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THINKING THE UNTHINKABLE: AN EAST ASIA WITHOUT THE US?

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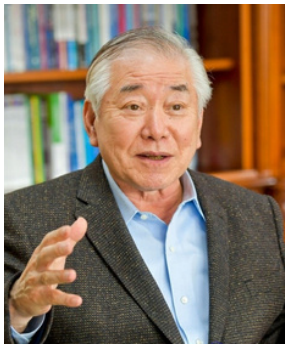

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Ninety years ago, Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci made a sombre prediction: “The old order is dying, and the new one is struggling to be born. In this interregnum, morbid symptoms appear.” This prediction is finding new resonance. Morbid symptoms are everywhere, and the global order that the US created following the end of World War II is vanishing. The escalating US–China rivalry is pushing the world into a new era of geopolitical volatility. An increasing number of areas—including the Taiwan Strait, the Korean Peninsula, and the South China Sea—are highly contested. The Westphalian system and the United Nations Charter, which enshrine the inviolability of sovereignty and territory, are in tatters. This reality has been exemplified by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

In addition, the global trade order is being shaken by recessions, rising trade protectionism, and increasing supply chain threats. The US–China economic rivalry, compounded by the Trump administration’s ‘beggar-thy-neighbour’ policies—aggressive tariffs, strong-arm investment tactics, and America-centred industrial policy—has made the situation worse. As a result, geoeconomic fault lines have manifested throughout East Asia.

Despite the 2015 Paris Climate Accord, global warming is driving an increase in extreme weather patterns. Climate change is already heightening economic, social, and humanitarian instability. Likewise, the challenges to democracy and human rights are severe. Some advanced democracies are regressing into right-wing populist regimes, while some non-Western democratic countries are returning to their illiberal past. Even in the United States, democratic institutions and structures are being challenged. The storming of the US Capitol by Trump supporters on January 6th, 2021, and the idiosyncratic governance style of Trump 2.0 are two stark instances of democratic backsliding.

Another noticeable morbid symptom of this interregnum is the relative decline of American power and status in East Asia. This has precipitated various conjectures about the US future in the region, including the idea of an ‘East Asia without the United States’. Such an idea was once unthinkable because the American economic and military presence in the region was so dominant and beneficial to many of its countries. Hence, intellectuals in East Asian countries have begun to broaden their views on the matter and craft new narratives about America’s role in the area. This work, through an East Asian (South Korean) perspective, addresses the convoluted dynamics that arise from this changing role of the world’s foremost superpower.

American hegemony and the old order

Hegemony refers to a power configuration where one country enjoys dominance. However, a preponderance of power is a necessary but insufficient condition for hegemonic leadership; a hegemon must also possess the intention and political will to lead. After World War II, the United States was the only country with both the capability and willingness to lead the world. The US championed the creation of the United Nations, based on collective security, and laid the groundwork for a liberal international economic order through the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the Bretton Woods monetary system. By fostering a rules-based global order, America played a major role in establishing the institutional foundations for global peace and prosperity.

Moreover, the United States served as a patron for countries in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East against the communist tide. Under the grand strategy of containment—aimed at curbing Soviet expansion—Washington established the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Europe, the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) in the Middle East, the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) in Southeast Asia, and ANZUS in the South Pacific. In East Asia, the US signed bilateral alliances with the Republic of Korea (ROK), Japan, and Taiwan, thereby providing a security umbrella to these nations while simultaneously curbing Soviet expansionist ambitions. This solidified America’s image as the ‘world’s policeman’ and allowed its allies to enjoy security as free riders.

The United States also established itself as a benevolent benefactor. After World War II, the Marshall Plan was instrumental in Europe's post-war economic reconstruction. Separately, America played a key role in the economic recovery of Japan, South Korea, and other East Asian countries. It created an extensive network of overseas development assistance (ODA) programs for newly independent states emerging from colonial rule. America deserves special merit for its role in overcoming the destructive legacies of war and revitalizing the global economy.

Despite setbacks in the Korean and Vietnam Wars, the US won the Cold War. The reunification of Germany, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact ushered in a unipolar world. This marked the triumph of liberal democracy and market economics, relegating communism to the dustbin of history. Francis Fukuyama famously declared this the "end of history"—arguing the world had entered a new period of peace and prosperity.

Fukuyama's prediction, however, missed the mark. History proved not to be linear but rather a complex cycle of evolutionary and regressive spirals. The events of September 11th, 2001, marked a painful inflection point. Although the US achieved limited success in its war against Islamic terrorists, the costs were substantial. The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq—justified by the need to punish terrorists and spread democracy—brought numerous unintended consequences. Nevertheless, during the Cold War and immediately after, East Asian countries retained fond memories of the United States as a reliable security patron, an economic benefactor, and a model of democracy and human rights. The unipolar moment of American hegemony did not last long, particularly with the rise of China.

The China–US strategic rivalry

The US-led unipolar order began to face a new challenger as the strategic rivalry between China and the US intensified, forcing East Asian countries into a dilemma. China was poor and chaotic until it adopted market-led economic reforms in December 1978. In less than 30 years, it emerged as the world's second-largest economic power. By 2010, its economic size was second only to the US, its trade volume had surpassed America's, and it held the world's largest foreign reserves. This wealth fuelled an unprecedented military build-up, challenging the American unipolar moment—the first morbid symptom of a new order struggling to be born.

China's rise precipitated an immense internal debate in the United States. In his 2012 Foreign Affairs article, "What China Wants," Andrew Nathan classified two main schools of thought. The first, 'the Shanghai school', was represented by figures such as Henry Kissinger, who understood China's rise as an inevitable historical process. It advocated a new modus vivendi in which the US accommodates China's rise, perhaps through a 'G2' formula. For this school, the most urgent task was to avoid military clashes through cooperation, competition, and eventual co-evolution.

Proponents of the second, the 'Crowe school', presented a completely opposite view. Just as Eyre Crowe warned in his 1907 report of the threat posed by Wilhelm II's rising Germany, this school argued that China's rise must be taken seriously and countered through containment. The 'China threat' was their common concern, marked by a bitter regret that American engagement had ultimately produced a negative boomerang effect on the United States. The Crowe school reflected a combination of belief in American primacy and fear of power transition. As this hardball 'China hawk' position became dominant in Washington, the Shanghai school was marginalized.

Kurt Campbell and Jake Sullivan offered an alternative perspective in their 2019 Foreign Affairs article, "Competition Without Catastrophe." They argued that while China aims for regional hegemony by 2035 and global hegemony by 2050—making strategic competition with the US unavoidable—there is still room for cooperation on global issues like climate change, pandemics, and nuclear proliferation. While competition in trade and technology is inevitable, and confrontation over democracy and human rights may be necessary, this '3 Cs' (cooperation, competition, confrontation) framework was incorporated into the Biden administration's China policy.

Regardless of this domestic debate, US public opinion has shifted radically to an anti-China stance, popularized by Graham Allison's 'Thucydides trap' hypothesis. Official documents such as the 2022 US National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy have depicted China as 'a revisionist power' threatening American interests. The days of engagement are gone, replaced by a strategic rivalry on four major fronts: geopolitical, geoeconomic, technological, and ideological.

First, on the geopolitical front, the US has taken a strategic offensive to contain China's military expansion by pursuing its Indo-Pacific strategy and strengthening alliances. This includes minilateral arrangements such as the Quad (US, Japan, India, Australia), AUKUS (Australia, UK, US), and cooperative groups such as Japan–ROK–US and Japan–Philippines–US. The United States has increased the frequency of joint military exercises in the region. Such moves have invited reciprocal responses from China, heightening tension over the Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea, the East China Sea, and even the Korean Peninsula.

Second, the geoeconomic arena has become a battlefield. The US has pursued a decoupling strategy, aiming to divert trade and investment away from China—through 'reshoring', 'near-shoring', and 'friend-shoring'—thereby isolating China from global supply chains. China has responded with coercive economic diplomacy, such as controlling rare earth exports, implementing a 'dual circulation' strategy (relying on both exports and domestic consumption), and pursuing a self-sustaining economy. The United States has also expressed concern over China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its promotion of a yuan-based digital currency.

Third, technology has become a critical dividing line. The United States, long supreme in proprietary technology, once advocated 'techno-globalism'—a relatively free transfer of technology through the market. China took advantage of this, orchestrating a massive state-led industrial and technology policy, often called 'techno-nationalism', to acquire new technologies. These efforts have yielded great results. China is now on almost equal footing with the United States in most cutting-edge technologies and has surpassed it in investment in research and development and the number of patents. Realizing this challenge, the US has taken tough measures, controlling exports of advanced technology, preventing the theft of critical technology, and forming technology alliances with partners. The clash of techno-nationalisms has become the most pronounced battleground.

Finally, values and ideology have surfaced as another contentious front. The United States has mobilized allies to criticize deteriorating democratic and human rights conditions in China, especially in Hong Kong and among the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. China denies these violations and emphasizes its own 'democracy with Chinese characteristics'. Competition for global governance has also become a pressing issue, especially since China's President Xi Jinping proposed his Global Governance Initiative in August 2025.

China's rise, assertive American countermoves, and the associated collateral damage reveal the 'morbid symptoms' of this precarious interregnum.

Tough strategic choices

Like other East Asian countries, South Korea is torn. The United States is its ally, while China is its strategic cooperative partner. Although Seoul wishes to maintain the status quo, mounting pressure from both sides has placed it in a difficult 'sandwiched position'. Washington has pressed Seoul to endorse its Indo-Pacific strategy, join decoupling efforts, form a technological alliance, and support its campaign against Beijing's human rights violations.

In contrast, Beijing has sent a subtle warning: while it does not expect South Korea to side with China, it insists that Seoul remain neutral. If South Korea involves itself in contingencies in the Taiwan Strait or the South China Sea, or allows the United States to use its territory as a forward base (for example, by deploying additional THAAD systems or intermediate-range ballistic missiles), China will treat South Korea as an enemy.

Economic decoupling is not an easy proposition. China accounts for almost 20 percent of South Korea's total trade; Chinese markets are as important as American ones. This economic interdependence is sustained through global supply chains that include over 20,000 South Korean companies doing business in China. South Korea also joined the BRI by participating in the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). More importantly, small and medium-sized South Korean businesses are heavily dependent on Chinese imports and tourists.

Technology seems less problematic, as South Korea's technological cooperation with China has been limited. However, cooperation in semiconductors and EV batteries has become a source of American concern.

How has South Korea responded to its strategic dilemma? Current domestic debates suggest four strategic choices: pro-American 'balancing', 'bandwagoning' with China, standing alone, or 'muddling through'.

Regarding values, Washington has not been explicit in demanding an anti-China stance, but the South Korea–US alliance now explicitly includes shared democratic values. The Yoon Suk Yeol government co-hosted the third Democracy Summit in March 2024, which implicitly targeted China. Yet Seoul's room to manoeuvre is constrained by the 'One China policy' and the principle of non-interference in domestic politics it pledged to in 1992. On the issue of global governance, South Korea has been sympathetic to China's call for the resuscitation of the United Nations, a multilateral trade order, and open regionalism. However, it has followed American policy lines in various international arenas and fora.

How has South Korea responded to its strategic dilemma? Current domestic debates suggest four strategic choices: pro-American 'balancing', 'bandwagoning' with China, standing alone, or 'muddling through'.

Favoured by conservative politicians, pro-American 'balancing' involves siding with the US to counterbalance a rising China. Proponents argue that a rising China is inherently aggressive and poses a threat of 'Finlandization', where South Korea would lose its autonomy. Negative public perceptions of China—stemming from past invasions, domination, and its role in the Korean War—bolster this view. This approach calls for active participation in US-led military activities, joining the decoupling strategy, and voicing stronger objections to China's human rights violations.

However, the costs of such an approach are substantial. South Korea's security could be jeopardized, as China would emerge as a direct threat and could strengthen its military cooperation with North Korea. As Henry Kissinger once remarked, "China is too near and powerful to ignore or antagonize it." China's economic retaliation—seen after the 2017 THAAD missile deployment—could deal a critical blow to the South Korean economy.

Alternatively, some historians see 'bandwagoning' with China as a credible position. This approach seeks security and economic benefits by siding with the rising power. They invoke the humiliating lesson of the 1636 Manchu War, when the Chosun dynasty disastrously sided with the declining Ming instead of the rising Qing. This scenario would mean a fundamental geopolitical realignment, likely ending the ROK-US alliance and promoting active cooperation with China. South Korea would also become a robust participant in the BRI, while remaining silent on China's human rights situation.

While this could facilitate stability if the United States disengages from the Korean Peninsula, the short-term risks are immense. Strategic uncertainty, fear of 'Finlandization', and high economic opportunity costs could shake South Korea's security and economic foundations. Silence on China's human rights record could damage South Korea's global reputation. Furthermore, strong anti-Chinese public sentiment in South Korea makes this option politically unfeasible. Likewise, because Beijing prefers the status quo, it may not welcome such a sudden shift in Seoul.

A further strategy championed by certain groups of nationalists seeks an autonomous diplomatic space. Right-wing nationalists, doubting the reliability of the American nuclear umbrella, argue that South Korea should acquire its own nuclear weapons. According to these groups, acquiring nuclear weapons is the only way to effectively manage the whims of great powers and to ensure national security and dignity.

In stark contrast, left-leaning pacifists argue that South Korea should declare permanent neutrality and terminate its alliance with the United States. Both approaches appeal to certain sentiments but are widely seen as idealistic and impractical.
The preferred strategy for most South Koreans is preserving the status quo via 'muddling through'. It entails a simultaneous pursuit of an alliance with the United States and a strategic partnership with China. Since the presidency of Kim Dae-jung, governments in South Korea have followed this strategic line in the name of balanced diplomacy, or anmi gyeongjung (security with the US, economy with China). Proponents claim this double hedging is the best way to ensure security, maximize economic benefits, and balance national interests. This strategy works when US–China relations are congenial.

But as American political scientist Stephen Walt argues, "If the Sino-American rivalry heats up [...] Beijing and Washington will press Seoul to choose sides." That is what is currently happening. The status quo strategy is reaching a breaking point. South Korea will have to make a hard choice.

In sum, the South Korean public and liberal/progressive camps strongly support 'muddling through'. The conservative camp favours pro-American 'balancing'. Support for other options is marginal. The Lee Jae-myung government is attempting a balanced 'muddling through' strategy, a profound deviation from the pro-American balancing of the previous Yoon Suk Yeol government.

Other East Asian countries face similar dilemmas. Japan and the Philippines have adopted a pro-American balancing strategy. Most ASEAN member states, lacking formal US alliances, are attempting to walk a tightrope between Beijing and Washington. Meanwhile, North Korea is exploiting these cleavages to consolidate trilateral cooperation with China and Russia. This deepening rivalry between China and the United States is a bad omen that foreshadows the arrival of a new age of interregnum and triggers an unprecedented regional dynamic.

The Trump 2.0 shock

The inauguration of US President Donald Trump 2.0 in January 2025 is a morbid symptom of this new interregnum. President Trump's America First foreign policy and transactional approach have placed East Asian countries in a serious dilemma. The United States is no longer a benevolent hegemon but an extortionist, having become a liability rather than an asset.

President Trump has persistently argued that the United States' East Asian allies are free riders who have not properly reciprocated US protection. He has demanded that the ROK increase its defence spending from the current 2.6 per cent of GDP to 5 per cent, and raise its cost-sharing for US forces stationed in Korea from $1 billion to $10 billion per year. Likewise, Trump has threatened to scrap the existing agreement and pull out troops. He has even gone so far as to declare that the United States would not intervene in another war between South and North Korea.

Trump's MAGA base opposes stationing troops overseas, viewing USFK (US Forces Korea) as a 'tripwire' that could draw the US into a war on the Korean Peninsula. As such, they want a reduction in troop levels on the peninsula or a complete withdrawal. In contrast, American China hawks want USFK's role expanded from deterring North Korea to containing China. They advocate for strategic flexibility that would allow American forces to move in and out of the peninsula without consulting the ROK.

Furthermore, China hawks call for the South Korean military to become an active participant in the US Indo-Pacific strategy. As part of the ROK–US alliance, Washington wants Seoul to make explicit military commitments to contingencies in the Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea, and elsewhere. This reflects a logical consequence of limited US military capabilities.

Equally troublesome for South Korea is Trump's hardball push for economic concessions. As evidenced by his own remarks, President Trump—believing allies had "ripped off the US"—began adopting aggressive tariff policies. He first imposed a 50 percent unilateral tariff on steel and aluminium, followed by 25 per cent reciprocal tariffs on all items from South Korea. President Trump then offered to lower these tariffs to 15 per cent if South Korea purchased $100 billion of liquefied natural gas (LNG) and other energy products and established a $350 billion investment fund for US manufacturing—an amount accounting for 82 per cent of Seoul's total foreign reserves. Trump himself would decide where funds were allocated, and the US public would receive 90 per cent of the return on the investment. South Korea cannot afford this up-front cash investment.

This request was a complete reversal of past negotiations. South Koreans' bitter feelings were amplified because Trump ignored the bilateral FTA he himself had ordered renegotiated in 2017. More critically, a recent mass arrest of South Korean workers at a Hyundai Motors plant in Savannah, Georgia fomented immense anti-American public sentiment. The US had begged South Korean firms to invest; when they did, sending engineers and technicians with valid visas, ICE agents raided the plant and handcuffed them like criminals. The televised scenes of these brutal arrests enraged South Koreans.

Finally, America's image as a beacon of democracy and human rights has been shattered, largely due to the political campaign by the American far right. After former ROK President Yoon Suk Yeol was impeached for declaring unconstitutional martial law on December 3rd, 2024, American far-right groups, mostly conservative evangelicals, spread conspiracy theories criticizing the impeachment. Just hours before a summit with President Lee Jae-myung on August 24th, 2025, President Trump posted on social media: "Is Yoon's impeachment and arrest 'purge or revolution?'"

Seoul cannot accept Trump's investment terms, viewing them as economic coercion. Lee's position is clear: the investment agreement must be fair, equal, and mutually beneficial.

Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich thundered in The Washington Times that the Lee administration's "recent all-out assault on political and religious liberty has been breathtaking." Similarly, the 'Build Up Korea 2025' conference—modelled after 'Turning Point USA' and featuring radical MAGA figures—was held in a conscious effort to expand the far right's presence in South Korea. The common denominator behind these events is a conservative Christian nationalism building a transnational coalition to disseminate MAGA ideology, threatening to intervene in South Korean politics and questioning the legitimacy of its constitutional order.

Facing this pressure, the Lee Jae-myung government's response has been markedly different. President Lee has stated that South Korea will take the lead in its own defence, reduce dependence on the US, and raise defence spending to 3.5 per cent of GDP. He strongly desires to regain wartime operational control that was transferred to the American commander in South Korea. Additionally, since US Forces Korea (USFK) will be transformed into a supplementary military force, the ROK would reduce its financial contribution to the cost of stationing American troops on the peninsula. Furthermore, Seoul has made it clear that it does not support 'strategic flexibility' for the USFK and is reluctant to commit direct military support for US contingencies elsewhere, fearing entrapment.

The Lee government has also been President Trump's toughest negotiator on trade. Seoul cannot accept Trump's investment terms, viewing them as economic coercion. Lee's position is clear: the investment agreement must be fair, equal, and mutually beneficial. There is also a growing awareness of the political danger posed by the transnational ultraright coalition of American MAGA/Christian nationalist forces and South Korean conservative Protestant far-right groups.

Implications of an East Asia without the US

Recent American unilateralism and predatory behaviour reveal that the US under Trump 2.0 is not the one we used to know. It is no longer a hegemonic stabilizer but an unpredictable contender. It is no longer a patron but a cumbersome partner. It has become unreliable, extortionist, and intrusive. In short, the United States is seen as a liability, not an asset. The old order is being destroyed by its creator, while the new order is visible only in its contours. It is in this interregnum that East Asian countries have started to consider an 'East Asia without the US'.

Some pundits argue that we should not rush, that the US will return to its traditional orbit after Trump. Judged by the current US domestic political environment, however, this seems like naïve, inertia-driven thinking. There is no clarity, coherence, or consistency in current US foreign policy. While Trump indulges in narcissistic, transactional calculations, his MAGA base presses for retrenchment, isolation, and homeland security. 'Primacists' advocate global power projection. By contrast, 'prioritizers' appear to prevail by arguing that the US lacks the resources to cover Europe, the Middle East, and the Indo-Pacific at the same time. They contend that the US should concentrate its power and military capabilities on encircling and containing China.

Ideological rigidity, political polarization, and hubris are deeply embedded in the fabric of American foreign policymaking, clouding the future of its commitment to East Asia.

East Asians have serious doubts about the future of American foreign policy. Ideological rigidity, political polarization, and hubris are deeply embedded in the fabric of American foreign policymaking, clouding the future of its commitment to East Asia. This erratic nature drives East Asian countries to 'think the unthinkable': an East Asia without the United States.

Hence, the question we need to ask is: what does an 'East Asia without the US' actually mean? I see three possible paths for this scenario:

The first path is a complete US disengagement from the region. This path involves the termination of alliances, withdrawal of American troops, and suspension of military cooperation. This could happen if the US returns to isolationism, accepts a sphere of influence with China, or if East Asian countries themselves terminate their alliances with Washington. This scenario seems inconceivable, but it cannot be completely ruled out.

The second path involves a loose alliance system. Under this scenario, the US withdraws ground troops from Japan and South Korea but maintains its extended nuclear deterrence as an 'offshore balancer' against China. Allies would defend themselves against conventional threats emanating from North Korea and China, while the US provides them with a nuclear umbrella and other bridging capabilities. The alliance system and defence commitments would continue to exist, but in a much weaker form.

Finally, the third path is maintaining the status quo. The US retains its existing alliance structure but offers only a weak defence commitment. The current Trump 2.0 policy resembles this. Domestic political fragility and conflicting signals tempt allies to seek alternative regional security architectures, either by partnering with China or enhancing intra-regional cooperation to cope with a weaker American presence.

An alternative vision for East Asia

In his book *By More than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific Since 1783* (2017), Michael Green argues that American intervention in the Asia-Pacific is more than destined; it is a historical mandate. For him, American disengagement is unthinkable. But such beliefs are increasingly questioned.

An East Asia without the US should not be seen as the end of security or prosperity. East Asian countries can build a new security community, a common zone of prosperity, and a new space of cultural harmony. But creating such a community will be a daunting challenge, requiring new thinking and leadership.

East Asian countries need an innovative approach, such as 'transcending diplomacy'. Diplomatic historian Paul Schroeder coined this term to describe the attempt by weak states to "surmount international anarchy and go beyond the normal limits of conflictual politics; to solve the problem, end the threat, and prevent its recurrence through some institutional arrangement involving an international consensus or formal agreement on norms, rules, and procedures for these purposes." A transcending diplomacy could mitigate the US–China rivalry by proposing multilateral security cooperation and restoring multilateral regimes to resolve trade and technology problems.

Individual East Asian countries cannot initiate this effort alone. They must work with other middle powers facing a similar dilemma: Japan, Australia, Canada, and ASEAN. They should also mobilize support from European and BRICS middle powers. This group must forge a new international consensus on norms and rules to tame the damaging economic and political impact of the US–China conflict. Their collective action is the only viable way to pull China and the US out of their 'game of chicken' and restore international order. Geopolitics is not destiny. We can overcome geopolitical determinism through multilateralism and open regionalism.

In this regard, I would like to propose the following:

Be prepared. The US is unpredictable. Secure strategic autonomy, strengthen self-defence, and work together with others to create a new regional order devoid of American centrism.

Transform the current US-centered collective defence system into a collective security system. Collective defence assumes common enemies and common threats, leading to a perpetual security dilemma. The most sensible way to break this cycle is to change our way of thinking about security. Security is indivisible and can be achieved through cooperation. We, as East Asians, should learn from the Helsinki process and the OSCE model.

Restore the liberal multilateral trade order. East Asian countries have been the greatest beneficiaries of open regionalism and a multilateral liberal trade order. They reject unilateralism and maintain a belief in the virtues of diffuse reciprocity as embedded in the GATT/WTO. They must work together to counter Trump's 'divide and rule' tactics.

Promoting intra-regional economic cooperation through Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, and a China–Japan–ROK trilateral FTA seems a logical choice.

Preserve cultural pluralism. East Asia is an amalgamation of diverse cultural, social, and political entities. Mutual respect for differences should be the foundation for peaceful coexistence. As stipulated by the United Nations Charter, respect for sovereignty and territory should be preserved, and any pending conflicts should be resolved peacefully. There should be no interference in domestic political affairs. Empathy should serve as the central norm for mutual understanding.

Finally, **reject zero-sum logic**. If we perceive international politics as a win-or-lose game, there will be no room for compromise. A win-win, positive-sum outcome should guide our interactions.

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