

**“South Korea at the Crossroads:  
South Korea as a Middle Power in East Asia and Global Implications of North  
Korean Instability”**

*Scott A. Snyder*

*Lecture Summary by Courtney Andrews, Golden Gate High School*

Scott Snyder, a senior fellow for Korea studies and director of the Program on U.S.-Korea Policy at the Council on Foreign Relations, provided immense insight into the intricacies of South Korea's influence in Asia. As an expert on South Korean foreign policy, Snyder outlined the complex geopolitical situation in which South Korea is embroiled.

Since the Korean War, a convoluted history has enshrouded the Korean Peninsula. Its divergence has catalyzed dissent which extends far beyond simple regional conflict. With the mounting threat of nuclear capabilities by the Northern regime – backed by the Chinese government -- South Korea must grapple with the uncertainties generated by the rise of China's influence, North Korea's aggression, and the stability of its security alliance with the United States.

Throughout his lecture, Snyder underscored the importance of the U.S.-South Korean alliance. He described it as an effective tactic to deter North Korean aggression and maintain security in the region. He noted that this alliance has remained steadfast and dependable, attributing its longevity to the U.S.' strategic approach to extending diplomacy to both Japan and South Korea. However, the stability of this diplomatic framework has been threatened by the insurgence of efforts to undermine security in the region – namely by North Korea and China.

One key consideration he made was to acknowledge the intrinsic system of priority associated with policymaking. With ongoing international disputes, for example, the Ukrainian conflict and unrest in the Middle East, North Korea falls off the radar. An opportunistic regime, North Korea has used this complacency to its advantage, fortifying its military capabilities. As North Korea continues to bolster its nuclear arsenal and develop intercontinental ballistic missiles, its threat level continues to evolve.

To an extent, South Korea has developed a dependency on the United States for security. Unlike its Northern counterpart, South Korea does not possess nuclear capabilities. South Korea relies on the U.S.' nuclear portfolio to contest North Korea. Economically, South Korea has positioned itself as the tenth most robust economy in the world -- a significant accomplishment.

However, it is disadvantaged when compared to the economic influence of China and Japan -- two of the largest economies in the world. Therefore, South Korea's economic foothold in the region remains vulnerable and it heavily relies on support from the United States. One crucial point to note is South Korea's primary source of income: trade. Snyder explained that South Korea aims to remain aligned with the core of global trade, the United States, to maintain its standing in global trade.

Most notably, tensions between North and South Korea have reached unprecedented levels in recent years. North Korea has continued to pursue its advancement toward its nuclear arsenal. Reunification efforts have been abandoned as Kim Jong Un, North Korea's leader, has denoted South Korea as North Korea's "principal enemy." In response, South Korea has upheld its own boundaries, citing the right to respond with military force if North Korea acts against South Korea. Snyder explained that this situation will challenge the U.S.-South Korean alliance and require the U.S.' involvement in coordinating a response with South Korea.

China's influence in the region has also sparked tensions. South Korea has endured significant aggression from China, which attempted to suppress South Korea economically. China proscribed Chinese tourism to the area, blocked South Korean firms, and outwardly censored South Korean media. Snyder elaborated on China's restrictive policies toward South Korea, citing instances where China has blatantly disregarded appropriate economic conduct. China has effectively monopolized key facets of trade in East Asia, making South Korean trade vulnerable to China's influence. Chinese rhetoric has worsened relations with not only South Korea, but Taiwan as well. South Korean civilians carry heavy disdain toward China for their actions, worsening relations.

The geopolitical climate in East Asia remains a tumultuous situation. With South Korea situated in the middle of it all, it remains to be seen how it will manage the evolving discourse within the region. As disputes fester, South Korea will have to remain a stronghold for democracy and rein in conflicts that emerge. For the United States, South Korea is a key player in upholding foreign policy. The preservation of their alliance must remain a top priority as they continue to traverse the delicate diplomatic landscape and face their international rivals.