SOUTH KOREA’S FOREIGN POLICY AND EAST ASIA

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South Korea, which for many years lacked a forward-looking foreign strategy, is now in a position to opt for something longer term and ambitious. These days, there are growing debates and burgeoning discourses about the desirable future trajectory of South Korean foreign policy. A theoretical perspective that will guide South Korean foreign strategy in defining the policy environment and specifying purposes and interests is necessary, together with a more concrete exploration of future policy agendas.

I. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE FOR EAST ASIAN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: MULTIPLE HISTORICAL DIMENSIONS WITH OVERLAPPING ORGANISING PRINCIPLES

Western International Relations theories, discourses and foreign policy thinking have been based on the assumption that there have been paradigmatic or grand transitions in organising principles and constitutional structures in the making of the medieval, modern or postmodern order.1 Symbolised by events such as the fall of the Roman Empire or the Treaty of Westphalia, the Western order has witnessed mega-transitions that affected the formation of ‘international’ or regional political structures or the constitution of individual agents and units. Scholars agree that modern international relations have been structured under the organising principle of ‘anarchy’, in which state units retain sovereignty internally and externally. Positivist-oriented IR scholars have built ‘scientific’ theories of international relations on the basis of this assumption, and historical sociologists have traced the process by which territorial states as units gain superiority over other competing units such as empires, city states and principalities.2 Various paradigms such as realism, liberalism or

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structuralism, although they diverge in their basic theoretical assumptions, share the view that the organising principle of anarchy is overarching in forming the international political structure and the character of state units.

While modern political transition in Europe was driven by inherent forms of logic such as the rise of territorial states, empowerment of the bourgeoisie through the development of capitalism, and the role of rationalism and a secular world view, which led to the strengthening of territorial kings, modernity, for Asians, was imposed externally. Charles Tilly’s thesis that “war makes states, and states make war” also applies to Asia, but in a quite different way. The Opium War in 1840 paved the way for Westerners to transform fundamentally the organising principle of the Asian regional order. In a sequence of unequal treaties that forced open ports, China was made accustomed to the ‘modern international’ order. Throughout the nineteenth century, other nations such as Japan and Korea were also transformed into modern units, characterised by sovereignty, territorial boundaries, and empire-colony relations. The process of modernisation in regional order was couched in severe rivalries among Western powers, a new inherent growing empire such as Japan, and a modern colony such as Korea.

The impact of externally imposed modernisation, and of distorted modernisation based on empire-colony relations has been enormous. To establish modern international relations means establishing an equilibrium among units in observing the basic constitutional norms, even though the relationships between these units are highly competitive. Without common rules and principles, which make competition itself possible, order cannot be maintained. State sovereignty entails norms of mutual recognition as independent units and non-intervention. The fact

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