

12-1-2018

Snyder, Scott A. South Korea at the Crossroads: Autonomy and Alliance in an Era of Rival Powers. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.

Brian Arendt Ph.D.
Lindenwood University, barendt@lindenwood.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Environmental Studies Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Arendt, Brian Ph.D. (2018) "Snyder, Scott A. South Korea at the Crossroads: Autonomy and Alliance in an Era of Rival Powers. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 10: No. 1, Article 13.

DOI: 10.62608/2158-0669.1445

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol10/iss1/13>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of International and Global Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. For more information, please contact phuffman@lindenwood.edu.

Snyder, Scott A. *South Korea at the Crossroads: Autonomy and Alliance in an Era of Rival Powers*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.

Events of the past year on the Korean Peninsula have been highly dramatic. The two antagonists, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North) and the Republic of Korea (ROK) (South) may be on a path towards peace and mutual regard. This development appeared impossible not long ago. Although the major headlines declare that a U.S. president, for the first time, sat down with a North Korean dictator, the real headline has been the dance of Kim Jong-un and Moon Jae-in across the DMZ demarcation line. A possible peace agreement has been a long time coming, and South Korean politicians have long worked towards this goal, as Scott Snyder points out in *South Korea at the Crossroads*, and may be on the verge of accomplishing their ultimate objective.

Reunification is but one of Scott Snyder's topics in this work. Snyder, an influential academic and member of the staff of the Council on Foreign Relations, has produced a seminal work engaging the past, present, and future of South Korea's foreign relations. His resources are accurate and telling, including official publications of the South Korean administration and U.S. government, along with the memoirs of the major actors who guided South Korean foreign policy through the years. He has also scrutinized the work of other major authors in this field, such as Bruce Cummings and Victor Cha. He thus examines the gamut of South Korea's foreign policy positions, including, of course, Seoul's key relationship with the United States, as well as Korea's near neighbors, China and Japan. He also stresses the importance and relevance of South Korean domestic politics, especially after the successful democratization movement of the 1980s and 1990s.

Interestingly enough, Snyder's analysis focuses on the South Korean relationship with China most of all. Given the rather rapid rise of China since the 1980s, and especially since its recent military modernization and expansion, the question raised today in Korean domestic politics is whether South Korea would be better served having a closer relationship with China or with the United States. Snyder clearly concludes that the relationship with the United States continues to provide greater benefits, especially in terms of security, than a closer connection with China would. (Because *South Korea at the Crossroads* was published before the outcome of the 2016 elections and changing U.S. policies, there are extenuating circumstances. However, Snyder does provide a lucid argument that the "sunk costs" of the US-ROK alliance and their shared democratic and economic values will maintain the alliance, as it is ultimately in the South's best interests.)

Other theses in Snyder's work are clearly connected to the history of South Korea and the various administrations that have run its government. During the Korean War, both the South and the North were run by less-than-democratic systems, and this would continue for some time. Beginning with the Park Chung-hee administration in the 1970s, however, South Korean contact with the North became viable, and a strategy emerged to pursue the goal of unification. The term "Nordpolitik" is assigned to this strategy, which was originally to isolate North Korea through better relations with China and the Soviet Union. By the 1990s, the South had experienced a political revolution resulting in a democratic political order. The turning point in the relationship between North and South was the administration in South Korea of Kim Dae-jung, whose Sunshine Policy envisioned a confederation in which South and North would share a common foreign policy but would have autonomy over their internal affairs until they eventually agreed to full unification. The key step was increased economic connection and political engagement,

which would eventually attain the agreement of the international community for Korean unification.

Of course, the relationship with the United States has always loomed large for South Korea in its foreign policy, not only towards unification with the North but also towards its status in Northeast Asia and beyond. Synder points out that the relationship between the U.S. and South Korea evolved from the early days of the Korean War to the onset of Park Chung-hee's attempt at constructing nuclear weapons. As an aspect of this relationship, the United States has also shifted in its support (or lack thereof) of ultimate Korean unification. While the Clinton administration expressed willingness to support Kim Young-sam's negotiations with the North, the Bush administration was unwilling to cooperate with the Kim Dae-jung administration on policies towards North Korea. By 2009, the U.S. would, in conjunction with the United Nations, insist on North Korean denuclearization while openly guaranteeing the security of South Korea and support for the South's democracy and its market system.

Synder also examines South Korea's desire for world recognition. By the 1990s, economic expansion had made the country a major exporter and a major trade partner of the United States, among others. By the early 2000s, the South had taken further steps to play a greater role in world politics, not only in Northeast Asia but in a number of international organizations. The Lee Myung-bak administration was instrumental in the creation of the Northeast Asian Cooperation Initiative, which sought greater cultural exchanges among the Northeast Asian states (China, Russia, North and South Korea, and Japan). Lee further attempted to raise the South's profile through hosting a number of important international summits (particularly the G-7 summit in 2010) and by promoting a "Global Korea" policy to magnify the South's standing in the world. Nonetheless, there is, for Snyder, skepticism as to whether South Korea is a true Middle Power, given that its GDP relative to China and Japan remains small and that its defense spending is far behind that of Russia and China.

Then there is Synder's thesis that domestic politics in South Korea have always had a major influence on the course of foreign policy. Perhaps during the decades of dictatorship, from Syngman Rhee to Chun Doo-hwan, domestic political considerations were marginal. However, with the arrival of democratic politics in the 1990s, the opinion of the Korean voting public began to hold sway. Synder has divided Korean domestic politics into a Conservative and Progressive wing. (Of course, anyone familiar with Korean politics understands that there are more factions within each grouping and that an election loss may lead to considerable jockeying of position until new factions gain control). The major political shift, to be sure, was the election of Kim Dae-jung in 1998 and the advent of the Sunshine Policy. Kim was affected, however, by a common element in Korean domestic affairs, the ebb and flow of anti-Americanism. As Synder cogently points out, the anti-Americanism of the generation of Koreans who were students in the 1980s was indeed directed at the whole of the United States, but by the early 2000s, the anti-American sentiment had manifested among a new generation of young Koreans as hostility to a particular American administration (the George Bush administration) and towards a Korean administration that was not properly defending the South's key interests. Hence, Kim's policies divided the Korean public between those fearing that the North Korean atrocities would never be sufficiently addressed and those that were willing to overlook this possibility in order to pursue negotiations with the North.

What, then are the prospects for a unified Korea, should it come about? A key factor is the possibility that a considerable economic burden imposed on the South Korean public will take place. Certainly, West Germans in the lead up to the reunification of Germany in 1990 were

concerned about the costs of reunification, and many West Germans were unwilling to accept increased taxes to create a new German government. However, the two Germanys were indeed reunited, with West Germany footing a good portion of the reunification costs; the question remains whether the Korean Peninsula will experience a similar transition. There are analysts in the South who now argue, as Synder points out, that an economic liberalization of the North would benefit the South and would enhance the general economic growth of the Korean economy, alleviating some of the burden of unification. Synder posits that the South may need to exploit the numerous weaknesses of the North Korean economic and political system and to risk its own security if unification appears achievable. This, of course, would lead to considerable domestic opposition if the North continued to resist the overture.

Overall, Scott Synder has provided in *South Korea at the Crossroads* real insight into the foreign policy of the Republic of Korea. Perhaps the study needed greater use of historical sources for the earlier Korean administrations, and perhaps more analysis of the foreign policies of the United States and China might have more clearly illuminated those powers' positions towards the Korean Peninsula. But these criticisms pale in comparison to the importance of this study. As events have unfolded in the past year, it is critical that an understanding of South Korean foreign and domestic policy supplement the greater attention paid to United States' diplomacy in the region. South Korea is not a helpless pawn in a struggle between two great powers but is clearly capable of shaping its own destiny. Time will tell if the long effort towards unification will result in success.

Brian B. Arendt PhD
Lindenwood University
Barendt@lindenwood.edu