

Hedging between the United States and China? South Korea's ideology-driven behavior and its implications for national security

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Abstract

Given the limits of the prevailing hedging account for Seoul's puzzling behavior that is in conformity with the interests of its adversary (i.e. North Korea) and potential threat (i.e. China) rather than those of its principal ally (i.e. the United States) and security cooperation partner (i.e. Japan), this article emphasizes the impact of the progressive ideology on Seoul's security policy. In doing so, it calls for attention to a domestic source of ideology in explaining the security behaviors of a secondary state, which is under-researched and thus is poorly understood.

1 Introduction

The Republic of Korea (ROK) or South Korea is a long-standing ally of the United States. The US–ROK alliance, since its founding, ‘has served as a lynchpin for security, stability, and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula, in the Asia Pacific region, and increasingly around the world’ (The White House, 2017). In recent years, however, South Korea has often behaved in a way that made the United States and Japan (America’s ally and South Korea’s security cooperation partner) distressed and rendered China (America’s strategic competitor) and North Korea (China’s ally and a major security threat for the United States, Japan, and South Korea) gratified. Examples of South Korea’s such behavior include its upholding of Pyongyang’s demands in US–North Korea nuclear negotiations, its announcement of non-participation in the US missile defense system in East Asia notwithstanding Washington’s cogent encouragement, its threat of the unilateral withdrawal of the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) with Japan despite Washington’s strong oppositions, its efforts to expedite the redemption of the wartime operational control (OPCON) of a combined US–South Korean force from Washington, and its reluctance to join the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy in contrast with its announcement of interests in participating in China’s initiative of One Belt and One Road (OBOR). What is driving South Korea’s behavior in this way? Does the hedging strategy of a secondary power positioned between great powers provide a compelling answer to South Korea’s behavior? If not, where should we look for a convincing explanation?

The main goal of this article is to explain South Korea’s puzzling behavior under the Moon Jae-in administration. It seeks to make sense of why South Korea sometimes behaves in conformity with the interests of its adversary (i.e. North Korea) and potential threat (i.e. China) rather than those of its principal ally (i.e. the United States) and security cooperation partner (i.e. Japan). By calling attention to the impact of the progressive ideology on the Moon administration’s security policy, which is under-researched and thus is poorly understood, it aims to make a meaningful contribution to the literature of South Korea’s behavior in particular and the role of ideology in state behavior more broadly.

The central thesis of this article is that while the hedging account largely explains Seoul’s strategic act between the United States and

China in the post-Cold War era, it does not provide a compelling answer to several important strategic moves of South Korea under Moon. In order to convincingly explain them, the role of the Moon administration's progressive ideology which generally shapes its security policy stances and priorities should be taken into account. Hence, the article highlights a domestic source (i.e. ideology) of South Korea's behavior on which the structural analysis of the prevailing hedging account is ill-equipped to provide a convincing account.

The organization of this article is as follows. Section 2 addresses the literature review and discusses the hedging account's limits as well as relevance for Seoul's behavior. Section 3 conceptualizes ideology and examines the relationship between ideology and interests in security policy, followed by South Korea's leading ideologies and their security policy preferences. Section 4 analyzes the Moon administration's progressive ideology and its impact on Seoul's behavior. Section 5 explores the implications of the Moon administration's ideology-driven security policy on the future of the US–ROK alliance. Section 6 addresses the limits of this research as well as the future research agenda.

2 Literature Review: Relevance and Limits of the Hedging Account for Seoul's Behavior

Previous accounts for South Korea's behavior in the post-Cold War era have mainly emphasized the concept of 'hedging' (Han, 2008; Kang, 2009; Kim, 2016a, 2018). Hedging is neither a balancing nor a bandwagoning behavior. It explains a secondary state's strategic act between two great powers (Goh, 2006; Medeiros, 2005/2006; Khong, 2013/2014; Lim and Cooper, 2015; Kim, 2016a). Accordingly, hedging states usually try to avoid taking a side over another and hold 'a delicate middle ground between all-out balancing and bandwagoning and, in so doing, seek to maximize the range of strategic options available to them' (Kim, 2016a, p. 716). Successful hedging for a secondary state stuck in between two dominant powers requires a great deal of delicate diplomacy, since it must content them simultaneously (Chung, 2007, p. 115). In many cases, the secondary state faces the dilemma of strategic choice for one dominant power, which will inevitably upset the other power rival. Unconfident about strategic options of balancing, bandwagoning, congaing (i.e. a skillful mix of containment and engagement),

or neutrality and worried about its own survival, a hedging state strives to minimize risk for an uncertain future and thus typically implements a policy of strategic ambiguity against the two preponderant powers in order to maintain favorable relationships with both of them.

South Korea's hedging behavior in the post-Cold War world is largely the outcome of its deliberate choice, given its geostrategic position. South Korea is geostrategically located between the two preponderant powers (i.e. the United States and China) that are engaging in the hegemonic competition. The United States is a long-standing security ally of South Korea, whereas China is currently South Korea's largest trading partner. In fact, South Korea's trade volume with China has exceeded its trade volume with the US since 2004. Due to its security dependence on the United States and its economic dependence on China, South Korea, like many other states in similar strategic circumstances [e.g. Australia and many Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) states], has relied on the hedging strategy in order to maximize its national interests.

It appears that the hedging strategy provides quite a compelling account for Seoul's behavior in recent years. For example, South Korea's decision to join the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank 'at the very last moment' in 2015 (i.e. just a few days prior to its membership deadline as well as only after other US allies such as the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Italy announced their decision to join it) can be viewed as an example of Seoul's hedging strategy since it represents South Korea's deliberate choice not to antagonize either its principal security ally or its largest trading partner (Kim, 2018, p. 619). South Korea's strategic act in 2016 revealed in the deployment of the US-led regional anti-ballistic missile defense system called the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) is also an example of the hedging behavior. Although Washington contended that the main purpose of the THAAD deployment on the Korean peninsula was to defend South Korea and its allies from North Korea's missile attacks, Seoul's long hesitation and extraordinary caution in embracing the THAAD was due to its largest trading partner's (China's) strong pressure against it (Kim, 2018, p. 620). Likewise, the Moon administration's New Southern Policy (NSP) by which South Korea tries to expand its diplomatic horizon from the focus of the traditional four major powers (i.e. the United States, China, Japan, and Russia) to

ASEAN states and India is another example of Seoul's hedging strategy. In the face of an uncertain future of the intensifying Sino-US hegemonic competition and trade war, South Korea seeks to increase its strategic leverage by building coalitions with countries in similar circumstances as well as diversifying its trading partners.

However, the hedging account cannot satisfactorily explain several important security behaviors of South Korea under the Moon administration. South Korea's behaviors in these cases go beyond hedging since they are clearly and heavily skewed in line with the interests of North Korea and China rather than those of the United States and Japan. In order to account for Seoul's extraordinary behaviors under Moon, it is critical to examine the impact of the progressive ideology on the Moon administration's security policy, as a state's security policy stances generally echo its ideological standpoints. In the following section, the concept of ideology and its importance in security policy will be addressed before the discussion of South Korea's leading ideologies and their security policy preferences.

3. Ideology, interests, and security policy

When we say that a group of people (e.g. elites, the members of the ruling party, the members of the opposition party) are ideological, it means that those people usually hold attitudes that are stable, coherent, consistent, logical, and relatively sophisticated (Jost *et al.*, 2009, p. 310). It is often said that ideology is something that the other people have, and 'many of us believe that our adversaries are obviously afflicted with ideological bias, but we find it difficult to see our own moral and political convictions as springing from anything other than good reason and sound evidence' (Jost *et al.*, 2008, p. 126). In any case, growing political polarization between Republicans and Democrats in the United States, between the Conservative Party and the Labour Party in Britain, and between far-lefts, far-rights, and centrists in many European countries and elsewhere demonstrates the power of ideology in our lives. A telling example is the fact that about 85% of the statistical variance in Democratic versus Republican voting intentions in US presidential elections from 1972 to 2004 can be explained by ideological self-placement on a liberalism-conservatism scale (Jost *et al.*, 2008, p. 134). This trend has further intensified in recent years.

What is ideology, then? Ideology, as [McLellan \(1986, 1\)](#) notes, is ‘the most elusive concept’ in social science. The Oxford dictionary defines it as ‘a system of ideas or ideals, especially one which forms the basis of economic or political theory and policy’ ([The Oxford Dictionary, 2021](#)). According to [Holsti \(1962, p. 245\)](#), it is ‘a set of lenses through which information concerning the physical and social environment is received.’ To [Levi \(1970, p. 4\)](#), it is a set of normative values (i.e. ideas about what ought to be) and relatively enduring beliefs (i.e. ideas about what reality is). [Hunt \(1987, p. xi\)](#) defines ideology as ‘an interrelated set of convictions or assumptions that reduces the complexities of a particular slice of reality to easily comprehensible terms and suggests appropriate ways of dealing with that reality.’ For [Freedon \(2003, p. 32\)](#), ideology is ‘a set of ideas, beliefs, opinions, and values that (1) exhibit a recurring pattern, (2) are held by significant groups, (3) compete over providing and controlling plans for public policy, (4) do so with the aim of justifying, contesting or changing the social and political arrangements.’ Although different scholars define ideology differently, there seems to be a general understanding in that its core concept refers to a set of ideas, values, and beliefs that shape individuals’ perceptions about the world.

What is important to note is that as [Mullins \(1972, p. 508\)](#) points out, ideology conceptualizes the outlines of reality, ‘not merely as it exists, but also as it might be shaped depending on the interpretations of politically organized human beings in the historical process.’ So long as ideology orients human beings for shaping the historical process, ideology itself is an agent of historical change ([Mullins, 1972, p. 504](#)). Also important to note is that ideology evolves following a need to explain relations of political power and objective of governance ([Nincic and Ramos, 2010, p. 120](#)). Hence, it can be said that ideology matters for politics since it has a power to not only transfer ideals, evaluations, and motives among members of groups but also enable them ‘to appraise their political condition and its prospects for the future and thereby facilitates the mobilization and direction of energies and resources for common political undertakings’ ([Mullins, 1972, p. 509](#)).

Given that ideology describes or interprets ‘the world as it is – by making assertions or assumptions about human nature, historical events, present realities, and future possibilities’ – and envisions ‘the world as it should be, specifying acceptable means of attaining social,

economic, and political ideals' (Jost *et al.*, 2009, p. 309), it certainly has a significant effect on state behavior (Levi 1970, p. 1). It makes a state behave in a certain way on the basis of its core beliefs about what should be done (Sylvan and Majeski, 2008, p. 2). Hunt (1987, p. 16) argues that ideologies matter 'because they constitute the framework in which policymakers deal with specific issues.' Likewise, Hurwitz and Peffley (1987) contend that ideologies are important as they influence foreign/security policy preferences. Herrmann and Keller's study (2004) also finds that the strategic choices of leader within the dimension of national security policy are shaped by ideological factors.

Like ideologies, interests significantly affect state behavior. In general, however, states put interests before ideologies when they make security policy decisions. As Levi (1970, p. 13) points out, 'the interests tend to determine their own choice of ideological justification and it is not the ideology which guides the choice of interests and their fulfillment.' Put another way, 'ideology plays a subordinate and minor role in deciding the state's objectives and plan for action to reach them, and a more important role in justifying the decision once it has been made' (Levi, 1970, p. 5). In brief, states often justify their interests-driven security policies by ideological terms.

Given the asymmetrical influence between ideologies and interests as well as the difficulty of separating them in practice for the impact of state behavior, assessing their relative weight in security policy may not seem to be important at first glance. Nevertheless, it is significant because it can provide a clue to state behavior that interests-centered accounts cannot explain. For example, when a state put ideologies ahead of interests or made more ideologies-driven, as opposed to interests-driven, security policy decisions, its behavior would not be satisfactorily explained if the relative influence between ideologies and interests is not taken into account.

It is worth mentioning that ideologies and interests are not necessarily opposites. They are not mutually exclusive alternative explanations for behavior either. For instance, when common interests are crystal clear and critically important, prevailing ideologies in society tend to reflect them. More often than not, 'an ideology tells its subscribers *when* to act in their direct self-interest and when to act on some other basis' (Bawn, 1999, p. 306).

Nonetheless, ideologies and interests do not always go hand in hand when it comes to a state's security policy. The national interest, in particular, is hard to define (Rosenau, 1968) and its concept is too comprehensive and slippery to be an analytical tool. Realists define it as 'the goals that are sought by the state' (Krasner, 1978, p. 12) or 'a set of transitively ordered state preferences concerned to promote the general well-being of the society that persists over a long period of time' (Krasner, 1978, p. 45). Liberals emphasize its 'social base' (Trubowitz, 1998, p. 4) and contend that the national interest reflects social preferences. No matter how it is defined, it is generally understood that the national interest refers to what is best for a nation. What is worth emphasizing here is that when the government's ideology and its national interest are congruent, the state is more likely to gain domestic support for its security policy, which tends to be moderate. On the other hand, if a state pursues security policy that is based more on ideologies than on the national interest when the two are not harmonious, the state's security policy often turns out to be radical or unrealistic and has potential to do more harm than good to the state. The George W. Bush administration's security policy of spreading democracy throughout the Middle East and beyond, which was driven by neoconservatives who sought to remake the world in the image of USA with the ideological conviction in 'the superiority and universality of American national values' (Rathbun, 2008, p. 283) may be a good example.

3.1 South Korea's Leading Ideologies and their Security Policy Preferences

By and large, South Korea's ideologies diverge into two different camps: conservatives and progressives. While there are also independents, who identify themselves as neither conservatives nor progressives, they typically do not have capacity to govern and support either conservatives or progressives in elections, depending on the issues in question. In general, in light of foreign policy attitudes, South Korean conservatives are defined by a group of people who keep vigilance against the North Korean threat and stress the need to cultivate a close relationship with United States for their security. On the other hand, South Korean progressives, while not oblivious to the North Korean threat, view 'the North more as a kin nation with which to be

reconciled' and regard the United States as a 'potential spoiler' or 'disruptor' of inter-Korean reconciliation (Chae and Kim, 2008, pp. 77–78). Divided roughly equally,¹ the two leading ideologies display quite different ideas and preferences about what South Korea, which is surrounded by the world's great powers (i.e. the United States, China, Russia, and Japan), should do in order to survive and prosper in the international system.

For example, with respect to South Korea's relations with United States, conservatives tend to highlight the importance of maintaining a strong US–ROK alliance and prioritize the policy coordination between Washington and Seoul. On the other hand, progressives generally place more importance on independence and autonomy in foreign policy than close US–ROK relations, even if it sometimes causes the policy dissonance with Washington. While conservatives uphold the US–ROK alliance as the highest value for South Korea's security and prosperity, progressives give credit to it but tend to view it as an unequal partnership between the hegemonic power of the United States and a weaker partner of South Korea. To many progressives, the US–ROK alliance is a United States 'political device to "intervene" in South Korea's foreign affairs' (Lee, 2017, p. 8) and thus needs rebalancing for South Korea's independence and autonomy. They highlight that 'as the alliance has become mature,' the United States and South Korea 'do not have to be on the same page on all issues, at all times' (Lee, 2017, p. 9). For conservatives, 'security is preeminent, and thus no one should tamper with the alliance,' whereas progressives think that the 'alliance should accommodate movement toward inter-Korean reconciliation' (Chae and Kim, 2008, p. 87). Hence, progressives are more open to the idea of the complete withdrawal or a radical reduction of United States military forces from South Korea as such a change would galvanize the substantial improvement of inter-Korean relations (Fuchs and Bard, 2019).

As for South Korea's policy on North Korea, conservatives tend to stress sticks (military strength and sanctions) over carrots (economic cooperation and dialog) and a close policy coordination between Washington

1 According to a recent poll, South Koreans who said that they are largely conservatives are 39.4 percent whereas they are largely progressives are 45.2%. See *Dailian*, 8 January 2020. <http://www.dailian.co.kr/news/view/859426/?sc=naver> (27 May 2020, date last accessed).

and Seoul, whereas progressives favor an engagement policy and prioritize the improvement of inter-Korean relations over the policy harmony between Washington and Seoul. Unlike conservatives who generally support the US hardline policy of North Korea, progressives largely have a negative view on Washington's handling of Pyongyang, which (they think) often bypass Seoul, and complain about the US tendency to 'guide' South Korea's security policy. While conservatives have more hawkish attitudes about North Korea, progressives tend to trust Kim Jong-un's intentions to reduce tensions on the Korean peninsula including his pledge of denuclearization and contend that Seoul should proactively pursue inter-Korean economic projects in order to promote North Korea's decision to disarm (Fuchs and Bard, 2019). Hence, progressives maintain that South Korea should sit in the driver's seat and take the lead in the matters of shaping its own future, such as the denuclearization of North Korea and establishing a peace regime on the Korean peninsula.

When it comes to South Korea's relations with neighboring countries, conservatives place US–ROK relations ahead of its relations with any other countries. While progressives acknowledge the importance of US–ROK relations, they are more open to shifts of priority of South Korea's relations with neighboring countries.

Regarding South Korea's strategic choice between United States and China, which are competing for global as well as regional hegemony, conservatives certainly favor siding with United States, whereas progressives tend to take a more neutral stance and are more open to the possibility of siding with China. Therefore, compared to conservatives, progressives are far less interested in the US strategy of containing China and maintaining anti-China posture (Fuchs and Bard, 2019).

Depending on who (i.e. conservatives or progressives) seized the power, South Korea has displayed quite different security policy preferences. As Jost *et al.* (2009, p. 324) points out, 'ideological commitments are robust predictors of a wide range of attitudes, preferences, judgments, and behaviors.' In general, more radical security policy was pursued when progressives came to power, as the left (i.e. progressives) who sees the world as it should be is believed to have a greater ideological commitment whereas the right (i.e. conservatives) who sees the world as it is tends to be more pragmatic (Rathbun, 2008, 281). In what follows, Seoul's several security policy moves, on which the Moon administration's progressive ideology made an enormous impact, will be examined in detail, after a brief

discussion of methodology and case selection for this research. Table 1 summarizes the security policy preferences of South Korea's leading ideologies.

3.2 Methodology and Case Selection

In order to analyze the impact of the Moon administration's progressive ideology on Seoul's security decisions, I adopt case study methods. The case study approach is 'the detailed examination of an aspect of a historical episode to develop or test historical explanations that may be generalizable to other events' (George and Bennett, 2005, p. 5). It typically involves an in-depth examination of single instance or several instances. Inferring and testing explanations that examine 'how/why "A" causes "B"' is often easier with case study than large-*n* methods'

Table 1 South Korea's leading ideologies and their security policy preferences

Issues of security policy preference	Conservatives	Progressives
The US–ROK alliance	View it essential for South Korea's security and prosperity	Value it but view it as an unequal partnership between a hegemonic power and a weaker power
The withdrawal of US forces deployed in South Korea	Strongly oppose	Conditionally support
Washington's hardline policy on North Korea	Support it and emphasize policy coordination between Washington and Seoul	View it negatively and favor their own approach
Seoul's policy on North Korea	Stress military strength and sanctions	Stress economic cooperation and dialog
Who should lead in dealing with North Korea's nuclear weapons threat?	The United States	South Korea
South Korea's relations with neighboring countries	Prioritize US–ROK relations	Acknowledge the importance of US–ROK relations, but more open to shifts of priority of South Korea's relations with neighboring countries
South Korea's choice over the Sino–US hegemonic rivalry	Favor siding with the United States	More open to the possibility of siding with China

(Kim, 2012, p. 116). Hence, the case-study approach adopted here seems to allow for an in-depth analysis of the causal linkages between ideology and states' security behavior.

The five cases that will be examined in detail are South Korea's security behaviors concerning its upholding of Pyongyang's demands in US–North Korea nuclear negotiations, its announcement of nonparticipation in the US missile defense system in Northeast Asia, its threat of the unilateral withdrawal of the GSOMIA with Japan, its efforts to expedite the redemption of the wartime OPCON, and its reluctance to join the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy. These cases were selected since they represent the most puzzling security behaviors of South Korea under the Moon administration. In all of these cases, Seoul's behavior would have been different if it had adopted a purely interest-based strategy such as hedging. Given that security policies (i.e. the dependent variable) constitute vital national interests and thus are least likely to be affected by ideology (the independent variable), the five cases selected here seem to be hard cases for the impact of ideology on states' security behavior.

4 The Progressive Ideology and the Moon Administration's Security Policy

Soon after South Korea's conservative president Park Guen-hye was ousted by impeachment, progressive president Moon came to power in May 2017, ending a decade of conservative rule. As the leader of progressives, Moon has displayed security policy preferences which are quite different from those of conservative predecessors. Indeed, Moon's progressive ideology, which favors independence and autonomy in foreign policy as well as engagement towards Pyongyang through economic cooperation and dialogue over the US–ROK alliance, a close policy coordination with Washington, and hardline policies against Pyongyang, has influenced his security policy and thereby often caused many frictions and discord with Washington.² As Martin *et al.* (2019) notes, 'collaboration between the United States and South Korea has become more inconsistent and unpredictable under the administrations of Donald Trump and Moon Jae-in.'

2 Fuchs and Bard (2019) point out that 'More often than not, the most contentious disagreements between the two countries are heightened when progressives are in power in Seoul, no matter which political party is in power in Washington, D.C.'

The salient examples of the Moon administration's ideology-weighted security policy moves are below.

First of all, when tensions were high on the Korean peninsula due to Pyongyang's nuclear and long-range ballistic missile provocations in late 2017, Seoul's policy had significant disagreements with Washington over how to deal with North Korea. While Washington, along with Tokyo, called for the strict implementation of maximum pressure (i.e. more and stronger sanctions) against Pyongyang, Seoul favored the policy of engagement and dialogue with North Korea, making itself as the 'odd man out' of US allies (Lee, 2017, p. 13). Seoul even requested some sanctions relief on North Korea in order to carry out various inter-Korean projects including reconnecting railways between the two Koreas. Indeed, contrary to Washington that insisted on keeping sanctions in place until Pyongyang takes concrete steps towards denuclearization, Seoul consistently argued that some exceptions on loosening sanctions (e.g. reopening of the Kaesung Industrial Complex and restarting the Mount Kumgang travel) should be made in order to encourage Pyongyang to denuclearize. Seoul also publicly supported China's proposal of 'freeze for freeze' (i.e. North Korea freezes its nuclear and ballistic missile tests in return for the suspension of US–ROK large-scale joint military drills on the Korean peninsula) and 'dialogue-based' negotiations against Washington's approach of more pressure and harsher sanctions for the solution of North Korea's nuclear weapons program. Even when Washington and Seoul were on the same page with engaging Pyongyang under 'the right conditions', they often disagreed on what truly constituted the right conditions (Lee, 2017, p. 12).

As a matter of fact, Seoul's policy stance here was closely in line with that of Pyongyang and Beijing, as opposed to Washington and Tokyo. By placing the inter-Korean relationship ahead of the US–ROK alliance (Nam, 2019, p. 60) and upholding the positions of Pyongyang and Beijing against those of Washington and Tokyo in US–North Korea nuclear negotiations (see, e.g. Lee, 2018), Seoul's behavior at that time raised Washington's eyebrows. The term 'Korea passing', which was increasingly used in news media during this period, illustrates Seoul's exclusion from Washington's policy consultations with other countries regarding North Korea (Lyons, 2017). It reflected not only Washington's serious doubt about Seoul but also significant frictions between the two longstanding allies over their North Korea

policy. Indeed, the Trump administration did not really endorse Moon's pro-engagement policy (e.g. requiring sanctions relief first in order to commence inter-Korean economic cooperation projects) toward North Korea. To many policymakers in Washington, it appeared that South Korea's priority was the improvement of inter-Korean relations rather than the denuclearization of North Korea.

Moreover, Moon argued at the UN in 2018 that North Korea's demand of formally ending the Korean War, which halted in armistice in 1953, should be accepted on the condition that United States and South Korea could withdraw from it if Pyongyang does not keep its promise of denuclearization. While Moon contended that such a move would not only encourage North Korea to take more concrete steps towards denuclearization by indicating the end of US hostilities on the Pyongyang regime but also make it possible to launch negotiations for a peace treaty that would replace the armistice, many in Washington viewed it as being 'premature and potentially perilous for U.S. security interests' (Friedman, 2018). In his pre-recorded video speech submitted to the 75th session of UN General Assembly, Moon again argued that 'The end-of-war declaration will, indeed, open the door to complete denuclearization and permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula' (Cheong, 2020). Moon seemed to believe that those measures were necessary to build confidence between United States and North Korea. However, Washington wanted to be cautious since the end-of-war declaration and the establishment of a peace regime on the Korean peninsula might raise the question of the *raison d'être* of the US-ROK alliance, given that it is basically a security alliance that mainly aims to protect South Korea from the North Korean threat. In other words, a peace regime on the Korean peninsula 'would weaken the rationale for maintaining a robust U.S.-ROK alliance and, over time, could lead to a reduction in the U.S. military footprint in South Korea' (Lee and Botto, 2018, pp. 12–13). Indeed, Moon Chung-in (2019), Moon's senior security advisor, argued in *Foreign Affairs* that 'What will happen to U.S. forces in South Korea if a peace treaty is signed? It will be difficult to justify their continuing presence in South Korea after its adoption.'

Second, the influence of the progressive ideology on Seoul's behavior is also found in the Moon administration's decision about the controversy over the deployment of the THAAD. The THAAD is an anti-missile defense system that aims to protect South Korea and its allies (e.g. the

United States and Japan) from North Korea's short- to intermediate-range ballistic missile attacks. Because of its capacity to monitor China's strategic assets, Beijing had strongly opposed the THAAD deployment on the Korean peninsula and pressured Seoul not to deploy it. China even economically retaliated against South Korea after the Park administration's decision of the THAAD deployment in July 2016.

Criticizing his predecessor's decision for lacking the 'procedural legitimacy' (i.e. parliamentary approval following public debates), Moon suspended the further deployment of the THAAD. He mentioned that the final decision about the full deployment of the THAAD would be made after a comprehensive and thorough environmental review. Although Moon reversed his decision after Pyongyang's long-range missile (i.e. the Hwasung-14) launch in 28 July 2017 and called for a temporary installment of the four remaining THAAD launchers (Reif, 2017), the Moon administration's negative view on the THAAD deployment worried Washington since it appeared to be in line with China's stance. Washington's concerns were further aggravated when the Moon administration reaffirmed the so-called Three No's³ (i.e. no additional deployment of the THAAD, no participation of the US missile defense system in Northeast Asia, and no establishment of a trilateral military alliance with United States and Japan) in an effort to restore its amicable relationship with Beijing.⁴ To Washington and Tokyo at least, Seoul's announcement of Three No's was a behavior that went beyond hedging as it was closely and heavily in accordance with Beijing's and Pyongyang's interests, as opposed to those of its principal ally and security cooperation partner.

Third, South Korea's announcement of the plan to discontinue the GSOMIA with Japan in August 2019 is another example of its ideology-driven security policy. The GSOMIA is a military intelligence-sharing agreement between South Korea and Japan. Signed in 2016, it

3 These are different from the Park administration's Three No's, which are basically a hedging strategy. The Park administration initially took the position of 'strategic ambiguity' regarding its decision about the THAAD deployment. Its Three No's refer to no request from Washington, no consultation with the US, and no decision about the THAAD deployment. See 'Spokesperson's Press Briefing' (31 March 2015) by South Korea's [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea](#) (2015).

4 See "South Korea's Three No's" announcement key to restoring relations with China" (2 November 2017) *HanKyoreh*. http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/817213.html (18 June 2020, date last accessed).

represents a symbol of military cooperation between the two countries, which are partners for economic and security cooperation but have had antagonism over historical issues. The GSOMIA allows the two countries to directly share sensitive military information such as North Korea's nuclear and missile tests without having to go through United States. It is supposed to be renewed annually and an automatic renewal is a norm unless either partner opposes.

South Korea's announcement of the plan to withdraw from the GSOMIA, which was set to expire in November 2019, was a response to Japan's economic retaliations against Seoul's decision of not interfering in its Supreme Court's ruling. South Korea's Supreme Court sustained a lower court's ruling that ordered Japanese companies to compensate South Korean laborers during Japan's colonial era. Because Tokyo's position is that the issue of reparation during Japan's occupation of Korea (from 1910 to 1945) was already resolved with the 1965 Japan–South Korea treaty, the Moon administration's unwillingness to interfere in the Supreme Court's ruling was seen by Tokyo as Seoul's violation of the treaty. Tokyo retaliated against Seoul by restricting exports of materials essential to South Korea's electronics and semiconductor industry. Japan also removed South Korea from its list (the so-called white list) of countries that have preferential trade access to strategic goods. In response to Japan's actions, South Korea removed Japan from its own white list of preferred export partners (Yeo, 2019). South Koreans also boycotted Japanese products. As Japan's economic retaliatory measures persisted despite Seoul's demands on their cancelation, South Korea unilaterally announced its plan to withdraw from the GSOMIA. Tokyo contended that Seoul 'linked its decision to terminate the GSOMIA with Japan's recent update of its licensing policies and procedures for export control in the context of security; yet these two issues are of totally different nature. Therefore, the ROK's claim is absolutely unacceptable and Japan firmly protests against the Government of the ROK' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2019). Many experts in Washington worried about Seoul's plan because it would weaken a trilateral security cooperation among the United States, Japan, and South Korea against their counterparts (i.e. North Korea, China, and Russia) in Northeast Asia. Hence, Washington expressed its concerns about Seoul's decision on the

GSOMIA using such terms as 'disappointment' and pressured Seoul to reconsider it.⁵

Although the Moon administration's decision on the GSOMIA may be seen as 'irrational, given its diplomatic and security costs' (Yeo, 2019), it makes sense if one takes into account the impact of the progressive ideology on its security policy. Indeed, reflecting their ideological preferences for independence and autonomy in foreign policy over the trilateral (Washington–Seoul–Tokyo) security cooperation, Moon and the progressive ruling Democratic Party framed a growing anti-Japan stance and an exit from the GSOMIA as national interests and criticized the previous Park administration's GSOMIA agreement with Japan for a hasty decision that was made without citizen's explicit consent (Yeo, 2019). They tried to downgrade the value of the GSOMIA, contending that even if South Korea exited from it, its security would not be weakened due to the existence of the so-called Trilateral Information Sharing Agreement, which was signed by the United States, Japan, and South Korea in 2014. The Moon administration's decision to terminate the GSOMIA was not surprising, given the progressive administration's tendency to underrate the North Korean threat, its emphasis on independence and autonomy over alliance, and its dovish stance toward North Korea compared to its relatively hawkish stance toward the United States and Japan.

Fourth, the Moon administration's efforts to expedite the redemption of the wartime OPCON from United States also reflect the influence of the progressive ideology on its security decisions. Since the early period (i.e. 14 July 1950) of the Korean War, United States has had the wartime OPCON, where the US armed forces play a leading role while the ROK army plays a supporting role. This arrangement is quite unique to the US–ROK alliance as few countries would transfer their sovereign right of controlling their military forces to another country during wartime. However, its main purpose was to alleviate

5 See *The importance of US–Japan–Korea trilateral defense cooperation*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/importance-us-japan-korea-trilateral-defense-cooperation> (15 April 2021, date last accessed). Also, see Japanese media's interview with Marc Knapper (Deputy Assistant Secretary for Korea and Japan at the State Department's Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs) on 2 November 2019, reported at Han (2019) and Jung Da-min (2019) Scrapping GSOMIA may pressure Seoul to pay more for USFK (28 August 2019) *The Korea Times*. https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2019/08/205_274672.html (16 July 2020, date last accessed).

US concerns that the American forces could be embroiled, against their will, in a conflict initiated by South Korea (Botto, 2019). Progressive President Roh Moo-hyun initiated the transfer of the wartime OPCON, but conservative President Park Geun-hye, Moon's predecessor, reversed Roh's decision. She agreed with United States on delaying the transfer until South Korea has 'the "key military capabilities" to spearhead the two partners' combined defense, the "essential capabilities" to respond to Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program, and a 'conducive' security environment for transfer' (Botto, 2019). Setting the US transfer of the wartime OPCON as a core presidential campaign pledge, however, Moon has sought to expedite the process of the transfer and planned to complete it by the end of his presidency (i.e. by May 2022). Given the preference of progressives for 'greater autonomy in decision-making on security and defense matters' (Lee and Botto, 2018, pp. 19–20), the Moon administration's efforts of retrieving the wartime OPCON as soon as possible (see *The Korea Times*, 2017; Ministry of National Defense of the Republic of Korea, 2019) were foreseeable since, to progressives at least, it constitutes a sovereignty issue rather than the issue of effectiveness of military cooperation between the two security allies.

Fifth, the influence of the progressive ideology on Seoul's behavior is also found in the Moon administration's reluctance to join the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy, despite Washington's strong encouragement. The Trump administration's vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific, which was announced at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Vietnam in 2017, upheld four principles: 'Respect for sovereignty and independence of all nations'; 'Peaceful resolution of disputes'; 'Free, fair, and reciprocal trade based on open investment, transparent agreements, and connectivity'; 'Adherence to international rules and norms, including those of freedom of navigation and overflight' (Department of Defense, 2019, p. 4). Replacing the Obama administration's 'pivot to Asia' strategy, the Indo-Pacific strategy sought to maintain United States influence in the Indo-Pacific region by forming a favorable balance of power and preventing hostile forces (in particular, China) from reordering the region to their advantage. While many US allies and security cooperation partners in the region (e.g. Japan, Australia, the New Zealand, India) publicly supported the Indo-Pacific strategy, South Korea has largely maintained an ambivalent stance

until recently (Yeo, 2020). Instead, the Moon administration has advocated the NSP, emphasizing economic common grounds between it and the Indo-Pacific strategy (see, e.g. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, 2019).

The Moon administration's stance on the Indo-Pacific strategy was extraordinary because South Korea has already expressed its interests in participating in the Chinese initiative of OBOR or the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was launched in 2013 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2013). The BRI was viewed by many in Washington as Beijing's attempt to expand its sphere of economic, political, and military influence to Eurasia.⁶ To be sure, South Korea's desire to join the BRI is to reduce its economic dependence on China by connecting itself to the rest of Eurasia. Another significant motivation for South Korea's participation in the BRI is to mitigate tensions with North Korea by creating various inter-Korean economic projects.⁷ Whatever is Seoul's intention, its reluctance to participate in the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy is sharply contrasted with its expression of interests in joining China's BRI. It is a behavior surpassing hedging. In any case, to the extent that the main purpose of the Indo-Pacific strategy was to counter China's ambition to achieve global hegemony via the BRI⁸ and that South Korea is a key security ally of the United States as well as a free and open economy, Seoul's

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- 6 See, for example, Alek Chance (2016) *American Perspectives on the Belt and Road Initiative: Sources of Concern and Possibilities for Cooperation*, Institute for China-America Studies. <https://chinaus-icas.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/American-Perspectives-on-the-Belt-and-Road-Initiative.pdf> (29 July 2020, date last accessed); Joshua P. Meltzer (2017) *China's One Belt and One Road Initiative: A View from the United States*. Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/chinas-one-belt-one-road-initiative-a-view-from-the-united-states/> (7 August 2020, date last accessed). According to Mearsheimer (2019, 46), the OBOR initiative 'is designed not just to help China sustain its impressive economic growth, but also to project Chinese military and political power around the globe.'
- 7 For South Korea's reasons for participating in the BRI, see Sungku Jang (2019) Should South Korea Participate in China's Belt and Road? (6 January 2019) *The National Interest*. <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/should-south-korea-participate-chinas-belt-and-road-40732> (10 August 2020, date last accessed).
- 8 See Andrew Korybko (2019) The Pentagon's Indo-Pacific strategy report is all about containing China (2 November 2017) Global Research. <https://www.globalresearch.ca/u-s-indo-pacific-strategy-report-all-about-containing-china/5679332> (11 September 2020, date last accessed) and Abhijit Singh (2017) The 'Indo-Pacific' has always been about containing China (28 November) *South China Morning Post*. <https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/2121907/indo-pacific-has-always-been-about-containing-rise-china> (14 September 2020, date last accessed).

lack of clear support for the Indo-Pacific strategy and its alternative emphasis on the NSP reflects the influence of the Moon administration's progressive ideology, which favors independence and autonomy in decision-making on its economic and security matters.

5 Influence of the Progressive Ideology on South Korea's Behavior and its Implications for the US–ROK Alliance

Although progressives largely hold an unfavorable view of the US–ROK alliance and have doubts about its necessity once a peace regime is formed on the Korean peninsula, there is currently a broad accord among South Koreans that it plays a central role in defending them from the attacks of North Korea, which has emerged as a *de facto* nuclear-weapon state. In other words, most South Koreans think that maintaining the US–ROK alliance is in their national interest as they are under the North Korean threat of nuclear as well as conventional weapons.

However, the Moon administration's security policy moves described above raise an important question about the solidarity of the US–ROK alliance in the post-Cold War era. Take Seoul's demands for formally ending the Korean War and establishing a peace regime on the Korean peninsula during recent US–North Korea nuclear negotiations, for example (see [Cheong, 2018](#)). Those demands are heavily in conformity with Pyongyang's and Beijing's interests, as they are likely to diminish US influence on the Korean peninsula. That is to say, by substantially diminishing the *raison d'être* of US troops deployed in South Korea in the absence of the North Korean threat, the formal declaration of the end of the Korean War, and the subsequent establishment of a peace treaty have a potential to weaken the US–ROK alliance in the long run ([Lee and Botto, 2018](#), pp. 12–13; [Moon, 2018](#), p. 38). Although Washington is against neither of them in principle, it maintains the position that North Korea's clear measures of denuclearization should be taken first in order to move ahead with those options. Therefore, the Moon administration's progressive ideology-driven security policy, which prioritizes the creation of a peace regime on the Korean peninsula following an official termination of the Korean War over

Pyongyang's obvious steps towards denuclearization, creates serious rifts in policy coordination with Washington. Consequently, it impairs the solidarity of the US–ROK alliance.

The Moon administration's announcement of the Three-No's also has a negative impact on maintaining the robust US–ROK alliance. To be sure, the announcement was the result of Seoul's deliberation to allay the concerns of China, which is South Korea's largest trading partner. Indeed, South Korea's economy greatly suffered from China's economic retaliation after the Park administration's eventual decision of deploying the THAAD. Nevertheless, the Moon administration's announcement of the Three No's is absolutely against US strategic interests of containing China and therefore has a harmful effect on the solidarity of the US–ROK alliance.

The same is true for the Moon administration's plan to withdraw from the GSOMIA. Since Seoul's announcement of the plan in August 2018, North Korea has launched its short- and medium-range ballistic missiles. However, South Korea and Japan have failed to accurately assess many of those launches. This instance demonstrates how important the GSOMIA is for a comprehensive understanding of North Korea's missile tests (Ha, 2019). Because of the harmful impact of Seoul's GSOMIA decision on US national interests, Washington consistently pressured Seoul to reconsider it. Many officers of the US Department of State and Department of Defense had indeed raised voices against the expiry of the GSOMIA, claiming that 'such an outcome will only benefit China, Russia, and North Korea' (Han, 2019). Under the strong pressure of Washington, Seoul ultimately reversed (more precisely, conditionally suspended) its decision just hours before the GSOMIA was due to expire on 22 November 2019. Nevertheless, Seoul's behavior regarding the GSOMIA heightened Washington's worries, given the importance of the trilateral (Washington–Seoul–Tokyo) security cooperation for US strategy in Northeast Asia, thereby weakening Washington's confidence in South Korea as a key ally in the region (Gordon *et al.*, 2019).

Likewise, the Moon administration's efforts to expedite the transfer of the wartime OPCON from Washington also have potential to weaken the US–ROK alliance. Currently, South Korea is not fully ready to lead the US–ROK combined forces at the time of war. As a matter of fact, it has not fulfilled the requirements of the transfer that

the Park administration laid out. Nevertheless, the Moon administration is trying hard to complete the transfer by 2022, claiming it as a military sovereignty issue. It contends that the completion of the war-time OPCON transfer will illustrate the solidarity of the US–ROK alliance as it constitutes the first case where the US forces give command to other nationals.⁹ However, an early and premature transfer could weaken the US–ROK alliance by inflicting serious damage on both the already complicated chain of command and control structure and the effectiveness of the combined forces (see, e.g. Yoon, 2019).

South Korea's reluctance to join the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy as well as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (better known as the Quad¹⁰) can also negatively affect the US–ROK alliance, especially because Seoul has already expressed its interests in participating in the China-led BRI. Under the circumstances where the Sino–US hegemonic competition in the world is intensifying (Beeson, 2009; Kim, 2016b), the Moon administration's contrasting stance on those initiatives can give a wrong signal to Washington and Beijing that Seoul's strategic choice is leaning toward China, instead of its long-standing ally of United States. Given North Korea's growing nuclear and ballistic missile threats and China's more assertive behavior in the South China Sea in recent years, South Korea's ambiguous stance on the Indo-Pacific strategy and Quad raises Washington's skepticism on Seoul and in so doing, can weaken the solidarity of the US–ROK alliance.

Now, before we move onto conclusion, it is worthwhile to mention several caveats. First, this research has the problem of generalizability. Because of a small number of cases analyzed here (i.e. Seoul's

9 If the transfer happens, it will be an exception of 'Washington's long-held adherence to Pershing's principle that the US forces never give command to other soldiers.' See Soo Kim (2018) Troubling signs in US-ROK alliance (2 November) *The Hill*. <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/414407-troubling-signs-in-us-south-korea-alliance> (29 September 2020, date last accessed).

10 The Quad, which was initially formed in 2007, is an informal strategic forum for military drills and information exchanges between Australia, India, Japan, and USA. In a 2021 joint statement entitled, 'The Spirit of the Quad,' the Quad members reaffirmed their shared vision of 'a free, open, inclusive, and resilient Indo-Pacific' and committed themselves to 'the rules-based maritime order in the East and South China Seas' (see [The White House, 2021](#)). Since it is widely viewed as an organization to curb China's growing influence and alleged aggression across Indo-Pacific, Beijing strongly criticizes it and has issued statements of concern.

behaviors under Moon), the external validity of its findings may be limited. Nevertheless, these research findings are significant in the sense that they explain South Korea's puzzling behavior for which a dominant hedging theory is incapable of providing a convincing account. In particular, they contribute to theory-building efforts for the relationship between ideology and the security policy of secondary states, which has been under-researched and thus is poorly understood. Second, the cases of the Moon administration's security policy moves analyzed above, which were driven more by its progressive ideology than by its national interest, should not mean that the conservative ideology is better than the progressive counterpart for South Korea's security and prosperity. Given that the national interest refers to what is best for a nation or a society, the question of which ideology is better for the nation or the society should be assessed based on what security policy preferences will make the nation or the society better off at the time. Third, the fact that much of the Moon administration's security policy is similar to that of previous conservative administrations except for the cases analyzed in this article illustrates that not all of Moon's security policy is ideologically driven. Indeed, a number of Seoul's behaviors under Moon are consistent with hedging. The Moon administration's hedging-based NSP is a case in point. This demonstrates that it is important to understand the specific domestic contexts where South Korea's behavior is pushed in one direction rather than the other (i.e. driven by either ideology or the national interest). Fourth, the classification of South Korea's leading ideologies' security policy preferences presented in this article is not perfect. Hence, there could be some cases where Seoul's behavior does not fit into the predictions of each ideology-preferred security policy. A good example is the conservative Park administration's apparent China-leaning foreign/security policy moves that raised concerns in Washington prior to Seoul's decision of the THAAD deployment.

6 Conclusion

Given the limits of the prevailing hedging account for South Korea's puzzling behavior, which is in conformity with the interests of its adversary (i.e. North Korea) and potential threat (i.e. China) rather than those of its principal ally (i.e. the United States) and security

cooperation partner (i.e. Japan), this article has stressed the impact of the progressive ideology on Seoul's security policy. In doing so, it has sought to make a meaningful contribution to the literature of South Korea's behavior in particular and the role of ideology in state behavior in general.

The theoretical account that emphasizes the role of a domestic source of ideology on the security policy of secondary states presented here is not so much the replacement of the systemic hedging account as the provision of complementarity. It is not necessarily a superior approach either. Rather, when the systemic and interest-based hedging theory does not provide a compelling answer for some puzzling behavior of secondary states, the ideological account may offer an alternative explanation, illustrating that a similarly positioned state in the international system sometimes behaves differently (i.e. the state is not a unitary actor) and suboptimally (i.e. the state is not a rational actor) contrary to the claims of Waltzian structural realism. Needless to say, many security behaviors of secondary states cannot be satisfactorily explained by the ideological account alone.

The United States and South Korea are undeniably long-standing allies. They have shared goals such as peace and stability on the Korean peninsula and the final, fully verified denuclearization of North Korea, although they do not guarantee that they will always act in close policy coordination with each other. That said, Seoul's behavior under the Moon administration analyzed above was quite extraordinary as it satisfied Beijing and Pyongyang but infuriated Washington and Tokyo at a time when North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile threats were aggravating. What is important to note here is that Seoul's such behavior was the results of more ideology-driven than interests-driven security policies. As mentioned earlier, when a state's security policy is based more on ideology than on interests, it tends to be unrealistic and radical, and often goes against the national interest.

Admittedly, ideologies generate preferences that are not directly linked to interests. Even though we conceptualize ideologies as ones that emerge from interests, an ideology-skewed security policy, as opposed to an interest-driven one, can be dangerous for a state whose security depends heavily upon the protection of its ally, as analyzed in the South Korean case above. Thus far, the value of ideology in political decision-making has generally been acknowledged. For example, as

Bawn (1999, p. 304) points out, 'Ideologies place people clearly on one side of issues about which, on the basis of interest alone, they would be indifferent.' Indeed, ideological preferences often play a decisive role in democratic decision-making, as votes cast based on ideology can easily swamp those cast based on direct self-interest (Bawn, 1999, p. 303). What is less recognized, however, is the importance of ideology in security policy-making and its consequences on the security of the state. By highlighting the value of ideology in explaining the security policy of South Korea, which is strategically positioned between two competing hegemonic powers (i.e. USA and China), this article calls for attention to a domestic source of ideology in explaining the security behavior of a secondary state on which a prevailing interest-based and structural account (e.g. the hedging account) does not provide a convincing explanation.

To be sure, this research has limitations. Since the main purpose of this article was to explain South Korea's puzzling behavior under the Moon administration by analyzing the role of its progressive ideology, it did not address the specific mechanism under which different ideologies shape different security policy preferences or under what conditions states put ideologies ahead of interests and vice versa, etc. Future research could explore those important questions for a better understanding of the role of ideology in state behavior. Developing a measurement system by which one can assess the relative weight of influence between interests and ideologies in security policy could be another important area of future research.

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