

Book Guide

South Korea at the Crossroads

Against the backdrop of China's mounting influence and North Korea's growing nuclear capability and expanding missile arsenal, South Korea faces a set of strategic choices that will shape its economic prospects and national security. In *South Korea at the Crossroads*, Scott A. Snyder examines the trajectory of fifty years of South Korean foreign policy and offers predictions—and a prescription—for the future. Pairing a historical perspective with a shrewd understanding of today's political landscape, Snyder contends that South Korea's best strategy remains investing in a robust alliance with the United States.

Summary

The Korean Peninsula has historically been a victim of the tragedy of great-power politics given its geographic location at the vortex of great-power rivalry in Northeast Asia, yet South Korean leaders have had little ability to determine their country's fate. With no option other than to rely on the United States as an effective protector in the decades since the Korean War, South Korea faces an uncertain strategic environment generated by China's rise and questions surrounding its security alliance with the United States. In this context, South Korea's choice that will determine its future and influence the direction of the regional order in Northeast Asia.

Despite South Korea's rise as a significant middle power today, the prospect of renewed inter-Korean conflict hold its security and prosperity at risk. South Korea's foreign policy is a product of factors that have shaped its strategic environment and Koreans' choices before the country's establishment. First, the establishment and survival of South Korea as an independent state following the end of World War II depended on security guarantees provided by a distant great power, the United States. Second, the evolution of South Korean foreign policy has been accompanied by an ongoing struggle between the impulse toward inward-centered parochial nationalism and the demands of internationalism that have accompanied the country's economic growth. Third, South Korean leaders have continuously pursued unification as a national objective.

For the first time in decades, South Korea faces an active debate over alternative strategies to safeguard its security and prosperity. China's rise has uncovered latent tensions and rivalries that are gradually reshaping the regional context and reopening domestic debates over South Korea's choices, including questioning the durability of its alliance with the United States. If China successfully challenges U.S. global leadership or if South Korea comes to regard U.S. security guarantees as unreliable, South Korea will have to pursue an alternative, which will generate friction and stress in U.S.-South Korean relations.

As South Korea's domestic debates over its future and the competition among great powers intensify, South Korea will face greater pressures as it weighs alignment alternatives versus achieving greater autonomy. Even with South Korea's improved capabilities, the country is unlikely to be able to assure its security absent the credible assurances and commitments of a dependable alliance partner. China's rise has enabled it to assert growing economic and political influence on Seoul, but China does not yet have sufficient power, influence, or commitment to become an alternative security guarantor for South Korea. To better understand South Korea's predicament, this book sets out to examine the major factors that influence South Korean strategic choices. Despite sharper debates and increasing friction over South Korea's future, the U.S.-South Korea alliance will remain an essential instrument for assuring the country's security given its relative weakness compared to its neighbors.

Read an excerpt from [*South Korea at the Crossroads*](#)

This book is suitable for the following disciplines in undergraduate and graduate courses:

- International Relations
- East Asian Studies and History

- Contemporary East Asian Foreign Relations
- History of U.S. Foreign Policy

Essay and Discussion Questions

Courses on International Relations

1. What does the history of South Korean foreign relations say about the leverage, instruments, and role of a relatively weaker power in the context of rising great power competition?
2. What are some lessons about alliance dynamics based on the history of South Korea's foreign relations?
3. What strategic choices does a relatively weaker power face as an emerging power challenges an established power?
4. How did the 1987 democratization affect U.S.-ROK relations? What does it say about the role of domestic politics and system types in international relations?

Courses on East Asian Studies and History

1. What were the important events that affected the course of South Korea's foreign policy?
2. Historically, what are the predominant patterns that have characterized South Korea's foreign policy?
3. What have been the major factors affecting South Korea's foreign policy historically?
4. How has the deep and longstanding ideological polarization between progressive and conservative camps affected South Korea's North Korea policy and U.S. involvement on the Peninsula?

Courses on Contemporary East Asian Foreign Relations

1. What are the lessons that South Korean leaders today can learn by studying the history of their foreign policy?
2. What can be expected of South Korea's foreign policy in light of the Donald Trump administration's outlook on Korean affairs?
3. What lessons can be drawn about South Korea's recent missile defense spat with China and China's future approach to issues in the U.S.-ROK security alliance, based on the history of South Korea's foreign relations?

Courses on History of U.S. Foreign Policy

1. What are some possible policy prescriptions for the United States based on the book's understanding about how South Korea has responded to U.S. policies?
2. How has the alliance dynamics with South Korea changed and why?
3. What can be expected of the alliance dynamics in light of the current U.S.-North Korea nuclear confrontation?
4. How has each South Korean president attempted to pursue more autonomy vis-à-vis the United States? What were the results?

Supplementary Materials

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