Two-Level Games for South Korea’s National Security Decisions:

The Precarious Balance Between U.S. Alliance and South Korean Constituents

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**Introduction**

It is undeniable that South Korea will need the United States as an ally for its survival in the face of the North Korean threat. Yet historically, South Korean presidents have had varying degrees of trust and compliance with the alliance. Due to the concern that the U.S. may abandon its own commitments, for instance, former President Park Chung-hee pursued independent development of nuclear weapons with full knowledge that it violated the terms of the alliance. Nearly four decades later, the decision under former President Park Geun-hye to deploy the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense system without proper legal procedures — a decision that, unlike her father’s, showed strong compliance with the alliance at the expense of national autonomy — caused a public uproar. Following Park’s unprecedented impeachment, President Moon Jae-in faces a dilemma between having to maintain the U.S.-ROK alliance and having to satisfy a liberal, politically engaged constituent base that is far different from Park’s main supporter base.

**Literature Review**

The primary theoretical foundation for this study is Robert Putnam’s theory on two-level games. Putnam’s two-level game theory views international agreements as consisting of two stages, namely Level I and Level II. The first stage involves “bargaining between the negotiators, leading to a tentative agreement,” or also referred to as Level I; the second stage involves “separate discussions within each group of constituents about whether to ratify the agreement.”[[1]](#footnote-1) The description of a Level I agreement can be simplified into two lead negotiators, each representing their own country, attempting to reach an agreement. In the case of the THAAD deployment, for instance, the Level I agreement would include the chief diplomats from South Korea and the United States, and the diplomats will negotiate over whether THAAD should be deployed to Korea at all, and if yes, what the specifics of the deployment should entail. While the real-life negotiations at Level I would involve far more actors from the Ministry of Defense of South Korea and the U.S. Departments of State and/or Defense, the simplified picture allows for an understanding of international agreements in game theory terms.

Level II, then, would require the citizens of South Korea and the United States to “ratify” or approve of the agreement that was made on THAAD deployment. The preferences of various constituent groups in Level II can be represented by a “win-set.” The win-set in Putnam’s theory refers to “the set of all possible Level I agreements that would ‘win’ – that is, gain the necessary majority among the constituents – when simply voted up or down.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Putnam concluded that when all other conditions and variables are the same, the negotiation with larger win-sets are more likely to be successful. The three factors that Putnam found to be the most important in determining the sizes of the win-sets, then, were the following: Level II preferences and coalitions, Level II institutions, and Level I negotiators’ strategies. First, the variation of preferences and payoff matrices in the Level II groups affect the size of win-sets. Let us suppose that the government presents to coalitions A and B (domestic level) the agreement it reached with a foreign state at Level I (international level). If coalition A has less to lose from no-agreement than coalition B, then coalition A will be more likely to be skeptical of the Level I agreement. It is thus likely for countries with large, self-sufficient economies to generally be opposed to ratifying international agreements. These self-sufficient countries have less to lose from the failure to reach a trade agreement or an ally. On the other hand, small economies that depend on imports and exports are more likely to ratify international agreements. South Korea belongs to the latter group, for it heavily relies on the U.S. for both trade and national security.

Next, domestic institutions at Level II also help determine the size of win-sets. The institutions not only include physical entities that have been established by the government or people of the state, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and non-governmental organizations, but it also includes rules and norms that guide the political decision-making process in the state. For instance, Putnam argues that in a country in which “a two-thirds vote is required for ratification, the win-set will almost certainly be smaller than if only a simple majority is required.”[[3]](#footnote-3) In other words, the more stringent the rules are for obtaining the approval of the domestic constituency, the smaller the win-set, and therefore the more difficult it is to find the overlaps between the Level II actors of the two states that are part of the agreement.

Lastly, the Level I negotiators’ strategy can also influence the size of win-sets. Here, the Level I negotiators’ strategy and their intentions to change the win-set sizes apply both to their own win-set and the other side’s win-set. Putnam concludes that whereas “each Level I negotiator has an unequivocal interest in maximizing the other side’s win-set, but with respect to his own win-set, his motives are mixed.”[[4]](#footnote-4) This is because first, if the other side’s win-set is large, then there is a greater number of potential agreements that will be ratified by the other side’s domestic constituents. Second, it may be preferable for each Level I negotiator to either make his or her win-set larger or smaller, depending on the circumstances. If the negotiator’s own win-set is larger, then the agreements the negotiator brings home are more likely to be ratified. Yet at the same time, having a large win-set means that the other side may attempt to force agreements that are not optimal. For instance, let us suppose that country A is a large country that is economically self-sufficient and does not really need trade. Then its domestic win-set is probably small because its constituents have little to lose from reducing trade and they can be discriminating about the conditions of a trade agreement. On the other hand, suppose that country B is a small economy that must continue to have exports and imports with country A in order to survive. B’s win-sets are likely to be large because as long as the conditions of a trade agreement are reasonable and not extremely harmful to B’s interests, then the domestic constituents will have to accept the trade agreement instead of rejecting it and facing an economic crisis.

The two-level game theory is important in the South Korean context in that South Korea is a small state that depends on numerous allies and trade partners for its own prosperity. At the same time, despite the relatively small size of its population and the overwhelming ethnic homogeneity, the South Korean constituency consists of a variety of ideological orientations, socioeconomic backgrounds, and generational differences on political issues. The persistence of the multiparty system, as opposed to the two-party system, in South Korean politics demonstrates that even among the conservatives and liberals, nuanced disagreements on policy issues are important for individual voters. In addition, the recent impeachment of President Park Geun-hye has heightened the South Korean public’s scrutiny of its own government and its actions. Putnam’s study of international agreements has shown that even when both governments (or “chief diplomats”) reach a successful agreement at Level I, the sustainability of the agreement hinges upon the preferences of actors at Level II. At times, concealing the specifics of the Level I agreement to the public so that it does not ratified by Level II actors may be preferable for the governments. For instance, in the Iran hostage crisis, “even though both the American and Iranian governments seem to have favored an arms-for-hostages deal, negotiations collapse as soon as they became public and thus liable to de facto ‘ratification.’”[[5]](#footnote-5) Such was the decision that the Park administration and the U.S. had made regarding the deployment of THAAD, when they bargained over the details over the deployment without making the deployment known to the public. The Park administration announced the matter publicly only after it had reached an agreement with the U.S., causing a fury among the South Korean public for bypassing the necessary democratic procedures and disregarding the citizens’ will. An interview statement from the small town of Soseong-ri, in which THAAD was deployed, represent such frustration of Level II actors and their attempts to strike down the Level I agreement: “No one asked us if we want to host this U.S. base. I’m worried about contamination of this river – our livelihood.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

 In the dilemma at hand, there are two sets of conflicts that Moon must deal with. In the first one, the conflict is between the South Korean government and the U.S. government. James Fearon’s model of audience costs is another theoretical framework that helps illuminate the different motives and costs associated with each party. Although Fearon uses his model to explain defender-challenger relationships in potential crises, we can adjust the model and identify the South Korean government as the “defender” and the U.S. government as the “challenger.” The policy options for the “defender” are then “commit to the alliance” and “develop greater autonomy,” instead of “responding with force to a challenge” and “not responding with force.” The policy options for the “challenger” are “commit to the alliance” and “abandon the alliance for a better security option.” Under the current circumstances, the U.S. abandonment could take different possible forms, such as a first-strike on North Korea without the South Korean government’s consent and withdrawing U.S. forces from South Korea (one that is highly unlikely but was suggested by Trump).

 Fearon suggests audience costs as means for states to signal that their threats are genuine, both in cases of when they are genuine and when they are “bluffing.”[[7]](#footnote-7) In our case, the goal for the “defender” state, i.e. South Korea, is to signal to the U.S. that its intention to commit to the alliance is genuine when it most likely is. Despite Moon’s talks of a liberal, pacifist approach to North Korea, it is highly irrational for him to pursue an autonomous self-defense policy given the recent developments of North Korean missile technology. On the other hand, it is possible that the U.S. government may abandon its alliance with South Korea if it believes the U.S. security interests are under a grave and imminent threat. For instance, despite reassurances from the South Korean government officials to the public, it may choose to act without consulting South Korea if there is reason to believe that the U.S. territories and citizens may be attacked. Yet even if the U.S. government may be “bluffing” and preparing for war contingencies, it is critical for the U.S. to signal to South Korea that it is also willing to commit to the alliance and that it will not attack North Korea preemptively without notice.

 This study will then focus on analyzing the signals on South Korea’s part as the second set of conflict. Whereas the South Korean government must signal that it is willing to maintain the U.S.-ROK alliance (for which its intentions are genuine), the signals it sends come into conflict with Moon’s domestic interests. For instance, the deployment of THAAD serves a practical purpose and also functions as a signal to the U.S., but it could weaken the public’s faith in Moon in his ability to maintain his campaign promises. Moon was able to avoid the public’s outrage, largely thanks to his unusually high approval ratings, biased media coverage in favor of him, and the vagueness of his campaign platform on THAAD. However, once the honeymoon period is over, Moon will have to confront more complex decisions on signaling in the years to come and may experience downfall in his approval ratings as a result of domestic policy decisions.

 In addition to an unusually high approval rating (largely thanks to a positive image of Moon created by the impeachment crisis), the increase in the number of parties could affect public opinion and news coverage of foreign policy decisions. Matthew Baum found in his research of the Iraqi coalition that in countries with a large number of parties, the news coverage becomes diverse, policy-centric, and critical. In turn, increased access to TV led to increases in opposition to participation in war. Here Baum assumed that troop deployment to Iraq is a politically high-risk decision that leaders — regardless of the number of parties — would avoid if domestic political risks become too high. In constrast, in countries with a small number of parties, there was greater room for candidates to pursue vague policy platforms, and increased access to TV actually led to a “decrease in public opposition to the war in Iraq”.[[8]](#footnote-8) Baum’s research adds complexities to Fearon’s model of domestic audience costs by identifying factors, such as the number of political parties, that would condition the ways media access affects public opinion on foreign policy decisions. Given that South Korea recently experienced an increase in the number of major parties, the news coverage and its effects on public opinion may need to be studied using Baum’s frameworks.

 Robert Johns’ study of public opinion on foreign policy decisions as a delegation heuristic — that is, delegating the choice to elites, government leaders, or news outlets — and not as a deduction heuristic — making decisions based on abstract principles — could also help explain the South Korean public’s responses to Moon’s signaling regarding the U.S.-ROK alliance. For instance, it is possible that the public relied more heavily on deduction heuristics under Park’s administration and opposed decisions like THAAD based on nationalistic principles, but that it is now more willing to delegate foreign policy decisions to the executive given the high public approval rating.

 Kertzer and Zeitzoff’s study on the effects of group cues on foreign policy opinion could also be helpful in the current South Korean context. The study is especially interesting in that it compares the strength of group cues to that of elite cues. Following the election of Moon, South Korea saw an emergence in anti-elitism, especially with Moon’s avid supporters waging a war with liberal news outlets. Whereas liberal elites — including the news outlets — are more likely to be skeptical of Moon’s domestic and foreign policy decisions regardless of his partisanship, Moon supporters in the past seven months have demonstrated that they are willing to blindly embrace Moon’s statements and actions. Any sign of criticism or disrespect toward Moon or the First Lady from the liberal media outlets have been attacked by Moon supporters, as showcased in a recent controversy with *Hankyoreh*’s decision to refer to the First Lady without adding “Madam” to her name. It may be observed in my study that group cues among those who identify as liberals, those who identify as supporters of The Minjoo Party, and those who identify as supporters of Moon as an individual may be stronger than elite cues. It is also notable that popular liberal elites in South Korea that were originally in favor of Moon, who would otherwise have criticized a blind following of a politician, have defended avid Moon supporters in their conflicts with the liberal media. Other liberal elites who may not be as supportive of Moon have remained largely silent in the fear of a public outrage. It will be interesting to study the interaction between group cues and public opinion on foreign policy, given the possibility that the current public obsession with Moon may blind both ordinary citizens and elites from seeing faults in Moon’s actions.

The agreements they reach with the U.S. government (first level) would then need to be approved by the South Korean public (second level). The case studies of three South Korean administrations, namely those under Lee Myung Bak (2008-2013), Park Geun-hye (2013-2017), and Moon Jae-in (2017-Present), reveal different historical, political, and social factors that jeopardize the precarious balance that South Korean presidents must maintain between the American ally and their constituents.

**Case Study 1: Lee Myung-bak Administration [Feb. 2008 – Feb. 2013]**

 The most notable controversy that haunted the Lee Myung-bak administration was that regarding the U.S.-Korea beef trade and the mad cow disease scare. South Korea had been one of the biggest importers of U.S. beef until 2003, when the outbreak of mad cow disease led to a halt in beef trade.[[9]](#footnote-9) In May of 2008, the Lee administration announced that it will resume the inspections of U.S. beef, and members of the South Korean public were outraged. By the summer of 2008, the organizations of anti-U.S. beef protests estimated that approximately 100,000 people were present at the candlelight vigil on a single day. The vigils continued for over three months, and President Lee’s apology to the public failed to assuage the citizens’ anger. About 10 years later the mad cow disease scare, in 2017, the U.S. became the number one source of beef against all other countries that export beef to South Korea, most notably Australia.[[10]](#footnote-10) The increase in the sale of U.S. beef since 2008 could be explained by its relatively low price, thanks to U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreements, and the gradual elimination of misperceptions and myths regarding the mad cow disease. Yet it is not the fact regarding the safety of U.S. beef at the time that is important to our discussion. The main focus of this case study will be how the Level I negotiators, the U.S. government and the South Korean President Lee Myung-bak, reached the agreement and delivered it in a manner that brought about vehement rejection from South Korea’s Level II actors.

 The Level I agreement in this case was the U.S. and South Korea’s mutual decision to resume importing American beef into Korea, given that thorough and quarantined inspections will be conducted for the beef. The Level I agreement clearly did not fall within the win-sets of the South Korean public, while it perfectly fit into the U.S. domestic constituents’ win-sets as beef exports would only bring about economic gains to the U.S. cattle and food processing industries.

 Existing preferences, coalitions, and institutions in Korea at the time help explain why the Level I agreement was so violently rejected by the South Korean public. In 2008, information was beginning to be spread rapidly through the Internet in South Korea, especially via online “cafes” where anonymous members could post articles and comments. These cafes were usually groups of like-minded individuals, and especially the cafes that brought together young mothers became sources of active protestors. The Chonsun Ilbo interview of a mother who protested against importing U.S. beef reveals that many women felt responsible for protecting their children from unsafe food. [[11]](#footnote-11)

 Lastly, Level I negotiators’ strategies can explain why the South Korean win-sets had become so narrow. The Lee administration did not do a proper job of delivering the agreement – resumption of beef import from the U.S. – to the public in a manner that would reduce their fear and eliminate unfounded misperceptions regarding the safety of the beef. If the government had adequately addressed the public’s concerns before the myths could spread online and start a mad cow disease scare, then the constituents’ win-sets may have broadened to allow for beef imports on the condition that stringent inspections are conducted before they enter South Korea.

**Case Study 2: Park Geun-hye Administration [Feb. 2013 – Mar. 2017]**

The greatest controversy that threatened Park Geun-hye’s balance between the U.S. and the South Korean public was the deployment of Terminal High-Altitude Aerial Defense (THAAD). THAAD is a defense system that targets and destroys short- and medium-range ballistic missiles in the terminal stage of their flight.[[12]](#footnote-12) The deployment in South Korea was not the first one conducted by the U.S. government in the Asia Pacific. Temporary THAAD batteries were deployed to the U.S. territory of Guam in 2013 for the first time following North Korea’s third nuclear weapons test in February of that year, and the system has been established in Hawaii as well.[[13]](#footnote-13) The deployment of THAAD in South Korea, therefore, marked the first time that the U.S. government installed the missile defense system in a non-U.S. territory. The question of national sovereignty is crucial in the South Korean government’s decision to agree to the deployment. Without the approval of voters and tax-paying citizens, does the federal executive single-handedly have the right to reach military- and security-related agreements with allies, if the agreement were in the best interest of the nation? What are the proper checks and balances that must be in place to ensure that such agreements do indeed improve the nation’s security? Or, on the contrary, should certain checks and balances be waived in order to ensure a timely and efficient decision-making process in the face of national emergencies? Such were the questions that the THAAD deployment to South Korea had revealed, ones that the relatively young democracy had not yet had the chance to resolve.

I will now discuss the differences among the American justification for the THAAD deployment, that of the South Korean president, and various South Korean constituencies’ justification or opposition regarding the deployment. It is important to note here that the South Korean constituency is not a single-minded monolith; numerous non-governmental advocacy groups had conflicting agendas and stances regarding the issue, and the divisions were especially conspicuous along generational and regional differences.

First, the U.S. has justified the deployment of THAAD as a necessary means of defense against the increasing threat of nuclear attacks from North Korea. North Korea had conducted its fifth nuclear test on September 9th, 2016, that was recorded to have caused “an artificial 5.3-magnitude earthquake near North Korea’s nuclear test site” at approximately 10 to 20 kilotons, in comparison to the 6-kiloton testing from earlier in that same year.[[14]](#footnote-14) On one hand, the U.S. presidents emphasized the need to create deterrence to prevent attacks from North Korea from occurring in the first place. Obama vowed to establish “extended deterrence, guaranteed by the full spectrum of U.S. defense capabilities.”[[15]](#footnote-15) On the other hand, THAAD’s function would be to successfully thwart off missiles in case North Korea decides to use them. North Korea’s first-ever testing of the intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) in July of 2017 made the possibility of a long-distance missile attack from North Korea to the U.S. mainland more likely than ever. The development of the ICBM may appear irrelevant to South Korea’s security. However, it is crucial to note that in the case North Korea threatens to attack both the U.S. mainland and the American allies in the Asia Pacific, the priority for the U.S. military will be to defend its own territories. It is all the more necessary for the U.S. to provide its allies with the proper mechanism for deterrence and defense as it readjusts its own security priorities.

Among the South Korean constituent groups that opposed the deployment, the most notable one was the group of elderly farmers living in the village of Soseong-ri, where THAAD was planned to be deployed. The South Korean Ministry of Defense announced in September of 2016 that it will deploy THAAD in Soseong-ri because it only had a small number of civilian households in the area.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The consituents in Soseong-ri have historically voted for the conservative party. They tend to be older and support polity platforms that are anti-North Korea and prioritize national security, such as the ones championed by the Saenuri Party (the party now named Liberty Korea Party). In fact, despite the THAAD controversy that embroiled the people of Soseong-ri, the city of Seongju (the city that Soseong-ri falls under) voted for the candidate from the Libery Korea Party in the 2017 presidential election against Moon Jae-in to many observers’ shock.

There are a number of reasons that prompted the citizens of Soseong-ri to oppose the deployment, and the “true reason” can be obscured by the messaging of their opposition. In other words, it is possible for a group of citizens to oppose the implementation of a policy due to purely self-interested reasons, but they will likely refer to non-selfish reasons when they demonstrate their opposition so that they can gain the compassion and support of third-party observers. The keyword that the elderly farmers of Soseong-ri used the most frequently in their protest against the deployment of THAAD was “peace.” The protestors from Soseong-ri and non-governmental or religious organizations from across the country used “peace” as an antithesis to THAAD, and their message calling for peace on the Korean Peninsula resonated with many liberal and moderate constituents.

**Case Study 3: Moon Jae-in Administration [May 2017 – Present]**

 Moon Jae-in’s conciliatory stance toward North Korea began to raise criticisms, both domestically and overseas, when Moon employed the message of peace and diplomacy on the Korean peninsula during his campaign for the 2017 presidential election. Moon had previously worked for the Roh Moo-hyun administration, and many observers predicted that Moon will be a “dove” who may compromise the U.S. security commitments in Northeast Asia.

 The fear of being perceived as too naïve to both the U.S. and South Korean voters prompted Moon to present himself as a “military man.” Moon recalled his time serving in the South Korean military as a young man in his interview with Time, describing how he cut down a tree under the orders of the commander of the United Nations forces in South Korea.[[17]](#footnote-17) The strategy of presenting himself as capable of being tough on North Korea is one of the tactics that Moon took as a Level I negotiator. Establishing a perception of the South Korean president as eager to maintain his alliance with the U.S. and cooperate against the North Korean threat would increase the Level II win-sets in the U.S. Moon was also able to widen his own domestic win-sets in South Korea by reaching an approval rating of 80% at its highest.[[18]](#footnote-18) As a result, Moon was able to reach multiple agreements with the U.S. to pursue a peaceful negotiation process with North Korea instead of responding to its nuclear threats with military options. As of June 2018, the U.S. agreed to suspend its joint military exercises with South Korea as a result of its own summit with North Korea in Singapore and multiple high-level talks conducted between the two Koreas.[[19]](#footnote-19)

**Conclusion**

The presidents of both the U.S. and South Korea face uncertainty regarding the win-sets of their domestic populations. In the U.S., the nationwide controversy over the nomination of Brett Kavanaugh, who has been accused of sexual assault by multiple women, may jeopardize the success of the Republican Party in the upcoming midterm elections in November 2018.[[20]](#footnote-20) Moon Jae-in’s approval ratings have fallen to an all-time low at 55%, due to dissatisfaction regarding his economic policies, such as his decision to increase minimum wage, from both the conservatives and liberals.[[21]](#footnote-21) Moon angered conservatives by raising the minimum wage without adequate planning or discussion of the matter, threatening the livelihood of independent small business owners without reducing hiring malpractices of large corporates. The new minimum wage law had allowed corporates to pay the same total amount of wages to workers because bonuses were now included to count as hourly wage. Liberal supporters of Moon were also disappointed that he failed to keep the promise he had made to voters regarding improving workers’ rights. It is all the more important as the U.S. and South Korea begin its denuclearization process with North Korea that the leaders of both countries properly understand their own win-sets and the other side’s. The agreements they reach regarding treaties with North Korea and national security will need to be carefully tailored to avoid widespread rejection from voters.

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