



The Possibility of Protracting Course of the US-China Conflict and Its Backdrop

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Executive Summary

A common rhetoric for describing the characteristics of the US-China relations was that the US and China “will eventually move toward cooperation despite a tit-for-tat between the two” based on liberal discourses. In other words, experts suggested the logic that even though the two countries go through conflicts from time to time, the US-China relationship will continue to rest on the nature of competition and cooperation in good faith for their common grounds, such as mutual economic benefits. This book contains the process of exploratory reasoning that explains the possibility of the US and China entering into a mid- to long-term hegemonic competition after their struggles, stepping away from their return to “previous” cooperative relationship.

A course of the US-China conflict, represented by the recent trade war, is likely to become a long-term hegemonic rivalry rather than a compromise. This conflict is prone to further “deteriorate” despite the possibility of temporary “sealing” between the two. It is too early to jump to conclusions, but the US-China conflict could last for more than 30 years, characterizing one generation, since the Chinese President, Xi Jinping, set the deadline of the “Chinese Dream,” which can be summarized as “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (中華民族的偉大復興),” to 2049, the centennial of the founding of the country.

The US-China conflict is a more structural than a temporary phenomenon, created by tensions between the existing hegemonic power and the rising superpower. Such circumstance may facilitate cooperation at times, but it will be difficult for the two nations to overcome the hurdle of their fundamental conflict-based competitive structure. China intends to reverse the Trump administration's China policy by inflicting the US a "short-term pain" regardless of a possible long-term pain in its economy. However, this lose-lose strategy is simply further deteriorating the situation.

South Korea's perception toward the US-China trade war is finally evolving. It is slowly but surely acknowledging that this war is not a simple "tariff war" nor a "trade conflict," but a "hegemonic competition" for the future international order. Since South Korea missed a golden time to recognize the accurate characteristics of the US-China conflict, it now faces a greater challenge and concern in its choice of "positioning" between the two superpowers. In other words, South Korea lacks a preemptive strategy or plan to deal with this circumstance. It can no longer hold a neutral stance between the US and China or hide behind a "clever excuse" by claiming that "South Korea should not choose one over the other since they are both equally important." Throughout the history, it has been a long-standing pattern for superpowers to enforce neighboring countries to form a line behind one for their hegemonic struggles.♣

※ Translator's note: This is a summarized unofficial translation of the original paper which was written in Korean. All references should be made to the original paper.

※ This article is written based on the author's personal opinions and does not reflect the views of the Sejong Institute.