

ROC and ROK between Domestic Politics and External Relations: Crossing the Divide in Two North-East Asian 'Shakers'

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Abstract

In the attempt to understand the causal linkages between the domestic and international dimensions of any actor involved in the political game, it must be acknowledged that their appear to be fictitious spheres of action divided by a conventional boundary, traditionally set at the level of the State. On the other hand, as relevant actors exist at a number of distinct levels 'below' and 'above' the State, and domestic and international are just two categories lumping together these levels into two wide groups, whereas in the absence of such a similar conventional system these levels would be spread in a continuum stretching from the 'individual' to the 'global'. It should be noted how in the context of North-East Asia actors like the ROC and the ROK represent divided entities, involved in struggles for independence/recognition or debates over ethnic identity and re-unification. Is in these 'shaker' States that the analysis of the domestic/external boundary becomes particularly interesting, seen its inherently ambiguous nature especially in the case of the ROC.

For some, Taiwan really is an internal matter that needs to be 'solved' by the PRC, yet even though it is involved in issues relating to 'China' as a whole, it can be considered that Taiwan as a State is behaving as an autonomous actor in the international arena. As a matter of fact, the domestic and external dimensions appear to be inextricably intertwined, and the porous boundary between the two is continuously called into question. Therefore, even when considering independent States recognized as such by the international community, such as North and South Korea, issues of re-unification and ethnic identity are nothing but domestic. In these cases we are allowed to cross the divide between these States, to the extent that the wider picture of 'Greater China' or 'Greater Korea' is taken into account, although bearing in mind the autonomous power of each actor involved. This remarkable method as implicitly employed in many contemporary studies can offer a comprehensive view of these controversial issues, by clearly encompassing the internal and the external dimensions while never shifting the attention

from the pivotal actor represented by the State.

Keywords: Taiwan, Greater China, South Korea, Greater Korea, Northeast Asia, Domestic Politics, External Relations, State Actor, identity, re-unification

In the attempt to understand the causal linkages between the domestic and international dimensions of any actor involved in the political game, it must be acknowledged that they appear to be fictitious spheres of action divided by a conventional boundary, traditionally set at the level of the State. As the primary actor in international relations, this entity becomes the obvious choice when deciding where to set the line demarcating what we call 'internal' or 'domestic', while distinguishing from all that stands outside that line as 'external' or 'international'. On the other hand, as relevant actors exist at a number of distinct levels 'below' and 'above' the State, forces determining governments' perceptions and decisions are at play within every one of these levels (see the role of actors such as for instance individuals, local institutions, national lobby groups, regional organizations, regulators of arenas for global governance). Domestic and international are just two categories lumping together these levels into two wide groups, whereas in the absence of such a similar conventional system these levels would be spread in a continuum stretching from the 'individual' to the 'global'.

Therefore, in analyzing internal and external forces acting on the State, we implicitly accept its role of main actor on the political scene. As the main decision-maker, the State is the focus of analysis of most political theories and case studies, which attempt to understand its goals and the strategies it employs to achieve them. Yet flipping the coin and looking at its other side, the question becomes: what forces influence the behavior of this pivotal actor?

Chiefly two recent studies will be analyzed and contrasted here, David Kang's *Rising China* (Kang, 2007) and Chung-in Moon's *South Korea in 2008* (Moon, 2009). Each one in its own way, they both attempt to look at the bottom-up pressures acting on States, the ones operating in what we conventionally call the domestic dimension. Clearly, these domestic forces not only have a strong influence on the State's behavior in the domain of internal affairs, but they can also affect its decision in the international environment, indirectly determining its relations with external actors.²⁴⁶ Assessing whether a country's domestic forces matter requires a parallel assessment of whether its international relations do too. Following a widely known theory dividing States into 'makers, shakers and takers', it appears that for the ends of this analysis the interesting categories to analyze will be the first two. In the context of North-East Asia, we will therefore concentrate on actors like the PRC, Japan, Russia and the United States and then the Koreas and the ROC (Taiwan), which respectively fall in the 'makers' and 'shakers' categories. It should be noted how the latter (ROC and ROK) represent divided entities, involved in struggles for independence/recognition or debates over ethnic identity and re-unification. As a matter of

²⁴⁶ See for instance Putnam (1988) about the entanglement of the two dimensions due to their reciprocal influences both in a top-down and bottom-up direction. His framework involving a negotiating level I and an institutional level II appears to be nothing but another conventional framework of analysis, without which reality would be, as seen before, represented by a continuum involving infinite levels. For the ends of this analysis, the 'domestic' and 'external' dimensions are the conventional levels taken into consideration, and nonetheless called into question.

fact, it is in States like South Korea and Taiwan that the analysis of the domestic/external boundary becomes particularly interesting, seen the ambiguous nature of this boundary, whose existence is questioned on a daily basis especially in the ROC.

David Kang captures the importance of the precarious equilibrium characterizing the situation of Taiwan and then the security issues stemming from the South Korean embrace of interdependence. He does so by naturally linking their internal struggles to the relationship with the PRC and the DPRK respectively (Kang, 2007, pp. 93 and 113). His analysis can therefore be interpreted in at least in two different ways: as a study of the internal struggles to South Korea and Taiwan alone, or as one embracing the 'domestic' dimensions of the whole of 'Greater China' and 'Greater Korea'.

Starting with Taiwan, it obviously appears that the political status of the island is a matter deeply influencing the international relations of the PRC. As a fundamental determinant of the PRC's external affairs, Taiwan can also be seen as an internal matter, as Kang reports that 'most states in East Asia' do (Kang, 2007, p. 99). Yet is Taiwan really a 'domestic' element of Chinese politics? As Kang reminds us, the issue is fundamentally one of identity (Kang, 2007, p. 102, or also Brown, 2004, p.1 or Wachman, 1994, p. 255), although one cannot deny that underlying factors such as economic interest and national prestige could result more important at the end of the game. Kang treats Taiwan as an issue that most countries want to resolve peacefully although it is the only issue on which the PRC has seriously threatened to use its military muscle. The author does not offer the possibility of thinking of Taiwan as an independent country: The Mainland Chinese will do *anything* to prevent that from happening, the people of Taiwan are *unsure* of their identity, most actors involved in the area consider it as an *internal* issue... For Kang Taiwan really is an internal matter that needs to be *solved by* the PRC. Yet economic relations suggest that Taiwan behaves as an independent entity, militarily it has its own army and as an international actor it has signed defense treaties and keeps on issuing visas, all of which suggest that it is acting as a State.²⁴⁷ Even in the context of identity struggles, a constructivist theory would describe the inhabitants of the island as Taiwanese, drawing from a peculiar socio-economic and peculiar experience and an individual history different from the one of the Mainland.²⁴⁸ Taiwan can be considered as an actor acting independently in the international

²⁴⁷ See in this sense works such as Kastner (2006) and White III (2004), respectively about cross-Strait economic relations involving investment and trade, and the possibility of Taiwan as a State according to international law.

²⁴⁸ Reference is to the KMT rhetoric of 'New Taiwanese' upheld by President Lee Teng-hui in the late 1990s, resurrecting the term '*xin Taiwanren*' during the electoral campaign promoting KMT candidate Ma Ying-jeou as future mayor of Taipei, position he actually obtained and that paved the way for his election as ROC President in 2008. The 'new Taiwanese' rhetoric can be subsumed in Lee's words: '*To convey a sense of the popular will on Taiwan today, I now refer to my fellow citizens as "New Taiwanese," meaning those who are willing to fight for the prosperity and survival of their country, regardless of when they or their forebears arrived on Taiwan and regardless of their provincial heritage or native language*' (as in Lee, 1999a, p. 9). For a more exhaustive research on the issue read

arena, and hence as a State, yet it is involved in issues relating to 'Greater China' as a whole, in that sense, 'domestic' issues. Kang makes the reference to the latter statement explicit, but fails to recognize the former.

Conversely, in the chapter relating to 'Greater Korea', another wider reality encompassing two clearly distinguished States, Kang adopts a different stand. First of all he talks about South Korea as an actor in full control of its capabilities as an international actor, and talks about its 'interdependence' not only in relation to the North, but also to the main actors in the area, the USA and most of all the PRC (Kang, 2007, p. 111 and 124). Yet, it should not come as a surprise that the 'domestic' issue of ethnic identity recurs also in this section. Kang depicts the ROK as clearly envisaging re-unification as the final goal and as favoring trade and interdependence with the DPRK as a means to that end.²⁴⁹ In particular, similarly to the case of Taiwan, he talks about 'solv[ing] the North Korean issue' as a synonymous with 'national reunification' (see Kang, 2007, pp. 109-10). Therefore, although unlike Taiwan South Korea is depicted as an independent actor, in his view, each shares the ultimate goal of re-unification as a *domestic* policy. One could easily disagree with the thesis upheld by the author, but his insight in individuating the framework in which these actors inter-act is in line with what I discussed earlier. As a matter of fact, the domestic and external dimensions appear to be inextricably intertwined, and the boundary between the two is continuously called into question. Therefore, even when considering independent States recognized as such by the international community, such as North and South Korea, issues of re-unification and ethnic identity are fundamentally 'domestic'. In these cases we are allowed to cross the divide between these States, to the extent that the wider picture of 'Greater China' or in this case 'Greater Korea' is taken into account.

To remain in the context of South Korea, Chung-in Moon's article *South Korea in 2008* (Moon, 2009) fits more easily into the conventional framework separating the domestic and the external dimensions, since it accepts the pivotal role of the State as the principal actor of international relations (which are here nothing but relations *between States*). Moon deals with power shifts between parties within the democratic setting of the ROK and emphasizes the direct effect that the election of one or the other party can have on the external affairs of the State. In the article he analyzes the aftermath of the 2008 elections, when conservative GNP²⁵⁰ leader Lee Myung-bak was elected President of the ROK after years of progressive rule. The domestic character of these circumstances is emphasized from the very beginning, with the listing of the parties winning seats in Parliament after the elections and with the description of Lee's loss of popularity,

Lee, *The Road to Democracy* (1999b), for social experience in Taiwan see Gold (1986) and Ching (2001).

²⁴⁹ These actions might well be inserted in the South Korean search for multilateralism in the sphere of Northeast Asian security as depicted by Moon, Chung-in and Kim, Taehwan (2004) for instance in the context of the Six-Party Talks.

²⁵⁰ Grand National Party.

nepotistic behavior and failure of policies on alimentary goods (Moon, 2009, pp. 121 and 123-24). Moon gradually engages the issue of international implications first by dealing with the outcome of Lee's election in the economic and commercial realm and finally in security issues (Moon, 2009, pp. 125-27). Maybe also due to the focus of my analysis, but probably also on a more objective basis, it seems that the paper moves in the right direction and gets more convincing the more it directs its analysis toward the external dimension. The remarkable method of Moon's study offers a comprehensive view of South Korea's situation in 2008 and encompasses clearly the internal and the external dimensions while never shifting the focus from the State actor, personified in this case by Lee Myung-bak. Therefore the paper appears to be perfect material for the discussion of the linkages between internal politics and external relations, in a more explicit and maybe conventional way if compared to Kang's chapters.

At the moment of dealing with the consequences of Lee's election in terms of security and international affairs, Moon refers to an 'ABR' agenda, meaning that Lee's policies would be reactive to the previous administration's ones: Lee would do 'Anything But Roh', meaning anything but what Roh Moon-hyun, previous President of the ROK, had done (Moon, 2009, p. 127). Abstaining myself from judging critically this approach, I can still not avoid noticing what a splendid example it is in the context of our analysis. Domestic party struggles such as the one between Lee (GNP) and Roh (URI²⁵¹ now Democratic Party) have the implicit power to affect the course of international affairs in the region in a powerful and sometimes determinant way. As far as the ROK is concerned, 2008 saw renewed and improved relations with the US, following Lee's policy of bilateral alliance based on shared values and interests, and with Japan, thanks to a commitment to overcome long-standing historical issues — although other events partially strained these 'otherwise congenial ties' (Moon, 2009, p.127-28).

For better or for worse, Lee's 'Anything But Roh' policy stemmed from domestic disputes but had clear consequences in the domain of international affairs. The same is true for the ROC, where power games between the nationalist KMT²⁵² and the independentist DPP²⁵³ definitely influence Taiwan's foreign relations, not only as an obvious consequence of the election of one or the other party, but also when it comes to specific policies enacted merely to overturn the opposition's previous work or to prove its claims wrong. To go back to the debate over Taiwanese ethnic identity, central to Kang's study, it is interesting to note how with the election of the DPP in 2000 after decades of KMT power monopoly, the issue of independence did actually jump to the top of the government's discussion priority list, but the 'New Taiwanese' policy inaugurated by KMT President Lee Teng-hui in 1998 was dismissed by new President Chen Shui-bian, at least

²⁵¹ Yeollin Uri Party (in English: 'Our Party').

²⁵² Kuomintang or Guomindang (In English: 'Chinese Nationalist Party')

²⁵³ Democratic Progressive Party.

as it was approached by Lee.²⁵⁴ This occurred not only due to ethnic competition between *waishengren* (those born outside of the island, Mainlanders) and *benshengren* (those born within the island, ethnic Taiwanese), but also as a result of power struggles and party competition. It is undeniable that the ROC-PRC struggle was affected by these shifts in policy: the DPP failed to aggregate a strong island-wide movement for independence, the previous discourse over a Taiwanese ethnicity was undermined at Chen's basis and the status quo prevailed in cross-strait relations.

Thus both in the ROC and in the ROK, as in all democratic States, free elections mean people's empowerment and accountability of the government to the citizens, but also the possibility for major shifts in policy as a result. This is true for domestic *and* foreign policy, but in South Korea and Taiwan the implications for the latter are likely to manifest themselves on a larger scale than elsewhere. In the same way, voters' behavior in these entities is likely to be more influenced by considerations on external relations than in other cases, like for example the United States. After all, when it comes to relations between States, these two actors are nothing but 'shakers': their actions manage to determine the asset of international relations but are in turn influenced by external factors to a similar extent. Conversely, 'makers' such as the United States are certainly determinant as actors on the international scene, but are unlikely to feel the influence of the development of international affairs in a similar fashion.

We have seen how Moon and Kang offer two very different frameworks of analysis to interpret the relationship between domestic politics and external relations. The former operates in a 'safe' environment and analyzes South Korea as an established Country both in its internal and external domains. His analysis grasps the nature of 'domestic' and 'international' within the conventional structure balanced around the State, in this way offering a useful example of how party struggles within a State can manage to influence its international relations. Kang, on the other hand, although reaching questionable conclusions, still provides a useful framework of analysis, to the extent that issues such as ethnicity and national identity are considered as 'domestic' politics of wider realities stretching beyond the limit conventionally set at the level of the State.

This framework manages to reflect the porosity of the boundary between 'internal' and 'external': other categories and other levels come into play, as the concepts of a wider 'Greater China' or 'Greater Korea', which encompass different States and actors. After all, contemporary politics readily call into question the role of the State as pivotal actor and cross the divide between its domestic and external dimensions, challenging in turn even the existence of the

²⁵⁴ Chen promoted the passage 'from identity crisis to focus on Taiwan' as the marker of Taiwanese politics when stepping into the new millennium (Chen, 2002, p. 13), actually not completely dismissing the identity question, but moving it one step further from 'Taiwanization to 'de-Sinicization', to borrow Gunter Shubert's words (Shubert, 2008, p. 99).

boundary between them. Yet taking into consideration these conclusions shouldn't mean disregarding completely the State as designated leading actor in the political arena, be it domestic or international, but being aware of the great number of possible conventional frameworks we could adopt, depending on the issue taken into consideration. Ethnic issues allow for a great deal of speculation: when it comes to identity we could argue anything, and the contrary of anything. As a matter of fact, this practice is also extensively adopted in the political realm, as part of electoral slogans and propaganda in search of a legitimizing basis. Choosing the appropriate context for our analysis, and therefore setting the boundary at the desired level, becomes crucial in developing whichever argument.

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