

Notes on Strategy

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Political-philosophical reflections on the paradigm
of international order in the COVID-19 era:
From isolated subjectivity to intersubjectivity

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**Political-philosophical reflections on the paradigm of international order in the COVID-19 era:
From isolated subjectivity to intersubjectivity**

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More than a year has passed since the COVID-19 pandemic broke out and fundamentally altered our way of life. Mask-wearing and contactless communication have become normalized. Scenarios concocted by our imagination enacted in disaster movies are occurring in real life. The worldwide death toll and economic damages have exceeded those generated by the tragic wars of the 20th century.

Despite the deep wounds brought on by COVID-19, the actual impact it has on people's worldviews or outlook on global affairs and security feels miniscule by comparison. Perhaps it is comparable to the visibility and invisibility of death; or something akin to the ubiquity of the news of the World Trade Center's collapse in direct contrast to corpses silently wheeled out of hospitals. Or does the egoistical response to COVID-19 just boil down to the self-centered nature of humans who are acting on instinct and showing their true colors in a crisis?

As demonstrated in the U.S.-China confrontation and the global response to COVID-19, the pandemic — which does not distinguish between race, gender, age, and nationality — is only exacerbating the conflict instead of cultivating shared

leadership in facing a collective fate. Perhaps it is indicative of the absence of self-reflection on fundamental concepts and philosophical underpinnings that shape international order.

The framework of Hobbes's thoughts on international order and its tragic fate

The championing of a state-centered international order and security — which are durable in destabilizing settings such as this pandemic — is anchored to Hobbes's ideological framework. The discourse surrounding Hobbes's ideas on the “war of all against all” in the state of nature has migrated to the political science discourse on international anarchy. Tellingly, the realist's view reproduced Hobbes's worldview on three levels: isolated subjectivity, instrumental rationality, and a mechanistic worldview.

First, the Hobbesian notion of the individual suggests it is a solitary modern actor disconnected from the community. The characteristics of isolated modern individuals can be contrasted with ancient peoples who were community-centric; their positions in society and the relationships they nurtured were all in pursuit of general harmony. The characteristics of isolated modern individuals are now assumed by a larger entity called the modern state. In that sense, each state (country) is just an isolated selfish entity whose survival comes first and foremost.

Second, for these isolated entities, the line of reasoning to objectify the world and other entities has become inevitable.

Should the survival of individual countries be prized above all, other countries cannot help but become targets of conquest or mere tools for survival.

Third, the Hobbesian notion of a mechanistic worldview — which deemed nations and societies as complex machines capable of assembling and disassembling — also shifted to an international order framework. Accordingly, the relationships between isolated countries are defined through external and mechanical relationships and operational methods presented by Newtonian dynamics for the modern world. This mechanical international order will be driven by the power disparities between individual states. The qualitative differences in domestic political systems have no bearing on the international order. With the sole purpose of pursuing scientific knowledge, international relations revert to dynamic and mechanical movements dictated by modern mechanisms. This is equivalent to physical reductionism in the modern era reproduced as reductionism in international politics.

There has been a slew of criticism levelled against the limitations of modern instrumental rationality. The authors of “The Dialectic of Enlightenment” (1947) depict the tragic fate of human beings in the 20th-century on the heels of World War II, created by isolated subjects and instrumental rationality, through a historical and philosophical lens. The authors traced the history of instrumental rationality and modern scientific skills, which led to the production of self-destructive nuclear weapons and a world war. They eventually arrived at a tragic conclusion — enlightenment, which Western civilization aspired to, was a “myth”. As

encapsulated by Odysseus's actions, the instrumental rationality of the isolated subject ended up rendering itself as a tool for dominating others, ultimately facing the tragic fate of self-destruction.

Intersubjectivity Paradigm as Alternatives and International Order

Unless this tragic fate is to be passively accepted, a new way of thinking about international order will be sought. If we still have no choice but to view it through Hobbes' ideological lens, the path to solidarity and cooperation in overcoming the COVID-19 crisis will be a long way off. It is hard to imagine coexistence, solidarity, and cooperation between countries in a world where there is a "categorical imperative", in which states must pursue security through a display of their power. This is why it is necessary to seek a new framework for international order and security to effectively respond to the climate change crisis not to mention COVID-19 world.

The intersubjectivity paradigm has been proposed as an alternative to escape Aporia, dominated by modern instrumental rationality. In it, one must move away from the "I and It" frame of reference that is employed by instrumental rationality. The key words to this transition are recognition and communication. Branching out from the subject-object framework of modern philosophy, which enforces instrumentalization of other entities, the recognition and communication between subjects should be a starting point for understanding the world. Only this will allow

instrumental rationality to escape from self-destructive consequences.

Operating on these premises, a more inclusive framework of recognition in the realm of international order becomes plausible. This is because international order can now be expanded into a dynamic space where recognition, disrespect, and the pursuit of strategic interests and the consensus-oriented communication compete, transcending the traditional attributes of a power confrontation. This transition would enable, first, the coexistence of states beyond the instrumental competition between isolated nations; second, recognition and communication between countries beyond the framework of instrumental rationality; and third, organic relationships between states beyond modern physics-based mechanistic systems. Of course, cooperation and solidarity between states are just “possibilities” that demand our action, given that the space of intersubjectivity is a dynamic space where conflict and cooperation compete with each other. Nevertheless, there is a fundamental difference between recognizing these possibilities in reality and not even acknowledging them. Only when one accepts the possibility of recognition and communication between countries, other paths to reconciliation and coexistence come into view.

Paradigm of Inter-subjectivity and South Korea’s Diplomatic Strategy

The philosophical transition and expansion of the international order paradigm are essential for responding to emerging security threats today. Without solidarity and cooperation

across borders, it will be impossible to tackle new security threats such as the climate change crisis, not to mention COVID-19. The collective response to a common crisis calls for solidarity and cooperation, with a shared and mutual understanding of the issue at hand.

Of course, a fundamental and tectonic shift in perception and solidarity of the international community are not things that should be naturally expected. Notably, the U.S.-China confrontation has only intensified amidst the outbreak of COVID-19. What South Korea needs to do is to stymie the U.S.-China confrontation, preventing a Cold War-esque ideological regression. Considering the pressure points of South Korea's economy and progress on the peninsula's peace initiative, the escalation of a U.S.-China conflict and the demand to choose sides are unacceptable conditions for Seoul. It will be necessary to proactively build a new framework for international order that reflects the needs of the time in order to transcend the outdated logic and create a new space for international cooperation.

If confined by Hobbesian ideology, one will never escape the pressures of choosing whom to side with. Should the U.S.-China confrontation and international order itself be treated as a zero-sum power struggle, South Korea will have no choice but to choose. The competition will presumably result in one's victory and the other's defeat, and in this case, the wise choice would be to stand in the winner's circle.

Reflection of long-standing beliefs and exploration of the international order paradigm is key to devising flexible diplomatic strategies, preventing reductionism, thwarting narrow-minded thinking, and the spread of Cold War logic. Given South Korea's geopolitical position, it is essential to carefully examine power shifts in neighboring countries when formulating diplomatic strategies. Yet at the same time, true diplomatic autonomy and flexibility require not only the observation of changes in power but an imagination and capacity to propose a new order of coexistence and communication in Northeast Asia.

As the U.S.-China competition ramps up, signalling a return to the nascent stages of the Cold War, fundamental reflection and decisive action are necessary to envision a new regional order and coexistence in Northeast Asia. Challenging the paradigm of orthodox thinking and advocating for change have always been causes championed by outsiders. Now, more than ever, there are fewer reasons to hesitate in responding to the demands of our time.