
Chinese president's visit to South Korea: an extraordinary milestone in bilateral ties

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The geopolitical plate of the Northeast Asian region is going through important shifts. We are currently witnessing a rising China, a resurgent Japan, an assertive Russia and an anachronistic North Korea which is simultaneously pursuing nuclear weapons and economic development. Disputes over history, territory and maritime security, among others, are raising concerns that even a small military clash, quite possibly through political miscalculation, may evolve into a full-blown conflict. At the heart of these tensions is a trust deficit. However, it is worth to pay attention to Chinese President Xi Jinping's state visit to the Republic of Korea (ROK) from July 3 to 4 this year, which shows sincere willingness to improve the bilateral relationship between ROK and China.

In a break with tradition, President Xi's arrival in South Korea made him the first Chinese leader to visit Seoul ahead of Pyongyang since South Korea and China established diplomatic ties in 1992. In the past, Chinese leaders had visited their ally North Korea before visiting South Korea. Chinese president Xi's decision to meet first with South Korean President Park Geun-hye before North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has considerable strategic implications: In a sense, it highlights China's interest in nurturing booming ties with South Korea, while sending North Korea an unambiguous message about its destabilizing pursuit of nuclear weapons.

This is a particularly remarkable development when one considers the close ideological and historic ties between China and North Korea. China backed North Korea during the 1950-1953 Korean War. Since then, China has been North Korea's sole major ally as Mao Zedong, the Chinese leader, once described the bilateral ties as being as close as "lips and teeth".

Deepening economic ties

Over the past 22 years, bilateral economic relations between South Korea and China have developed by leaps and bounds. China has become the ROK's largest trading partner, largest export destination and largest source of imports, while ROK is now China's third largest trading partner and fifth largest source of foreign direct investment. Two-way trade volume between China and South Korea surpassed 229 billion US dollars in 2013, a 7 percent year-on-year increase, that is larger than the combined value of South Korea's trade with the United States and Japan. Moreover, South Korea and China are the largest overseas tourist destination and source of foreign students for each other.

¹ The views expressed herein are the author's own and do not reflect the official policy or position of the South Korean government.

In their joint statement released after the summit, the two leaders agreed to strengthen the efforts for the conclusion of a free trade agreement (FTA) negotiations by the end of this year. The China-Republic of Korea FTA negotiations were launched in 2012 and more than 12 rounds of talks have been conducted since then. The two countries aim to conclude a comprehensive and high-level FTA. The FTA, if concluded, will certainly provide a valuable framework to bolster their already booming economic ties. It will also promote the process of economic integration among Asian countries. In a sign of further improvement in economic relations, it is worth to mention that both leaders also agreed to set up a direct trading exchange market between the won and RMB in Korea.

North Korea's Nuclear Issue

North Korea's nuclear weapons program has been regarded as the number one threat to peace and stability in Northeast Asia and beyond. North Korea's nuclear weapons capability will have devastating implications for the entire Northeast Asian security environment.

The six-party talks involving the two Koreas, the United States, China, Japan and Russia began in 2003, with the aim of ending North Korea's nuclear program. In 2005, North Korea agreed to scrap its nuclear program in exchange for diplomatic concessions and economic aid under a landmark deal. The talks, however, stopped in 2008. As a result, North Korea is further away than ever from the goal of denuclearization.

At the summit, the leaders of South Korea and China sent a strong message to North Korea, implying to share their common position against North Korea's development of nuclear weapons. The joint statement said that "the two countries reaffirm their firm opposition to the development of nuclear weapons on the Korean peninsula", a phraseology much stronger than a year ago. In addition, both leaders agreed to make efforts to resume the long-stalled six-party talks by preparing preconditions.

Thus far, the negotiating pattern regarding North Korea's nuclear ambitions is all too familiar: North Korea provokes a crisis. The international community imposes a certain amount of sanctions. Later, the international community tries to patch things up by offering concessions and rewards to North Korea. Meanwhile, North Korea uses the intervening time to advance its nuclear and missile capabilities. In order to break this vicious circle, the South Korean and United States governments demanded that North Korea demonstrate some tangible commitment to denuclearization before any substantive dialogue could be held. In contrast, North Korea called for an unconditional resumption of the talks.

Under the situation, the summit laid a solid foundation for strengthened strategic cooperation between the two nations towards the denuclearization of North Korea by reaffirming their common goals on denuclearization.

Shifting Dynamics

An intense security competition is now underway in Northeast Asia. This competition is more severe in intensity and more multi-faceted in extent than ever. Main seeds of conflict

are territorial claims and historical issues left over from the post-World War II order. The dangerous territorial disputes are being played out by China and Japan over the Senkaku Islands (called the Diaoyu Islands by China). The Spratly Islands could also become Asia's most volatile flashpoint among the claimants: China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines.

Despite being natural partners who badly need each other, South Korea-Japan relations are getting harder in recent years, mainly on account of historical grievances that date back to the first half of the 20th century. The core of South Korea's resentment lies in the issue of the so-called "comfort women" or women victims forced into sexual slavery before and during World War II by the Japanese military. In a related development, Japan announced in late June, this year that the Kono Statement had been drawn up in cooperation with South Korea. The statement, Japan's landmark sexual slavery apology, had acknowledged the army's role in forcing women into sexual slavery. The review of that apology by Japan has only served to make the bilateral relationship harder.

In another important development that could possibly affect a rapidly shifting balance of power in Northeast Asia, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is shifting Japan to the right by pushing for a bigger role by the Self-Defense Forces and a less apologetic view of Japan's World War II wartime history. The Japanese Cabinet announced its reinterpretation of Article 9 of Japan's pacifist Constitution on July 1 this year, which had been in place for almost 70 years, allowing the country's military to play a more robust role in the increasingly fragile region. Japan's changed stance has certainly concerned the Chinese and Koreans, who have suffered most from Japan's brutal colonial expansion in the first half of the 20th century. During the state visit, Presidents Park and Xi voiced concerns over Japan's recent moves.

Just in time for Chinese President Xi's arrival in Seoul, Japanese Prime Minister Abe announced that he would lift some sanctions imposed against North Korea in return for North Korea's pledge to investigate the fate of Japanese nationals abducted in the 1970s and 1980s. The recent progress in talks between Japan and North Korea, however, has drawn concerns from South Korea and the other neighbors since any compensation deal is feared to compromise the trilateral cooperation aimed at denuclearizing North Korea, among the United States, South Korea and Japan.

At the root of shifting dynamics in Northeast Asia is rising nationalism. Nationalism across Northeast Asia has added new complexities and uncertainties to the region.

Challenges and opportunities

Chinese President Xi's state visit to South Korea has greatly contributed and will continue to contribute to further consolidating the China-ROK relationship in many fields and injecting new vigor for future cooperation. On the other hand, the United States-Republic of Korea alliance has served as the cornerstone of peace and stability on the Korean peninsula and beyond. The United States still maintains 28,500 troops in South Korea. In fact, South Korea needs to befriend the United States and China. In this situation, there is a growing importance in developing harmoniously the bilateral relationship between Korea and United States together with that of South Korea and China.

There is some speculation that a rising China is doomed to clash violently with the United States. Not necessarily so. Depending on the present order may be in no regional actor's interest. The economic and security architecture designed after World War II and maintained by the United States has served as the guarantor of regional peace and stability, which has enabled Asia's sustained economic growth. China, on its part, has contributed to the global economy as the single most important engine of growth. Herein lies the need that all regional actors be guided by a sense of wisdom and a perception of shared interest in preventing a war and shaping a stable and prosperous future.

It is in this challenging environment that South Korean President Park seeks the "Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative" (NAPCI) through the pursuit of **Trustpolitik** in the region. President Park's NAPCI is a plan to build trust among regional players starting with less sensitive issues, such as the environment, counter-terrorism, disaster relief and nuclear safety.

The ROK-China summit has provided South Korean policy-makers with opportunities and challenges alike: through the summit, the ROK has proved its enhanced strategic value in shifting dynamics in the region. How to parlay its increased strategic position into substantial gains, such as the abandonment of North Korea's nuclear weapons program and the shaping of the parameters for Korea's unification, will remain one of the trickiest challenges for South Korean diplomats.

The task is daunting. More than anything else, they must overcome the inherent contradictions in an increasingly economic-focused China policy and a strategic-focused United States policy and play a constructive role in maintaining a stable and prosperous regional order. To that end, it is imperative that the South Korean diplomats pool their wisdom and resources and work out a clever strategy.