployment seriously damaged popular Chinese support for relations and new antagonism could damage security cooperation over the long run. Deepening Sino-U.S. competition is forcing Seoul to choose, with security at the forefront. As for economics, the author also highlights linkages with security, under the shadow of a trade deficit and dependency giving China leverage, made more likely by declining trade complementarity.

Lack of trust is a favorite Chinese mantra: the U.S. is blamed for lack of U.S.-DPRK trust and South Korea is faulted for a deficit in Sino-ROK trust. Economic ties are seen as necessary but insufficient for trust; security cooperation is increasingly the touchstone for proving one's trust. Given the worsening situation in the region due to DPRK-U.S. and Sino-U.S. tension, the burden is on Seoul to prevent a new cold war by boosting security ties to Beijing. The opening of the diplomatic track with Pyongyang in 2018 was a game changer, not because denuclearization was in sight, but because China's main objective for Northeast Asia could now be openly pursued: the transformation of regional security with Washington under pressure and with Seoul beleaguered. Beijing has upped its pressure on Seoul: join in precluding a cold war (use of the term suggests that China will stand with North Korea) or face various kinds of pressure for failing to act. The time for strategic patience (into which the U.S. has receded and to which Seoul is inclined) has passed.

Chinese sources anticipate tough times. They distort U.S. policy toward North Korea, ignoring carrots and assuming sole reliance on sticks has aroused the North's dissatisfaction. No mention is made of what the North needs to do, only of how, since Hanoi, there is danger of a downward spiral, the prevention of which Seoul must assist by working with Beijing. The supposed purpose is denuclearization, deemed possible only by a process satisfactory to both Pyongyang and Beijing.

THAAD looms in Chinese writings as a foretaste of what could follow if Seoul does not make the right moves. After Xi Jinping's visit in 2014, Seoul did make the right moves for two years: joining the AIIB and sending Park Geun-hye to the victory day parade in 2015, but for another two years it did not, until the December 2017 visit to Beijing by Moon, which started a recovery, however limited, in ties. Bilateral trade well over \$300 billion with China's imports in excess of \$200 billion is now linked to security; the wrong choice could lead China to insist on narrowing its huge deficit and to cut back a massive flow of tourists to South Korea. This unbalanced trade cannot be sustained; Seoul must reject Trump's economic approach to China and open its markets more to Chinese industrial products.

Seoul could go astray in at least three ways, readers are told. It could take the wrong line on the denuclearization process, as it did in 2008, a result of conservative leadership at the time, after close Sino-ROK coordination had brought about the 2005 joint agreement —

held up as a model. Were a conservative president to succeed Moon — a “political shift” — China would not be so forgiving this time, is the message. Seoul also could cross a red line if it were to backtrack on the “Three Noes” of 2017 or agree to U.S. multilateral alliance or missile defense appeals. Warnings center on Chinese public opinion becoming aroused, as it still is years after the THAAD decision, with implications for national identity as well as security, which could lead to retaliation. New economic diversification could be construed as aimed at hurting China’s rise, e.g., the New Southern Policy boosting economic ties to Vietnam at China’s expense or linking to the FOIP in competition with the BRI. Despite approval for Moon’s role in facilitating the turn to diplomacy in 2018, Chinese fault him — almost as if he has committed another THAAD-like error — for how he has proceeded since then with North Korea. He had prioritized a three-way framework, excluding China and trying to put South Korea in the lead. The fact that Xi visited Pyongyang and not Seoul in 2019 is indicative of China’s reaction, insisting on a four-way framework with room for a six-way one.

The overall message is that if Seoul wants to resolve the North Korean issue it must work with Beijing. It must join in containing what is called the U.S. militarist policy through closer security ties to China aimed at what is called “peaceful resolution” of the matter. Whether the shift is seen as taking a balanced approach to China and the U.S. or not, it really points to new pressure aimed at Moon leaning toward Beijing and acting now to institutionalize relations before a conservative replaces him or, perhaps, a new U.S. president pressures Seoul in a manner different from Trump’s pressure. Essentially, it is up to Seoul if a new cold war lies ahead. Given warnings about U.S. cold war thinking — both under Obama and Trump, with more expected — Seoul is the country that will shape the future of Northeast Asia through its choice in the very near future. Its hopes in 2018 were an illusion, which irritated China, but now it risks serious retaliation if it makes the wrong moves. To avoid such responses, South Korea should boost security ties, accept China’s rise and the concept of a shared future, and no longer delay its choice. The time has come to forge strategic trust through policy shifts toward China, North Korea, and the U.S.

Xi Jinping’s strategy toward South Korea encompasses three dimensions more intensely than a few years back. In 2016 the economic dimension came to the fore with sanctions, and it remains important in the trade war with the United States. Already having led South Korea into a trap of high dependency, Xi appears intent to wield economic power to force technological transfers and integration. In 2019, Xi’s summit with Kim Jong-un and demands regarding missile systems point to new pressure on the security dimension, going beyond the pressure for “Three Noes” in 2017. Finally, the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of WWII, in 2020, brings history to the forefront, making it likely that more will be expected of Moon than Park’s attendance at the parade for the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary, especially if Kim Jong-un now plays a role in the proceedings.

Whether Xi makes a visit to Seoul conditional on demands or takes advantage of Trump’s calls for Moon to meet U.S. demands (against new North Korean provocations, for 5G controls, for participation in FOIP, or for bilateral issues that strained ties already in 2019), Xi can anticipate that the year 2020 will notably advance his strategy for South Korea. Trump is leaving not only the South adrift, but also Asia, with more urgent consequences in Northeast Asia, where North Korea may resume provocations and Moon has left the ROK isolated through an obsession with North Korea and a breakdown in ties with Japan—both without enduring benefits.<sup>10</sup>

## Xi's Framework for Russia

Prior to Xi 1.0, Sino-Russian relations were advancing over two decades without a breakthrough moment: Medvedev's presidency saw exploration of a "reset" with Obama, cross-border ties had not progressed as promised in joint agreements, and China remained discontent with the manner of Russia's hesitation and delays on Shanghai Cooperation Organization economic integration. A strong bond had been forged, but neither side appeared to be in a rush to raise it to the next level. Moscow was holding back on arms sales, angered by reverse engineering, and Beijing awaited a stronger commitment to the overall relationship, confident that it would have the upper hand.

Xi broke the logjam in 2013, taking into account Putin's antipathy to the West after his return to the presidency, and the susceptibility of Central Asian states to China's economic blandishments. Announcement of the Silk Road Economic Belt (centered on Central Asia, later expanded into the BRI, more southerly oriented) was a gamechanger. It put pressure on Putin that he did not resist. If Putin might have been hesitant in other circumstances, his decision to invade Crimea and start a war in the Donbas region made Russia more dependent on China. As energy linkages expanded, the challenge remained of docking the Eurasian Economic Union with the BRI. This proved hard despite upbeat language from both sides that relations had never been better. In Xi 1.0, upgraded ties with Russia proceeded on many fronts, but there was unease that the results did not suffice. Russians grumbled about lack of investment, Chinese about Russian barriers to opening borders.

Xi 2.0 has witnessed a major leap forward in Sino-Russian relations. It is seen in arms sales, talk of an alliance beyond anything seen earlier, and cross-border ties inclusive of China's assistance in large-scale industrial projects in the Russian Far East. Whereas earlier Russian policies toward Japan, India, and the South China Sea appeared out of sync with China's, the gap had narrowed. On security matters, coordination was increasing, opposed to the U.S. and its missile defenses in Asia. On economic matters, Russia's acceptance of the BRI was clearer. Moreover, as seen in the Chinese response to perceived U.S. interference in Hong Kong, warnings about U.S. behavior were overlapping more than before. Earlier misgivings were fading, especially on China's side.

It is in Xi's interest to convey an image of Sino-Russian solidarity.<sup>11</sup> That was lacking in the mid-2010s despite Putin's insistence that it existed after Russia was sanctioned over its aggression in Ukraine. Abe was wooing Putin to drive a wedge between Russia and China. There was talk of Putin wooing Kim Jong-un at a time when Xi was shunning him. Moon Jae-in came to power intent on swinging Putin behind ROK-DPRK-Russian economic triangularity distinct from Xi's approach. Even in the U.S., doubts were widespread about the strength of the Sino-Russian relationship. By late 2019, all such doubts had faded. Putin had rebuffed Abe, had coordinated closely with Xi on the Korean Peninsula, and had met many of Xi's concerns about bilateral relations. With Kim Jong-un on board in engaging in diplomacy and boosting ties to China and Putin agreeable to far greater regional coordination, the building blocks were in place for Xi's 2.0 strategy for Northeast Asia.

A key component of Xi's strategy is using economic integration for geopolitical objectives. For Russia, which through three decades had been wary of opening its Far East to China (refusing to build promised bridges, resisting Chinese workers despite a serious labor shortage, and limiting Chinese investments in many sectors) the essential revenue from oil

and gas pipelines to China loosened barriers to cross-border economic ties. For North Korea, Xi dangled the lure of closer economic ties through tourism and special economic zones (which would do little to undermine North Korea's tight social control) or policy changes that appeared increasingly possible even if denuclearization remained far off. For South Korea, as well as for Russia, great economic dependency on China was being leveraged more than before. In Northeast Asia, only Japan elicited different treatment since its level of economic dependency was lower and China's need for it was greater.

Chinese have long argued that Moscow must side with Beijing because the U.S. is bent on weakening it. But lately, taking note of Putin's intense hostility to the U.S. and blaming the U.S. even more for its treatment of Russia, Chinese have pressed for achieving the "community of common destiny" together. This means abandoning any hope of gaining leverage in the triangle with Beijing, recognizing Russia's weakness, and throwing in Moscow's lot with Beijing.

China published its white book on Arctic policy in January 2018, incorporating the "ice silk road" into BRI and raising its demands on Russia, and raising its demands for Hokkaido's ports in transit.<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusion

China's immediate challenges shifted over three decades, but it is unclear whether Xi 2.0 meant a new strategy or open acknowledgment of a persistent worldview. In the second half of the 1980s, the minimal aims were: to prevent Gorbachev's despised "new thinking" from leading to regional alignment between Washington and Moscow; to deny Japanese aspirations for regional leadership as a political and eventually a military great power; and to steer North Korea to a soft landing while preventing the contagion of South Korean democratization from spreading. Just a decade later China's urgent objectives had been adjusted: to tilt Russia toward China rather than the U.S., to balance Japan economically while besmirching it morally in the face of Japanese moves to reach breakthroughs with Russia and South Korea, and to keep North Korea afloat as it made South Korea economically dependent and kept it and the U.S. from blaming China for the North's nuclear and missile behavior. By the late 2000s, China was emboldened to strive for a more active role in shaping Northeast Asia: to solidify the Sino-Russian nexus at the expense of the U.S., to pressure Japan to accept China's political and territorial interests, and to readjust the balance on the Korean Peninsula through economic ties to the North and economic and national identity pressure on the South. These shifts can be seen as stages in the pursuit of Sinocentrism. Xi Jinping's influence was felt in the late 2000s, dominated in Xi 1.0, and intensified in Xi 2.0.

Xi found Putin a promising partner despite Putin's wariness about economic integration and the extension of China's influence in Central Asia. Putin's antipathy to the U.S., obsessive "turn to the East" but wariness of Japan and South Korea, and nostalgia for socialist national identity, all served Xi's interests well. It took time to outmaneuver Putin in order to bypass his priority for the Trans-Siberian Eurasian artery, to suck up Russian oil and gas at discount prices, to penetrate barriers to the Russian Far East, and to take satisfaction in Putin's maladroit diplomacy that left his claims of multipolarity in shambles in Northeast Asia. By the end of the 2010s Xi had Putin where he wanted him – economically dependent, in a quasi-alliance, and deferential on identity. Russia might still feign otherwise, but it would pose little problem to Xi 2.0 in Northeast Asia.

The Korean Peninsula demanded more work, as Kim Jong-un not only gave Xi leverage versus the U.S. but also resisted both the military stabilization and the economic openness sought by Xi. At the same time, even Moon's progressive government was too beholden to the U.S. and too tough on North Korea to suit Xi's strategy. The next moves were up to Kim and awaited resolution of the tensions between Moon and Trump, but Xi could dangle economic carrots before both men as he also kept alive sticks in the form of sanctions, both formal and informal. The peninsula at last had become the battleground sought by China, with troubled U.S.-ROK relations and the end to North Korea's isolation, although the uncertainty of U.S. moves left China in a watchful mood.

The Northeast Asia version of BRI faces hurdles: Kim Jong-un remains slow to open his border with China, Putin has only cautiously left the border with the Russian Far East ajar and agreed to China's secondary role in the Northern Sea Route, Moon Jae-in has so far defied Xi's pressure in his overtures to Kim Jong-un and priority for the ROK-U.S. alliance, and Abe Shinzo has given very conditional support to the southern BRI but not a northern variant. Xi's strategy seems more likely to lead to polarization with China, Russia, and North Korea on one side, and with assertiveness by the U.S. of triangularity with Japan and South Korea, than to the alignment Xi is seeking. The potential swing country is South Korea, facing increased pressure from both China and the U.S. Setting aside soft power and flexing intense pressure, Xi is revealing the essence of his approach. Yet, Xi is able to steer Chinese public opinion, toward Russia and of late somewhat toward Japan without boosting Japanese views of China, but against South Korea and the United States.<sup>13</sup>

India joined the SCO, Japan began to cooperate with the BRI, South Korea tried and failed with North Korea and turned to China for assistance, and North Korea relied more on China after its talks with the US led to an impasse. Given its strong relationship to Russia, China had improved its position in the Indo-Pacific under Xi 2.0. Yet it wanted more from each of these countries. Xi saw the Trump era as an opportunity, as neighboring states sought more autonomy or leverage in their dealings with the US. Xi was conditioning meetings on concessions. In the first part of 2020, as China struggled with the coronavirus hatched at home but spreading, and as Trump appeared to be preoccupied elsewhere, it was unclear if Xi 2.0 was gaining momentum or would be slowed.

## Endnotes

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