How International Geopolitics Drives Student Mobility in East Asia

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The evolving geopolitical dynamics in East Asia have significant implications for higher education in the region. The administration of South Korea’s president Yoon Suk Yeol appears to be delineating a distinct line between the Korean Peninsula and mainland China, tilting towards another neighbor, Japan, and forming ever-stronger ties with the United States. This repositioning is in response to the changing geopolitical dynamics in the region, influenced by China, Russia, and North Korea.

East Asia’s Power Trio
China, Japan, and South Korea are economic and political powerhouses in East Asia. Thus, shifting relationships among these nations often result in changing higher education policies. A prime example is the Campus Asia Project, a trilateral student exchange program facilitated by a consortium of universities from each nation. In 2010, three country’s leaders held a summit and earmarked this as a pivotal collaborative initiative. Presently, the project even stretched to include a few ASEAN countries, 20 project groups encompass top-tier universities. In 2022, through this initiative, 1,300 students went on exchange programs between South Korea and its two partner countries. This total included 76 dual-degree, 352 long-term exchange, and 872 short-term study abroad students; 382 and 452 were invited from China and Japan, respectively.

The Rise and Fall
A decade after South Korea and China formalized their diplomatic relations in 1992, the number of Chinese students in South Korea began surging. In 2003, the figure stood at roughly 5,600. The count of credential seekers from China skyrocketed tenfold in six years, reaching over 50,000 in 2009 and surging further to 71,000 in 2019. Even during the recent pandemic, the numbers held firm, hovering around 67,000, representing about 35 percent of all international students in South Korea. This trend underscores the competitive edge and value attached to South Korean qualifications in the Chinese job market.

There is a stark contrast in the opposite direction. The number of South Koreans studying in China plunged from 73,240 in 2017 to 16,968 in 2022—a staggering 75 percent drop. China’s status as the top study abroad destination for South Koreans, even surpassing the United States in 2016 and 2017, dwindled rapidly. While this decline can be partly attributed to South Korea’s dwindling youth population, other factors are also at play. The geopolitical tensions between South Korea and China around 2016–2017 over the deployment of the United States military defense system in South Korea and subsequent Chinese economic sanctions played significant roles. It acted as a trigger to set two countries apart for a while. While South Korea tried to recalibrate its position between the United States and China, it might have been too late to redirect the dispersion of South Korean students. The COVID-19 pandemic also disrupted both human and material interactions between the two countries. The situation was exacerbated via online platforms and social media, leading to further decline in mutual understanding. Moreover, the evident inclination of the current South Korean government towards a United States–South Korea alliance, coupled with apprehensions about studying in nondemocratic settings with considerable anti-US sentiments, is likely to further play a significant role in influencing student choices.
Beyond Historical Strains

In comparison, student exchanges between South Korea and Japan have remained relatively stable. While historical and territorial tensions between South Korea and Japan persist, these factors have had limited impact on educational exchanges between the two nations. It appears that these factors have not significantly hindered educational and academic exchanges at least by the exhibited numbers of mobile students. The longstanding nature of these issues and their perceived impact, when juxtaposed against recent tensions with China, might explain this steady flow. They were not strong enough to deter students’ and parents’ aspiration to learn in South Korea or Japan. In fact, Japanese higher education attracted many South Koreans even before they began to consider studying in the United States.

For instance, during the 2019 period of economic sanctions imposed by Japan on South Korea and the subsequent South Korean public boycott of Japanese products, the number of each country’s students at the other end remained steady. Japanese enrollment in South Korean institutions doubled from 2,486 in 2003 to 5,733 in 2022. On the other hand, the count of South Korean students in Japan has remained stable over the past 20 years, reaching its peak at 27,965 in 2010 and now stands at approximately 15,000. The Study Korea 300K Project, a national effort to attract more international students, is set to gain momentum. This strategy resonates with the government’s geopolitical objective to fortify ties with both the United States and Japan by focusing on student exchanges with these nations.

A noteworthy observation is the academic focus of these students: nearly 43 percent of Japanese students in South Korea are enrolled in Korean language programs, with only 5 percent in graduate programs. This contrasts sharply with the 6 percent of Chinese students in South Korea studying the Korean language, while 39 percent are enrolled in graduate studies. It implies that Japanese students in credential mobility are more attracted to South Korea for its cultural components, including language. Chinese students tend to engage in degree mobility to seek greater academic value from South Korea. Even for Chinese educators lacking advanced degrees, South Korean universities present an avenue to fulfill their requirements.

The Campus as a Diplomatic Frontier

The fluidity of student mobility in Northeast Asia mirrors the broader geopolitical shifts in the region. While government-sponsored student mobility programs thrive, the geopolitical landscape has substantially impacted individual or nonsponsored study abroad decisions. South Korea’s alignment with the United States and Japan, coupled with strained relations with mainland China, will most certainly affect the region’s educational landscape in the following years. The complex interplay of national sentiments, global hegemony, and educational purposes is more evident than ever.

It is vital to promote educational collaborations that transcend political discord. Building on triumphs such as the Campus Asia Project, often called “East Asia’s Erasmus program,” can enhance the academic and career paths of students in this region. Such partnerships not only enhance multilateral understanding of historical and cultural contexts but are also crucial in laying the groundwork for long-term symbiotic relationships essential for peace, sustainable growth, and collective prosperity.