Korea and Japan in the Evolving China-US Relations

Covid 19 and Global Governance: Koreas and Japanese perspectives
A panel discussion and short commentary proposal
(26 April 2020)

—Online panel discussion on 28 May 2020 (IAFOR Asian conference on Asian studies)

—Short commentary piece (max 1,000 words) on one of the two themes outlined below (deadline: title submission asap; deadline for piece 25 May)

Outline

There are several themes and topics that are widely discussed in the international media, aside from each country's responses and the problems related to them. Some common issues are: issues related to testing and screening, social and cultural problems related to social distancing and lockdowns, burden on the health care system, including medical equipment supplies (PPE for medical staff, ventilators and ICUs, and face masks), efficacy of face masks, and anti-Asia (China) racism.

For the purpose of this project, *Japan and Korea in the evolving China-US relations*, I have selected two topics that may be worth some in-depth discussions:
    (a) the impact of China-US relations on the system of global governance.
    (b) the claim that Asian authoritarian tendency is an asset to tackling the outbreak.

Outline

This is not the first time that the world has experienced a pandemic neither is it the first time the world responded to virus outbreaks, from the avian flu, SARS and MERS and successfully contained the spread. Many governments' responses (or preparations against it) were too slow, and the cost of it has been very high, especially in Europe and the United States. Because it started in Asia, and like the SARS epidemic or the bird flu which were more or less contained in Asia, the outbreak was in the early stage a far-away occurrence.

By the time lockdowns of cities, regions and countries became inevitable, it opened a new door to many social and political (not to mention economic) challenges in countries under a state of national emergency, an extraordinary situation for many people who have only known peaceful conditions. US President Donald Trump likened himself to a "war time president" to fight an "invisible enemy" by the time he belatedly realized that the pandemic was affecting his country the most.

    a) **Covid-19 as a global governance challenge**

In the blame game for letting this virus spread, there are two main targets, China and the World Health Organisation. While China's problems are manifold, as a global governance question, the failure of the WHO is arguably more serious. From the outset, and even before the Trump administration began attacking both China and WHO, there was already a view that WHO was too slow to act and that its chief, Tedros Adhanom, was defending China's

early missteps and misleading the world about the dangers of the virus. The recent article in _The Atlantic_ is damning:

> The most notorious example came in the form of a single tweet from the WHO account on January 14: "Preliminary investigations conducted by the Chinese authorities have found no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission of the novel #coronavirus." That same day, the Wuhan Health Commission's public bulletin declared, "We have not found proof for human-to-human transmission." But by that point even the Chinese government was offering caveats not included in the WHO tweet. "The possibility of limited human-to-human transmission cannot be excluded," the bulletin said, "but the risk of sustained transmission is low."

It still has not changed its guidelines about face masks for "healthy people". China's problems notwithstanding, for the WHO to be accused of being an agent of one country is deeply problematic because it contributes to eroding confidence in the UN system. The Trump administration's threat to halt funding the organization has further threatened spirit of international co-operation, collaboration and coordination that is indispensable for the proper functioning of the UN system or good global governance.

This has serious implications of Japan and Korea. The already cold bilateral relationship started on the wrong footing in dealing with the spread when Japan carelessly targeted only China and Korea when it issued entry visa bans to Japan (when Italy and Iran were already major outbreak countries). The co-operation between the two countries as neighbours deeply affected by the spread was and still is desirable. But as two countries dependent on the UN system as well as China and the US, Korea and Japan are almost inside the eye of the storm, as Chinese and the American actions undermine the UN system through its counteracting policies toward WHO.

The lack of trust between the US and China has been problematic from the outset when China asked the US group to not be part of the WHO team inspecting the situation. Clearly neither country is capable of global leadership to help the UN system. As many are already talking about the world after Covid-19, about who might be the winners and losers in the aftermath, one thing that should not be on the loser side is the UN system. But at the moment, this appears a distinct possibility.

Should not countries like Japan and Korea (middle powers) work more closely and strategically with EU states and Southeast Asian states to restore credibility in WHO and salvage the UN system? If so, how could we do this?

b) Covid-19 as an East-West cultural challenge

The pandemic has demonstrated that when trust in global governance breaks down, a host of other problems emerge that reasserts the divisive side of nation-states: closing of borders, xenophobia and racism, and the politicization of the pandemic through blame games. China's actions and motivations are deeply questionable, because the pandemic comes at a time when the downside of China's global influence is being played up. Accusations of human rights abuse, poor hygiene

in wet markets, information control and propaganda, and oppression and persecutions of those deemed "dissenters" by the authorities (such as the whistle blower doctor in Wuhan), and above all, lack of transparency, do not make for good advertising. To counter this, China has also begun to spin its narrative to defend its actions.

One of the views that have emerged (which I find deeply troubling) is the stereo-typing of Asian societies as intrinsically or innately authoritarian, defer to authority and trust their states, and that is why they are better at containing the spread of the virus.

While there may be a grain or two of truism in this claim, this generalization should not be part a global conversation when the time comes to review how the world responded to the pandemic. The self-congratulatory Chinese claim that its resolute way of approaching the situation in Wuhan was successful feeds into the larger discourse on "alternative models" of development, political system and governance. The broad Orientalist brush strokes of "East v West" overlook real democratic impulses in Asia, and how alternative models to democracy other than "liberal democracy" in the Western sense should be understood as part of democracy's evolution.

The governments of Japan and Korea (and Taiwan and Southeast Asian states) have demonstrated that the iron fist of the central state is the last resort. For all its imperfections and missteps, Japanese government has done everything to avoid "lock down" (with the consequences playing out as we speak but still…). This and other examples tell a different story about how "Asian societies" are coping with the pandemic that does not sit comfortably with the Orientalist narrative. The tension between state and civil society is no different than what is played up in the US or in Europe. And, I think it is in the interest of East Asians (especially Japan and Korea as the two largest democracies in East Asia, as US allies, and as major countries in the international economy) to offer a counter-narrative about the Asian socio-cultural and political characteristics in a larger context of democracy in Asia.