

How Does South Korea Make Sense of the Rise of Illiberal China in East Asia Today?

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Abstract

This article aims to provide a reality check on how South Korea makes sense of today's China, more to the point, the rise of illiberal China, by looking at 1) the recent South Korean public's attitude toward China and 2) South Korean International Relations (IR) studies scholars' – focusing on middle power diplomacy scholarship – discussion on China. It appears clear that anti-China sentiment has recently and rapidly increased in South Korea, particularly among young people. Although South Korea-China bilateral incidents affect the South Korean public's attitude toward China on a daily basis, liberal young South Koreans' skepticism of Beijing's political illiberalism may further the distrust of China in South Korea in the longer term. It is likely that the anti-China sentiment informed by liberal values increasingly tells more on the discursive matrix of diplomacy

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and security in South Korea. In addition, this article points out that South Korean middle power diplomacy discourses, which tend to inform Seoul's strategic thinking and foreign policy, attempt to secure the existing U.S.-led liberal international order (LIO) in East Asia and beyond, seeing rising illiberal China as a challenger – perhaps, a threat – to the LIO. Both sites – the public's growing negative attitude toward illiberal China and middle power diplomacy talks in South Korea – reveal that not just material interests but (liberal) values gradually add more weight to South Korean society's stance and Seoul's strategic thinking toward China in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: South Korea, China, Liberal values, Sentiment, Discourse

1. Introduction

South Korea and China are close neighbors, geographically, culturally, and historically. Most of all, economically, according to a report by the Korea Institute for Industrial Economics and Trade, the value of South Korea's exports to China, on average, has been about \$140 billion annually for the past decade. In 2020, Korea's trade volume with China – exports and imports combined – was \$241.5 billion. It was about 25 percent of Korea's total trade. It was almost double of South Korea's trade volume with the U.S. (\$131.6 billion) and triple with Japan (\$71.1 billion).¹ In spite of the high level of economic interconnectedness, most South Koreans' trust toward China has yet to increase accordingly. Rather, as will be discussed later, more and more South Koreans perceive China unfavorably these days. No positive spill-over effect from economy to politics, culture, and society has happened so far.

This article aims to provide a reality check on how South Korea makes sense of today's China, more to the point, the rise of illiberal China, by looking at 1) the recent South Korean public's attitude toward China and 2) South Korean International Relations (IR) studies scholars' – focusing on middle power diplomacy scholarship – discussion on China. It appears clear that anti-China sentiment has recently and rapidly increased in South Korea, particularly among young people under the age of 40. Although South Korea-China bilateral incidents affect the South Korean public's attitude toward China on a daily basis, liberal young South Koreans' skepticism of Beijing's political illiberalism may further South Korea's

¹ Gyu-lee Lee, “‘Money or freedom’: Is South Korea safe from China's infiltration?” (September 8, 2021), visited date: October 15, 2021, 《*The Korea Times*》, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2021/09/120_315236.html.

distrust of China in the longer term. It is likely that the anti-China sentiment informed by liberal values increasingly tells more on the discursive matrix of diplomacy and security in South Korea.

In addition, this article points out that South Korean middle power diplomacy discourses, which tend to inform Seoul's strategic thinking and foreign policy, attempt to secure the existing U.S.-led liberal international order (LIO) in East Asia and beyond, seeing rising illiberal China as a challenger – perhaps, a threat – to the LIO. Both sites – the public's recent growing anti-China sentiment and middle power diplomacy talks in South Korea – reveal that not just material interests but (liberal) values gradually add more weight to South Korean society's stance and Seoul's strategic thinking toward China in the twenty-first century.

Methodologically, this article looks at two critical sites in which Seoul's foreign policy informs and is informed: the public's attitude and local IR studies. It is thus not exhaustive about all the South Korean understandings of China. Nonetheless, the above two sites matter in South Korea's foreign policy-making and policy-performing. Seoul's foreign policy cannot be effective without considering how the general public in South Korea rationally and emotionally perceive others in world politics. Plus, there has been a revolving door between IR community and policy-circles in South Korea. The South Korean IR community has been responsive to its state demands, and vice versa. Arguably, IR studies in South Korea has been a statecraft, and it is commonplace to see that IR scholars turn into policy makers.²

² Jungmin Seo & Young Chul Cho, "The emergence and evolution of International Relations studies in postcolonial South Korea" (online first, 2021), visited date: October 15, 2021, *Review of International Studies*, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/review-of-international-studies/article/abs/emergence-and-evolution-of-international-relations-studies-in-postcolonial-south-korea/6A6B1930B66928B587401B3436B77BB1>.

At this juncture, one caveat should be mentioned. Although emphasizing the importance of the public's attitude and IR community in the context of South Korea, this is not to say that there is a direct link between the public's attitude/IR studies and official foreign policy making/performing. Rather, it is argued that the public's attitude and IR studies can give us a strong sense of the discursive matrix within which foreign-policy talks are in operation. As Callahan noted, "rather than search for a clear unified foreign policy, it is more productive to analyze a range of views and catalog the possibilities are being discussed in China [South Korea in case of this article], noting both their negative and positive influences."³

As for the article's scope and normative orientation, this article is not about what China really is in East Asian IR but about how South Korea talks about China today. It thus attempts to read South Korean understandings of China, and not to include Chinese replies to them. The article's South Korean understandings of China are not necessarily right or wrong, or correct or incorrect. They should be seen as a snapshot of how South Korea perceives the rise of illiberal China in East Asia today. The article does not make a moral judgement on the snapshot which depicts China unfavorably, and it also rejects to be regarded as China-bashing.

In what follows, this article looks at various public surveys showing the South Korean public's growing unfavorable attitude toward rising illiberal China. Doing so points to a South Korea firm belief of liberal values which are a simmering and critical element quickening the anti-China sentiment in South Korea currently. The subsequent section explores the ways in which South Korean middle power diplomacy scholarship

³ William A. Callahan, "China's Strategic Futures: Debating the Post-American World Order," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (2012), p. 641.

perceives China, which is followed by their policy-oriented suggestions of how to deal with illiberal China. The last section summaries the key arguments, with a practical implication of them.

2. The interface between growing anti-China sentiment and liberal values in South Korea

Kolon Global Corporation, a South Korean local builder, planned to set up a 1.2 square kilometer ‘Korea-China Cultural Tourism Town’ in South Korea’s Kangwon province by 2022. To do this, the builder signed a MOU with the People’s Daily in China in 2018 and established a company for that purpose. It also received the approval of the Kangwon provincial government for the construction project. Yet, this project became a controversy after an online petition of ‘Scrap the Chinatown Construction in Kangwon’ had posted on the Blue House (Cheong Wa Dae; presidential house) website in 2021. As of April 26, 2021, the petition was signed by 660,000 people. The writer of the online petition said “[w]hy do we need to make a small China in Korea? The public do not understand why we should provide China’s cultural experience on our land, and we firmly oppose it”.⁴ S/he also said that “[i]t is time to confront China,” which keeps trying to steal our culture.”⁵ Since it got more than 200,000 signatures in a month, a relevant governmental body should provide an answer.

As for this controversy, the Kangwon provincial government provided

⁴ Ji-hye Shin, “Public opposes Chinatown in Gangwon province” (April 5, 2021), visited date: October 15, 2021, *The Korea Herald*, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20210405000769>.

⁵ Chan-kyong Park, “South Korea cancels Korea-China Culture Town project amid mounting anti-Chinese sentiment” (April 27, 2021), visited date: October 15, 2021, *The South China Morning Post*, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3131255/south-korea-cancels-korea-china-culture-town-project-amid>.

an explanation that “[i]t is a cultural tourism district that will feature a K-pop museum and a Korean Wave video display, enabling mutual cultural exchanges between the two countries [South Korea and China]”, and “it is not a Chinatown”.⁶ Plus, it was said that the People’s Daily is just a mere sponsor and not a direct investor. The provincial government and local builder maintained that the controversy was due to fake news, without seeing economic and other benefits to Kangwon people and South Korea. Despite the fact-correcting efforts by the local government, Kolon Global Corporation decided to cancel the Korea-China Cultural Tourism Town, saying that “[r]egardless of the truth and facts, we have no alternatives but pay heed to the voices of the 650,000 people who have signed the petition, because [South Korean] people are also clients who are no less important than foreign tourists”.⁷ The withdrawal of Korea-China Cultural Tourism Town project has been seen as one of multiple cases of showing mounting anti-China sentiment in South Korea today.⁸

Most of all, the growing anti-China sentiment in South Korea is clearly captured by recent public surveys. According to a joint survey in 2021 by the Korean newsmagazine SisaIN and the polling company Hankook Research,⁹ 58.1 percent of the 1,000 respondents called China ‘close to evil’, whereas only 4.5 percent said that it was ‘close to good’. Over 70

⁶ Michael Lee, “Don’t call it a Chinatown, Gangwon insists of project” (April 20, 2021), visited date: October 15, 2021, 《*Korea Joongang Daily*》, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2021/04/20/national/politics/Chinatown-Gangwon-petition/20210420192100294.html>.

⁷ Park, “South Korea cancels Korea-China Culture Town project amid mounting anti-Chinese sentiment.”

⁸ Hyun-woo Nam, “Anti-China sentiment growing in Korea” (April 28, 2021), visited date: October 15, 2021, 《*The Korea Times*》, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2021/04/120_307940.html.

⁹ Oh-sung Lee, “A group who hates everything about China, who is it? [in Korean]” (June 17, 2021), visited date: October 15, 2021, 《*SisaIN*》, <https://www.sisain.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=44821>.

percent of the respondents believed that China seeks hegemony in Asia and the world and China damages international law and order for the sake of their own interests. Only 8.4 percent of the respondents reckoned that China is contributing to peace in Asia and the world. Regardless of their ideological spectrum of either conservative or progressive, over 80 percent of the South Korean respondents had negative views of Beijing – the Chinese Communist Party.¹⁰

In the same year of 2021, the East Asia Institute and Genron NPD also conducted a survey of 1,000 South Korean adults. According to it, about 73.8 percent of the respondents had unfavorable views of China, which had increased by 14.4 percent from last year.¹¹ Only 10.7 percent said that they were favor of China, whereas 20 percent had favorable views of Japan. In addition, 61.8 percent of the respondents saw China as “a country posing military threats” to South Korea, which had been up 44.3 percent from last year. China has replaced Japan, the former colonizer, as the country seen least favorite in South Korea.

In October 2020, Pew Research Center released a report under the title of ‘Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries’, after conducting surveys of 14,276 people in the same year, in 14 developed economies. According to the report, 31 percent of the South Korean respondents were negative of China in 2002; yet, the negative view reached 75 percent in 2020, and only 24 percent of the respondents was favorable toward China. In addition, there has increased a negative

¹⁰ Oh-sung Lee, “Antipathy toward China, the opposite side of it is pro-U.S. [in Korean]” (July 12, 2021), visited date: October 15, 2021, 《SisaIN》, <https://www.sisain.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=45021>.

¹¹ Yonhap, “Koreans with unfavorable views of China rise sharply this year: survey” (September 28, 2021), visited date: October 15, 2021, 《The Korea Times》, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2021/09/120_316131.html.

evaluation of Chinese President Xi Jinping from 37 percent in 2014 to 83 percent in 2020. Most of all, Pew's report pointed out that South Korea is the only one country where younger people held more negative views toward China than elder generations, though negative views of China have increased in all other 14 advanced countries as well.¹² Likewise, the above survey by SisaIN and Hankook Research showed that 62.8 percent of the South Korean respondents aged between 18 and 29 said that China is close to 'an enemy', though the overall average of all ages was 49.1 percent.¹³

This tendency of young South Koreans' higher negativity toward China can also be found in a joint survey of 1000 people between the ages of 18 and 39, conducted by the daily newspaper Kukminilbo and the polling company Global Research in June 2021. This survey showed that 51.7 percent of the respondents were negative of China. This number is strikingly higher than that of Japan (31.2 percent) and that of North Korea (12.6 percent), both of which – the former colonizer and the security threat – often ranked as most unfavorable countries in the past.¹⁴

All the recent surveys above indicated that there has been a growing tendency of seeing China as the subject of negativity and distaste among South Koreans, particularly younger generations in the country. What are, then, the main causes of growing anti-China sentiment in South Korea

¹² Laura Silver, Kat Devlin & Christine Huang, "Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries" (October 6, 2020), visited date: October 15, 2021, 《*Pew Research Center*》, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries/>.

¹³ Sang-won Lee, "Why does the generation aged between 20 and 29 hate China so much? [in Korean]" (July 14, 2021), visited date: October 15, 2021, 《*SisaIN*》, <https://www.sisain.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=45025>.

¹⁴ Han-sol Park, "Young Koreans lash out at heavy-handed China" (August 26, 2021), visited date: October 15, 2021, 《*The Korea Times*》, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/culture/2021/10/135_314536.html.

today? Regarding this, Beijing's inept handling of COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan, fine-dust pollution, Chinese fishers working illegally in Korea's maritime territory, Chinese attempts at cultural appropriation of Hanbok (traditional Korean clothing), Kimchi (Korean fermented cabbage dish), and Samgyetang (Korean traditional chicken soup with ginseng), Beijing's economic retaliation of the installation of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) U.S. missile defense system in South Korea, China's Northeast Project of claiming Goguryeo (ancient Korean kingdom) as a part of Chinese history, and more bilateral events are often ascribed to.¹⁵ Indeed, all of these incidents are very plausible factors shaping South Koreans' negative views of China.

However, there is a simmering and more fundamental element quickening anti-China sentiment in South Korea today, that is, not just specific bilateral events but seemingly incompatible values between South Korea and China now. The values taken very seriously in South Korea, yet Beijing thoroughly rejects, is political liberalism such as democracy, human rights, and freedom. Although liberal values were imported from the West, they are not just Western but Korean in contemporary South Korea. Just as Confucian ethics constitutes the social fabric of Korean daily life, liberal values are central to South Koreans' mindsets of who we are, how we see the world, and what we ought to do. For an ordinary South Korean psyche, democracy and human rights are values/institutions achieved by the earlier generations' sweat and blood, which must be defended, cherished, and thrived. Imperfect though they may be, liberal values have

¹⁵ William Gallo, "In South Korea, Antagonism Toward China Is Growing" (April 20, 2021), visited date: October 15, 2021, 《VOA》, <https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific-south-korea-antagonism-toward-china-growing/6204814.html>; Nam, "Anti-China sentiment growing in Korea."

become nonnegotiable in South Korean society. It is almost impossible for South Koreans to abandon liberal values until the general public see a better alternative in reality. Especially for younger South Koreans, a liberal environment is regarded as their society's default and desirable social setting for decent human condition, and they thus tend to have "an inherent antipathy toward illiberal countries."¹⁶

An exemplary case is Beijing's iron-fist crackdown on the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong in 2019-20. In fact, Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement was not a first-hand bilateral issue between South Korea and China. Nonetheless, Beijing's harsh and combative ways of handling Hong Kongers' democratic demands increased concerns, negativity and distaste in South Korea, particularly among young people. This interface between growing anti-China sentiment and liberal values in South Korea is well featured in The Korean Times' recent three-part series reported in August and September, 2021.¹⁷

The following comments by young South Korean students in the news reports reveal that liberal values matters in assessing their giant neighbor, China, in East Asia. "How can a nation with such a track record [oppressing ethnic minorities within its borders and asserting its claims on the South China Sea by a non-diplomatic means] be considered a normal country in the present era?"¹⁸ Referring to Beijing's continuing crackdown in Hong

¹⁶ Sang-Hun Choe, "South Koreans Now Dislike China More Than They Dislike Japan" (April 20, 2021), visited date: October 15, 2021, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/20/world/asia/korea-china-election-young-voters.html>.

¹⁷ Park, "Young Koreans lash out at heavy-handed China"; Hyun-kyung Kang, "Don't mention 3T's: Confucius institutes engender academic freedom in Korea" (August 30, 2021), visited date: October 15, 2021, *The Korea Times*, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/culture/2021/09/703_314693.html; Lee, "'Money or freedom': Is South Korea safe from China's infiltration?"

¹⁸ Park, "Young Koreans lash out at heavy-handed China."

Kong, “China has paid no regard to maintaining the universally accepted values of freedom and human rights.”¹⁹ For younger South Koreans, as noted by Shambaugh, Xi Jinping and the CCP are “taking China backwards politically precisely at a time when it should be moving forward through increased freedom of expression, political participation, and civil society.”²⁰ In this sense, Chinese CCP has been endowed with dictatorial motivations, uncivilized tendencies, and all-too-often overbearing inclinations. Beijing – broadly speaking China – means anti-democracy.

Associated with the image of illiberal China, many South Koreans appear to be unsure about what kind of an international order China wants. They are suspicious of Xi Jinping’s ‘China dream’ in the twenty-first century, believing that China becomes assertive and overbearing in regional issues as it rises militarily and economically. Many South Koreans began raising the question of what it would be like to live under a greater influence of rising illiberal China in the near future. Is a China-formed, if not China-centered, regional order better than the current liberal international order for South Korea? What kind of values is today’s rising China – to be exact, the CCP – offering to domestic and international audiences? It would seem that most South Koreans do not want to live under illiberal China’s shadow, though they know that South Korea needs China for economic and North Korea-related reasons.²¹ In this political and social climate at home, Seoul feels more compelled to consider finding the right balance between the need and how to engage and trade with rising illiberal China and the need and how to secure the liberal values that shape

¹⁹ Park, “Young Koreans lash out at heavy-handed China.”

²⁰ David Shambaugh, *China’s Leader: From Mao to Now* (Oxford: Polity, 2021).

²¹ Young Chul Cho, “Rising China and International Respect: A Non-Chinese Asian Perspective from Below [in Chinese],” *Eurasian Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 6 (2019), pp. 39-46.

what It means to be (South) Korean today.

3. International Relations studies in South Korea, the U.S.-led liberal international order, and the rise of illiberal China

Due to South Korea's rapid political, economic, and cultural developments in the past few decades, middle power diplomacy (MPD) discourses have been getting more popular among IR scholars in South Korea. South Korean MPD discourses are inherently and mostly policy-oriented, focusing on providing Seoul with diplomatic ways of navigating the uncertainty and complexity in world politics today. Indeed, they have informed both progressive and conservative administrations' foreign thinking and policies, such as the Roh Moo-hyun administration's (2003–2008) "Northeast Asia Initiative," wherein South Korea is defined as a critical facilitator of international cooperation and the Lee Myung-bak administration's (2008–2013) "Global Korea" which positions South Korea as a significant middle power in international society. Plural ideas and policy suggestions regarding how middle power South Korea engages with the world have been made in the local IR studies, and these have varied in terms of research scope, contents of diplomacy, and application in practice.²² Nevertheless, there appears clear to be one shared belief-cum-goal in the South Korean MPD scholarship, that is, a robust and unconditional commitment to securing the current liberal international order (LIO), as follows:

²² Sook Jong Lee ed., *Transforming Global Governance with Middle Power Diplomacy: South Korea's Role in the 21st Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Jongryn Mo ed., *MIKTA, Middle Powers, and New Dynamics of Global Governance: The G20's Evolving Agenda* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

- “South Korea has emerged as a new middle power that plays a significant role in a wide range of important global issue areas and *supports liberal international order* with its leadership diplomacy.”²³
- “[F]rom experiences gained since Korea began pursuing a middle power diplomacy strategy in the late 2000s, we can draw some thoughts that can be useful to other middle powers. ... [M]iddle powers need to reconfigure alliances with great powers to *strengthen the liberal international order*.”²⁴
- “South Korea should *understand the aim and strategy of her foreign policy in the context of international liberal order*, and it is desirable for her to consolidate multidimensional solidarity with other democratic middle powers.”²⁵
- South Korea is necessary to “establish effective foreign policies that can *resist illiberal* autocracies while assimilating rising powers into the LIO” and “to invest in education, as a catalyst for integration, to *nurture liberal democratic identity and citizenship*.”²⁶
- The Moon Jae-In administration should realize that South Korea’s national interests can be secured with short-term efforts to address the North Korean nuclear problem and long-term efforts to *lay out*

²³ Jongryn Mo, “South Korea’s Middle Power Diplomacy: A Case of Growing Compatibility between Regional and Global Roles,” *International Journal*, Vol. 71 (2016), pp. 587-607.

²⁴ Sook Jong Lee & Hye Jung Suh, “South Korea’s Middle Power Roles: Implications to Emerging Middle Power,” in Sook-Jong Lee ed., *Transforming Global Governance with Middle Power Diplomacy: South Korea’s Role in the 21st Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 161-165.

²⁵ Sung Chul Jung, “The Retreat of Liberal World Order? Declining Global Hegemony, Middle Power Democracies, and a Rules-Based Order [in Korean],” *The Journal of Political Science & Communication*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2020), p. 142.

²⁶ Shin-wa Lee, “Is the Liberal International Order at Risk?: Causes and Remedies,” *The Korean Journal of Area Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (2019), p. 370.

*and construct a liberal regional order in Asia.*²⁷

- A middle power is defined as “a strategic concept, implying a particular style of diplomacy or characteristic of a national strategy backed by *a commitment to liberal values*”²⁸
- “In pursuing its global agendas, *a commitment to liberal international order* has been as important to Seoul as a desire to pursue national interests in global issue areas”²⁹

Given all these, South Korean MPD scholarship seems to take it for granted that protecting the existing LIO is a must for its country. It is believed that South Korea has become prosperous and successful politically, economically, and socially; South Korea has also benefitted under the LIO. With this belief, for MPD scholars in South Korea, it is self-evident that LIO is universal and beneficial for not just South Korea but all countries. The successful South Korean modernity today vindicates LIO’s universalness and goodness. Thus, South Korean MPD scholarship is willing to continue and reproduce the existing LIO; there appears to be no need to question its normative commitment to the LIO. Then, how does South Korean MPD scholarship tend to understand the existing LIO? In their book, *The Rise of Korean Leadership: Emerging Powers and International Order*, John Ikenberry and Jongryn Mo pronounced that:

Over the last 60 years, large parts of the world have operated within an American-led and Western-centered system of liberal

²⁷ Yul Sohn, “A Proposal for the South Korean New Administration’s Middle Power Diplomacy,” visited date: October 15, 2021, 《*JPI Research Series*》, <http://jpi.or.kr/?p=10849>.

²⁸ Yoshihide Soeya & Geun Lee, “The Middle-Power Challenge in East Asia: An Opportunity for Co-Operation between South Korea and Japan,” *Global Asia*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2014), p. 86.

²⁹ G. John Ikenberry & Jongryn Mo, *The Rise of Korean Leadership: Emerging Powers and International Order* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 13.

*international governance. It is a distinctive type of order, organized around open markets, multilateral institutions, cooperative security, alliance partnership, democratic solidarity, and American hegemonic leadership. It was based on a vision of a “one world” system of rules and institutions. ... It became the organizing logic of the wider global system. It was only in these last two decades that it has been possible to speak of a singular system of global governance.*³⁰

This is a shorthand for the ‘U.S.-led liberal hegemonic’ order.³¹ Based on this hegemonic and hierarchical order, South Korean MPD scholarship defines South Korea as an important middle power contributing to the maintenance of that order. South Korea thus should be “a good citizen” in the international society as “a responsible follower of global governance rules [largely written by the U.S. liberal hegemony],”³² and it “never attempt[s] to share or encroach upon the dominant U.S. structural power.”³³

Particularly for conservatives in South Korea, “South Korea [was] able to rise from the ashes of the Korean War and achieve an economic miracle over the past 70 years, [o]nly because of the strong U.S.-Korea alliance.”³⁴ The alliance thus is “a matter of survival to South Korea” against North

³⁰ G. John Ikenberry & Jongryn Mo, *The Rise of Korean Leadership: Emerging Powers and International Order*, p. 168.

³¹ John Ikenberry, *A World for Democracy: Liberal Internationalism and the Crises of Global Order* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).

³² Lee and Suh, “South Korea’s Middle Power Roles: Implications to Emerging Middle Power,” p. 163.

³³ Euikon Kim, “Korea’s Middle-Power Diplomacy in the 21st Century,” *Pacific Focus*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2015), p. 3.

³⁴ “China knows S. Korea is weakest link in U.S.’ Asia alliances,” (April 5, 2021), visited date: October 15, 2021, *The Chosunilbo*, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2021/04/05/2021040501484.html.

Korea and even rising illiberal China,³⁵ and the U.S. liberal hegemony is indispensable for South Korea's national security and interests. They often accuse the current Moon Jae-in administration, which is a progressive government, of being anti-U.S., anti-Japan, pro-China, and pro-North Korea. For instance, regarding the Moon administration, *The Chosunilbo*, a major conservative newspaper, produced editorials under the titles such as, "Gov't becomes craven lackey of N. Korean Dictatorship", "Korea must not kowtow to Chinese bullying", and "China knows S. Korea is weakest link in U.S.' Asia alliances".³⁶

Although South Korean progressives tend to guard against overdependence on the U.S. security guarantee, progressives and conservatives are alike in that both camps aim to secure the existing LIO. An exemplary case is the U.S.-ROK Leaders' Joint Statement after a summit between U.S. President Biden and South Korean President Moon in May 2021. According to the statement, "[t]he United States and the Republic of Korea oppose all activities that undermine, destabilize, or threaten the rules-based international order and commit to maintaining an inclusive, free, and open Indo-Pacific. ... As democracies that value pluralism and individual liberty, we share our intent to promote human rights and rule of law issues, both at home and abroad."³⁷ It is clear that

³⁵ "South Korea troop cut speculation grows after U.S. comments" (July 22, 2020), visited date: October 15, 2021, *The Japan Times*, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/07/22/asia-pacific/south-korea-troop-cut-us/>.

³⁶ Browsing Date: October 15, 2021, See: http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2021/03/25/2021032501675.html; http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2021/04/27/2021042701617.html; http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2021/04/05/2021040501484.html.

³⁷ "U.S.-ROK Leaders' Joint Statement" (May 21, 2021), Browsing Date: October 15, 2021, *The White House*, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/05/21/u-s-rok-leaders-joint-statement/>.

South Korean progressives seek to protect LIO against possible illiberal forces.

Moreover, despite its close economic and geographical connection with China, the Moon administration touched Beijing’s two sensitive issues – South China Sea and Taiwan – along with the U.S., in the way of showing its willing to continue the existing LIO. According to the statement, both the U.S. and South Korea “pledge to maintain peace and stability, lawful unimpeded commerce, and respect for international law, including freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea and beyond. President Biden and President Moon emphasize the importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.”³⁸

It seems clear that, regardless of their ideological spectrum, both conservative and progressive camps in South Korea share a security aim of protecting the existing LIO with the U.S. and other allies, the idea of which is also embedded in South Korean MPD scholarship. LIO is thus something seriously defended in the mindsets of South Korean elites and state people.

In terms of critical IR perspectives, although the LIO is believed to be essentially good and universally applicable for the entire world in the mainstream security studies and policy-circles, it is not a system of sovereign equals but a hierarchical system designed to benefit powerful few at the expense of many weaker others. Furthermore, LIO is normatively based on a clear dualism between the modern/universal/civilized “good liberal us” (i.e., the benign U.S. liberal hegemony and its good liberal allies) and the pre-modern/parochial/uncivilized “threatening illiberal them” (i.e., mostly non-Western illiberal others), which means that “us”

³⁸ “U.S.-ROK Leaders’ Joint Statement”.

is superior to “them” in every way. In this hierarchical dualism, we (“us”) are the superior, self-righteous reference point that should enlighten, civilize, or conquer the inferior “them”. The practical implication of this is that the illiberal “them” should be converted into the liberal “us” for their own good, or it is at least necessary for us to socialize them. If they refuse this liberal conversion/socialization as per our rules, they are regarded as dangerous and menacing, and they therefore must be conquered, contained, and censored by us. The logic of conquest/containment and conversion/socialization is a liberal’s oft-method of addressing illiberals in practice. Conquest and conversion are two sides of the same coin.³⁹

Indeed, such normative dualism followed by the logic of conquest and conversion appears to inform South Korean MDP scholarship’s – whose self-evident belief is to secure the existing U.S.-led LIO – suggestions of how middle power South Korea deals with rising illiberal China in international affairs, along with the LIO’s center, America. A few examples are as follows:

- “[A] pivotal middle power such as South Korea can be a crucial addition to the United States’ capabilities for maintaining its preponderance of power over the potential challenger, the PRC.”⁴⁰
- “Together with other like-minded middle powers, South Korea as a key regional ally of the United States can also act to persuade China to be a responsible member of the status quo system, by engaging

³⁹ Young Chul Cho & Yih-Jye Hwang, “Mainstream IR Theoretical Perspectives and Rising China Vis-À-Vis the West: The Logic of Conquest, Conversion and Socialisation,” *Journal of Chinese Political Science* Vol. 25 No. 2 (2020), pp.175-198.

⁴⁰ Woosang Kim, “Rising China, Pivotal Middle Power South Korea, and Alliance Transition Theory,” *International Area Studies Review*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (2015), p. 263.

substantially with China.”⁴¹

- Liberal powers like middle power South Korea “establish effective foreign policies that can resist illiberal autocracies while assimilating rising powers [China] into the LIO” and “make such powers [China and Russia] more admissible to the current hegemonic state, i.e. the U.S.”⁴²
- China “seek[s] to change the global status quo and overthrow many of the rules, norms, and values that are embedded in the LIO.”⁴³
- Regarding rising China and the changing trends of middle power’s China policy, “the common denominator for the national strategies and interests of [middle power] South Korea and [middle power] Japan is to maintain and strengthen a liberal international order through middle power co-operation”⁴⁴
- Middle power democracies in Asia and Europe cooperate for “peace through [LIO] order,”⁴⁵ especially when the Sino-U.S. strategic competition intensifies. Accordingly, it is desirable for South Korea to appreciate the aim and strategy of its foreign policy considering the LIO while striving to build multi-layered solidarity with other middle power democracies.
- Faced with many illiberal challenges, “the future of U.S.-led LIO ... will depend on whether the U.S. has [the] ability and will

⁴¹ Woosang Kim, “Rising China, Pivotal Middle Power South Korea, and Alliance Transition Theory.”

⁴² Lee, “Is the Liberal International Order at Risk?: Causes and Remedies,” p. 370.

⁴³ Lee, “Is the Liberal International Order at Risk?: Causes and Remedies,” p. 370.

⁴⁴ Soeya & Lee, “The Middle-Power Challenge in East Asia: An Opportunity for Co-Operation between South Korea and Japan,” p. 91.

⁴⁵ Jung, “The Retreat of Liberal World Order? Declining Global Hegemony, Middle Power Democracies, and a Rules-Based Order [in Korean],” p. 142.

continue to provide public goods, and whether the international community, centered on middle power countries in the [Indo-Pacific] region [such as South Korea], will support or solidarity for U.S. leadership.”⁴⁶

- “One [China] still dwells in the days of territorial invasion and conquest, and the other [America] is concerned more about the stability of international markets and preserving core principles, norms, and values of the liberal international order.”⁴⁷

All these policy suggestions are premised on the implicit idea that rising illiberal China is very likely to be a dissatisfied revisionist power, and the U.S. as a benign hegemon is to seek peace and stability in world politics. In this context, South Korean MPD discourses are in tune with the mainstream American IR thinking such as power transition theory and democratic peace thesis, in terms of a liberal actor’s ways of engaging with illiberal others. In South Korean MPD scholarship, the rise of illiberal China today is often depicted as not a trustworthy peer but a challenger (perhaps, a threat) to liberal peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific, though rhetorically expressing that South Korea should be on good terms with China for economic and security reasons. In the eyes of South Korea’s scholarly IR, the idea of whether one subscribes to political liberalism or not seems to serve as a demarcation between whom we fear and whom we align with.

⁴⁶ Shin-wha Lee & Jae Jeok Park, “The Liberal International Order in the Indo-Pacific in the Midst of U.S.-China Hegemonic Competition: Challenges and Prospects [in Korean],” *International Regional Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (2021), p. 250.

⁴⁷ Geun Lee, “A Tale of Two Hegemons” (May 14, 2021), visited date: October 15, 2021, 《*The Korea Times*》, https://www.koreati3mes.co.kr/www/opinion/2021/05/197_307137.html.

4. Conclusion

In recent years, anti-China sentiment is rapidly growing among in South Korea. Although anti-China sentiment is growing in other developed countries, South Korea is a rare exception that younger generations have more negative views of China than their older generations. It would appear that “anti-Chinese sentiment has taken its place as a dominant cultural code among the younger generation” in South Korea, which means that China has become “the subject of so much negativity and distaste.”⁴⁸

As a matter of fact, there are a couple of factors or incidents which have worsened the anti-China sentiment in South Korea, such as COVID-19, fine-dust pollution, Chinese illegal fishing in South Korea's waters, Chinese attempts at cultural appropriation of Korean clothing and food, Beijing's economic retaliation of the THAAD missile defense system in South Korea, China's Northeast Project of history, and so on.

Yet, there is a deeper and becoming-more-important sense of the South Korean public, that is, not tangible bilateral incidents but liberal values. For South Koreans, China is politically illiberal like North Korea, though it has accepted economic liberalism. What is more, it appears that China as a great power increasingly acts in illiberal and assertive ways, in cases of various domestic and international issues from Hong Kong to South China Sea. Beijing's politically illiberal practices at home and abroad remind most South Koreans of the dark times of their living under authoritarian military governments until the late 1980s. It is clear to South Koreans that a liberal Korean way of life is better, safer, and more humane than an

⁴⁸ Mun-young Cho, “Anti-China sentiment among younger Koreans” (September 2, 2021), visited date: October 15, 2021, 《*Hankyoreh*》, https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/english_editorials/1010239.html.

illiberal Chinese way of life. South Koreans have yet to see an alternative, more lively and better democratic vision of what a future society should be from contemporary China under the CCP. This sort of liberal orientation and inclination may, more and more, inform the ways in which the South Korean public see, feel, and understand Beijing's domestic and foreign behaviors in the years to come.

Along with the public's sentiment as a critical site in which high politics – security and diplomacy – is in operation, IR studies in South Korea is an important arena of low politics which often informs Seoul's foreign thinking and practice in East Asia. In South Korean IR studies, MPD knowledge production become popular and notable, producing policy suggestions to Seoul. Although South Korean MPD knowledge varies in many ways, they all seem to share one normative commitment – protecting the existing U.S.-led liberal international order. With this commitment in mind, explicitly or implicitly South Korean MPD knowledge see rising illiberal China as a revisionist and/or threat to international stability and South Korea's national security in the twenty-first century. For partly this reason, most South Korean MPD discourses, which are largely policy-oriented, seem to suggest the logic of conquest/containment and conversion/socialization, in order to secure the U.S.-led liberal international order seen as conducive to South Korea's security and development in the world.

For sure, various ongoing bilateral issues of high and low politics between South Korea and China keeps telling on Seoul's foreign thinking and deed toward China in the years to come. However, it is likely that the South Korean public's liberal-value-laden distrust of illiberal China

increasingly informs the discursive matrix of diplomacy and security among South Koreans. In other words, this article argues that not just material interests but (liberal) values gradually add more weight to South Korean society's stance and Seoul's strategic thinking toward China in the twenty-first century. Under this circumstance, Seoul feels more compelled to consider finding the right balance between the need and how to engage and trade with rising illiberal China and the need and how to secure the liberal values that shape what It means to be (South) Korean today.