

# Notes on Strategy

Vol. 2021, No.15

## International Politics of Double Standard

Ki-jung Kim (President, INSS)

**INSS**

INSTITUTE FOR NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY  
국가안보전략연구원

## International Politics of Double Standard

Ki-jung Kim (President, INSS)

Korean poet Kim Chunsu's (1922-2004) most notable poem is titled Flower. "Before I called her name, / she was nothing / more than a gesture. / When I called her name, / she came to me / and became a flower." Because of this work, Kim Chunsu came to be known as the "poet of flowers." Readers have interpreted the word "flower" literally as in common usage or symbolizing adoration, thus reciting and admiring this piece as a love poem. Consumption of literature is up to the reader, so these interpretations should not necessarily be problematic. However, many poetry critics, including even the poet himself, interpret this poem as being about the essential properties of "existence," "language," and the "relationship" that language establishes.

### The meaning behind naming and calling

All things and phenomena of this world have names. A "name" is a way of combining material and concept, and simultaneously a process of imposing a "criterion" on the properties of a phenomena. To call something by giving it a name is to categorize

the phenomenon within the framework of that name. Therefore, naming can be thought of as a type of framing. It is a decision of simplifying the complex properties of a phenomenon to the confines of the frames of a specific word. Naming determines the method of interpretation, as in “this is how it should be viewed.” In this sense, framing should be considered as ‘prior planning of interpretation.’ In the social sciences, the intellectual work of “conceptualization” is similar to such means.

Many interesting things have happened in connection to names, concepts, and criteria in everyday life, but also in history. Take the naming convention of war, for example. Some of the names of wars are in relation to the area or region where the war occurred, while others are based on the actors involved in the war. The “Vietnam War” or “Gulf War” are examples of the former, while “Russo-Japanese War” or “Spanish–American War” are instances of the latter. Sometimes, symbolism is highlighted in the cause of the war, as in the “Opium Wars,” or specific points in time, as in the “June 25 Incident (Korean War).” There are no set rules for this scheme. The same war can sometimes be called differently. But it is no doubt that naming can determine outline of path toward understanding and interpretation. Hence, this becomes a matter of debate. For example, there exists the criticism that

by naming a war based on the outbreak area, it would be hard to identify the perpetrators and victims of that war.

### **The controversy of the double standard**

Considering the controversy over whether test-firing certain weapons or conducting military training should be regarded as a legitimate measure for “security” and “self-defense” or seen as “provocation,” such problems arise from the “politics of naming” and “subjectivity of interpretation.” The issue stems from how similar phenomena can be defined and named differently depending on the viewpoint of the observer. In discussing the difference between self-defense measures and acts of provocation, one side argues that “they are not even slightly similar but completely different issues,” while the other argues dismissively that “the two, in the end, are the same.” Such splits in opinion are also caused by problems of naming, interpretation, and conceptualization. Complaints about double standards thus emerge against this background. Some will admit that the arguments presented have the possibility to be somewhat controversial, while others completely dismiss the topic as not being debatable at all.

The term double standard indicates that there are

two different standards for judging a certain phenomenon or problem, or that the standard is unclear. The key here is that standard of judgment. The controversy of the double standard arises when the standard become subjective or arbitrary, and when the standard for what should be universal and common-sense value judgment becomes difficult to share. One typical example is the Korean term “naeronambul,” meaning “romance for me, affair for others.” Here, the issue does not revolve around whether the phenomenon is actually romance or infidelity, but how one views it.

The most common realm where this phenomenon occurs is international politics. State action, which includes preparatory measures against provocations and for self-defense, also involves the state mobilization of force. This is defined as aggression on one hand and liberation on the other. Even when it comes to colonial rule, the victims are sometimes defined as the pillagers while the colonizers brazenly declare themselves as having been benevolent actors. International politics is thus an area where such a duality has long been tolerated. The conflict between ambiguity in standard and interpretations is still ongoing. It remains challenging to establish universal standard for “judgment” of state action. Since the 20th century, there have been attempts at establishing a world-wide consensus on universal

values, but progress continues to be slow.

Why does this double standard controversy constantly appear in the field of international politics? It stems in part from the very nature of modern international politics. In international politics, unlike domestic politics, there is no world government. This means that there is no central authority. Therefore, the principle of self-help is taken for granted, and individual actors develop a tendency to independently interpret phenomena as how they see fit. Anarchy not only refers to the lack of protection for individual actors (states), but it also signifies the lack of authority to enforce certain interpretations of phenomena. Under such conditions, various types of double standards prevail.

The act of killing people is regarded as “murder” by moral criteria within a given country and is therefore subject to criticism. However, killing outside of that country’s borders is rebranded as a just act in carrying out war missions, and the murderer is even reinterpreted as a “war hero.” In another instance, there was a situation in which a country had agreed on a solution to tackle ecological problems in relation to solving the global warming crisis, but later refused to ratify it in consideration of the interests of its domestic corporations. While such countries may accumulate a great amount of

criticism from others, if those other countries also immerse themselves into the individualistic logic of pursuing national interests, most of their positions will shape to be no different. This is due to the double standard that exists between the legitimacy of universal values and the black hole-like discourse of national interest. At first glance, these may seem like contradictions, but as long as the modern form of international politics persists, these contradictions will not cease. The controversy of the double standard will continue until the progress of civilization spreads and becomes embedded in the realm of inter-state matters.

### **The international politics of balance of power and arms race**

The double standard controversy between provocation and self-defense is closely related to the mechanisms of the balance of power and arms race. Balance of power is often discussed in strategic discourse or current affairs. But in reality, the assessment of a balanced distribution of power is equivocal. Some view it as a condition of stability, while others assume it as the cause of instability. Strictly speaking, the balance of power is not a balance of material. It is difficult to precisely locate where national or military power is balanced in between countries, let alone calculate this balance. This is

because from the beginning, national power and military power both contain non-material elements, that is, epistemic elements.

From this perspective, the theory of balance of power is also a theory of ideation, judgment, and concept. Most countries are likely to declare that they have reached a “balance of power” when they “judge” that their military power is somewhat advanced, and thus, they “feel safe.” This judgment is undoubtedly highly arbitrary and subjective. Regardless, when such conditions are made, other countries naturally and inevitably experience increased feelings of insecurity. Therefore, the arms race is not caused by material balance or imbalance per se, but takes place under the conditions of subjectivity in “satisfaction” or “perception of threats.” Therefore, we say that the security dilemma/arms race and the balance of power constitute two sides of the same coin.

It is difficult to dictate how the other side should make their judgments and criteria. A war does not occur simply because of an argument of whether something is a provocation or not. We should accept that arbitrary judgments and interpretations up to a certain level are bound to occur. This is because international politics is a realm where such things happen, and where some uncivilized attributes

remain. Hence, a certain degree of hypocrisy is also natural. If hypocrisy is a strategy, it is to be a strategy. Whether through disguise or use of formal language, if ostensibly prioritizing the greater good, arbitrary interpretation can gain strength. Advocating for peace while promoting build-up of military power for self-defense may seem hypocritical, but at the same time, it is a good strategy. In this regard, the principle of an iron hand in a velvet glove is the optimal strategy.

### **How to deal with the double standard controversy**

In inter-state relations, the battle over criteria and interpretations is a kind of competition of theories to dominate persuasive power. This is what it means when diplomacy is described as a forum for competing discourse. The key is how much more persuasive one's own actions and (arbitrary) definitions are. Put into this battlefield of competing theories, one must find a way to win. One cannot remain nonchalant and polite, and blindly accept, for instance, the inability to define comfort women as "wartime sex slaves" while the other party blatantly calls them as engagers of "voluntary prostitution."

In the international community, securing many actors who support and respond to one's own logic is the way to come out on top in the competition

of discourses. This is also why public diplomacy is so important. In the arena of international politics, actions and arguments gain legitimacy when they inherently reflect universal values and, at the same time, as more countries support them. On such a basis, one's international influence increases. In addition, the brand and reputation that the country has accumulated also has an impact. Reputation is directly related to reliability.

What is important is that as one country increases its scope of interests shared with other countries, it can more easily share its logic and perspectives. Likewise, when countries are friendly or have similar identities, their logic can converge. If one country believes that it is on the same side as another, the way they view a phenomenon or definition becomes mutual. In short, interpretation is a subjective domain of individual countries, but when it is linked with interests or identity, then the point where subjectivity of one and subjectivity of the other meet, or the domain of "intersubjectivity," expands.

The double standard controversy raised over the definition of either provocation or self-defense is nothing new given the nature of modern international politics. However, arbitrarily judging and subjectively defining a phenomenon tend to go beyond verbal disputes. Differences in definition and

interpretation may provoke sentiments of anger and in turn, such sentiments may create a pathway for subsequent actions. This develops into a problem of aftereffects. The differences in discourse originating from the arbitrariness of definitions can intensify the competition of “who is right and wrong” between countries. However, it is necessary to manage such situations to ensure discourse and definitions do not unnecessarily aggravate the conflict between countries.

Conflict management is a practical issue. A verbal argument should not have to cost more than what it is worth. In international politics, no one has the right to enforce the beliefs of other parties. However, if conflict is left unattended simply based on the principle of self-help, it will not resolve on its own. This is because, as in the case of an arms race or a security dilemma, anxiety and threat perception only increase with time. In the end, communication and dialogue are the answer to overcoming the dispute over rules and definitions. Dialogue is the starting point for the formation of intersubjectivity, and from there, consensus can begin to develop. If actors start calling the same phenomenon by the same concept under the same structure of discourse, then there is no reason to argue with logic. Therefore, trust can be established. This also means that one will have the opportunity

to manage conflicts over concepts, interpretations, criteria and terms.

Let us once again summon Kim Chunsu's beautiful verse into the realm of international politics. Only when there exists the opportunity to be called a "flower" does our subject begin to exist as a flower. If she reciprocates by also calling me a flower, then to her, I become a flower. Centered around a single name, "flower," relations and meanings are created. This is the point where subjectivity meets another subjectivity. The debate over whether something can be called a provocation or an act of self-defense may be a matter of double standard, but at the core is also an issue of the absence of a relationship. Simply blaming the double standard does not solve the problem. When we decide to start a conversation and form a relationship, the problem behind our criteria and definitions will cease to exist as a controversy.