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[Korea's 60th Anniversary Special Contributions] Korean paradox: strong yet vulnerable

[Last in the series] In geopolitics, geography trumps culture.

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The paradox of South Korea is that it is both one of the strongest and also one of the most vulnerable countries in the world. How might Korea overcome this paradox?

The overwhelming strength of South Korea is in the economic field. There are many reasons for its success despite having had to fight for its survival, facing the constant threat of a North Korean invasion. South Korea undertook key land reform programs in 1945 and 1950 and in doing so created an economy that benefited both the elite and the masses.

After World War II, only the governments of South Korea and Singapore consciously studied the Japanese experience in detail, but the main outlines of the Japanese strategy were well understood by all four of the little dragons [Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Singapore]. They all knew that Japan began with labor-intensive industries and used the income from exports in this sector to purchase new equipment, while upgrading its training and technology in sectors where productivity gains would allow higher wages. They all saw the crucial role of government in guiding these changes. Having the Japanese model provided both the confidence that they, too, could succeed and a perspective on how to proceed.

Leadership was also a key factor. While South Korea is understandably questioning the legacy of Park Chung Hee it is also clear that a lot of its rapid growth took place under his stewardship.

The Korean economy grew at an average of 9.3 percent per annum during the period of his presidency from 1962 to 1979.

In hindsight, the rapid economic development of South Korea seems almost inevitable. But it is vital to remember how weak and vulnerable Korea seemed in the early years.

I was personally present and indeed fought for South Korea's cause when the republic was diplomatically weak and experienced one of its most humiliating diplomatic defeats. This happened at the summit meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement in Sri Lanka in 1976. As part of the Cold War competition, both South and North Korea sought membership in NAM. After protracted negotiations, both North and South Korea were to be admitted ... sequentially, in alphabetical order. The DPRK [North Korea] was admitted first. However, as soon as it was admitted, the North as a member immediately objected to South Korea's admission. When Singapore tried to protest loudly against this duplicity, a senior Tanzanian official who chaired the meeting refused to even allow Singapore to protest. Others tried to protest also and failed.

Fortunately, South Korea had the last laugh. The country that was refused entry into NAM became the second East Asian country to be admitted into the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development in 1996. The OECD does not really do that much, but admission into its ranks is nonetheless a global recognition that the country has arrived. Very few countries today can ever dream of being admitted into the OECD. The fact that South Korea was admitted was indeed a major accomplishment.

Similarly, South Korea's ability to become the second Asian country to host, in 1988, the prestigious Olympics was also a clear signal that the country has joined the first league in international rankings. The Games were a great success.

With all these international accomplishments, it is not surprising that South Korea is recognized as one of the strongest countries in the world. How then can it be perceived as one of the most vulnerable?

The meaning of this paradox may become clearer when one looks at

South Korea's most recent major international accomplishment: the election of Ban Ki-moon as the United Nations Secretary General in 2006. The UN made an excellent choice in choosing him, a brilliant and accomplished diplomat. However, having served as ambassador to the UN for over 10 years, I also know that permanent members of the UN Security Council have a firm policy of never electing UN secretaries general from strong countries, as a representative from a strong country could be less pliable to their dictates.

This international weakness of South Korea springs from the geopolitical constraints it faces. The Korean Peninsula, which was a geopolitical pawn for most of the 20th century, continues to be one even though the geopolitical context has changed significantly. Fortunately, all the great powers wanted stability on the Korean Peninsula. This allowed South Korea to enjoy rapid economic growth under a stable geopolitical architecture.

In the post-Cold War era the isolation of North Korea forced it to turn to desperate measures, including exploring the nuclear option.

There is no doubt that South Korea enjoys enormous respect and standing in Washington. Its success is also greatly admired. But it is also true that no great power puts the interest of its smaller ally ahead of its own interests. Indeed, the strategic concerns of small allies are often ignored. This was demonstrated clearly in 2002 when President Bush made his famous speech about the "axis of evil." Initially, he wanted to name three Islamic countries in this axis: Iran, Iraq and Syria, but he was advised to include a non-Islamic country. Hence, as an afterthought, North Korea was included in the axis of evil and Syria was dropped.

Someday, South Koreans should find out whether any policy maker in Washington seriously thought of the implications for South Korea when President Bush decided to mention North Korea. Did anyone say to him that he could endanger South Korea? It is likely that no one did. If so, it illustrates well how South Korea can become an inadvertent geopolitical pawn because the remark triggered a new

crisis on the Korean Peninsula without South Korea being consulted.

There is also no doubt that in the geopolitical contest between South and North Korea, South Korea is far more powerful. Many view North Korea as a potential failed state. Yet, with very few diplomatic cards, North Korea has often played its cards brilliantly and occasionally it has made Washington dance to its tune. This takes great skill. It is remarkable how the Bush administration, which adopted a belligerent attitude toward North Korea, began to realize that its only options were diplomatic after North Korea detonated a small nuclear device in 2006.

The new geopolitical contest developing in the world will be between China and the United States. So far, the recent positive trends in Sino-American relations have been beneficial to the Korean Peninsula. But there is a lot of wisdom contained in an ancient Sri Lankan proverb: "When the elephants fight, the grass suffers but when the elephants make love, the grass also suffers."

As the Korean Peninsula represents some valuable grass in the current geopolitical competition, it is vital for South Korea to pay careful attention to every twist and turn in the geopolitical games involving America, China, Japan and lately, Russia again. In the economic field, South Korea remains strong but in the geopolitical sphere, it remains vulnerable. The challenge for South Korea in the future is to manage this paradox.

South Korea will have to continue its recent record of skilled diplomacy as a new geopolitical game emerges. Fortunately, South Korea enjoys good relations with both Washington and Beijing. The good relationships enabled South Korea to pull one of its successful diplomatic coups: the simultaneous admission of China, Taiwan and Hong Kong during South Korea's chairmanship of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum in 1991. As an APEC senior official then, I remember being amazed that South Korea could accomplish this.

One of the cardinal rules of good diplomacy is that it is good to have a

maximum number of options. This should be one of South Korea's key goals to help compensate for its geopolitical vulnerability. Hence, despite the troubled history of Japan-Korea relations, it would be wise for South Korea to keep relations with Japan on an even keel. This creates an additional diplomatic option.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations provides another equally valuable diplomatic option.

Many Koreans are puzzled by Asean's diplomatic success and pay far less attention to Asean than they do to the European Union. In doing so, the Koreans fail to understand that Asean can be far more valuable to South Korea than the EU can be. The EU is an economic giant but it is a geopolitical dwarf. By contrast, Asean is an economic dwarf but a major geopolitical actor. Since South Korea's vulnerabilities are in the geopolitical and not the economic areas, Asean can be more useful to South Korea than the EU.

Asean's strength lies in its weakness which enables it to be seen as a nonthreatening partner by all major powers, including the U.S., China, India and Japan. Hence, all the major rising powers are happy that Asean provides the only credible diplomatic platform for all great powers to meet in the Asia-Pacific regions. China, clearly the most powerful skilled geopolitical actor in the world today, runs circles around the other great powers. One sign of its geopolitical competence was its early recognition of the strategic value of Asean. China became the first great power to propose, negotiate and conclude a free trade agreement with Asean - all in record time. South Korea could also try to match China's geopolitical record by working for an equally close relationship with Asean.

South Korea faces another geopolitical challenge. With its membership in the OECD, South Korea has also become a virtual member of the Western community.

This membership brings many global rewards but it also brings geopolitical risks. The geopolitical thinking in the West ignores one

major reality : We are reaching the end of the era of Western domination in history . There will be significant cultural pressures on South Korea to follow the Western lead on many geopolitical issues.

But in geopolitics, geography trumps culture. One of the delicate balancing acts that South Korea will have to manage is between the cultural pulls of the West and the geographical pulls of the East.

Despite these many challenges, I remain confident that South Korea will do well. By any standard, South Korea has emerged as one of the most successful countries of the world. South Korea's main challenge is to display the same exceptional skill in the geopolitical arena that it has demonstrated in the economic sphere.

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