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Prospect of International Affairs in 2021: Return of Geopolitics and Great Power Competition

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English Abstract

One of the distinct trends in the recent international order is the rise of the politics of great powers, commonly referred to as the “return of geopolitics.” At the end of the Cold War, most Western people were relieved that one of the most troubling geopolitical problems in international politics had been resolved. However, the end of the Cold War did not mean an end to geopolitical conflicts. China, Russia, Iran, and other revisionist countries, which have opposed the U.S.-led international order that was settled after the end of the Cold War, are trying to change the current international order. The return of geopolitics is directly related to the deepening conflicts over the control of territorial land and water. Geopolitics is a matter that includes territorial (maritime) jurisdiction and the composition and characteristics of the population living there, as well as the economic dimensions. This eventually leads precisely to the question of who lives where? In particular, competition among superpowers such as the U.S., China, and Russia is a key issue in predicting international order in 2021. With the inauguration of the Trump administration, the U.S. has pushed for the foreign policy that puts the American national interest at the highest under the phrase of “America First.” China, calling for the realization of the Chinese dream and the revival of the great Chinese people under the Xi Jinping regime, is not hiding its ambition to emerge as the greatest superpower by completing a set of goals named

“The Two Centenaries” by 2049. Russia led by President Vladimir Putin is demonstrating a strong will to regain the glory of the former empire of the Soviet Union. Due to these three superpowers’ pursuit of exclusive national strategies, a strategic competition among superpowers is likely to become a new normal state of the international order for the time being. The international order in 2021 will eventually depend on how quickly and firmly the recovery of U.S. global leadership takes place. The next year’s international order will have two pillars to observe: the shock of COVID-19 and the development of geopolitical conflicts among the superpowers. ♣

※ 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.