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# Urgency for Boosting Resilience by Crisis Management in the 25th Anniversary of Establishment of Diplomatic Ties Between South Korea and China

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For the past two and a half decades the South Korea–China relations have enjoyed the thriving years since the establishment of diplomatic ties between the two countries on August 24, 1991. However, they have experienced a serious downturn or been in the adjustment period for the last few years. The Republic of Korea (ROK) and the People’s Republic of China (PRC), major players contributing to peace and co-prosperity on the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia, are very closely intertwined in the historical, geological, political, and economic fronts. To take the ROK–Sino strategic cooperative partnership to the next level, strengthening of resilience of bilateral relations is required combined with a measure for the stable management of the current crisis.

### Evaluation on ROK–Sino Relations

The ROK–Sino bilateral relations of the last 25 years, since the official diplomatic ties were established in 1991, have made a phenomenal advancement but started to spiral downward in 2016 due to the difference of strategic interests over North Korea and its nuclear issues and conflicts

over the deployment of the THAAD anti-missile defense system to the Korean Peninsula. In particular, the ROK-Sino strategic cooperative partnership is increasingly being affected by the recent development – the strategic competition between the US and China has become ever fiercer due to China’s rising status as superpower and circumstances in Northeast Asia and the Korean Peninsula have gotten more complicated, partly owing to the North Korea’s nuclear advancement. However, there still exists a possibility of the stable management and cooperation of the ROK-Sino relations given that China has a high regard for Korea’s strategic value, joins the efforts for denuclearization of North Korea in solidarity with the international community, including South Korea and the US, and expresses its willingness to actively implement the UN sanctions against the North.

### **Measures for Crisis Management of ROK-Sino Relations**

The important reason that bilateral relations between the two countries should be stably maintained is because bringing peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula precisely matches the future vision of the governments of South Korea and China although there still remain fundamental and structural factors that constrain the development and advancement of the ROK-Sino strategic cooperative partnership. Therefore, a measure for promoting the future cooperation needs to be established based on an objective evaluation of the current challenges and crisis so that the ROK-Sino relations can move forward for the next 25 years. First, efforts are required to bridge the recognition gap on North Korea and its nuclear development between Seoul and Beijing. Second, there needs to be the division of strategy where on one hand, the primary focus of the ROK-Sino cooperation should be on maintaining peace, and on the other hand, bringing the stability on the peninsula and fostering the cooperation on unification should be set as a mid- to long-term goal and pursued in a gradual manner. Third, the issue of the THAAD battery – the biggest controversy between South Korea and China – should soon be resolved. It appears that the ROK government is not very likely to withdraw the THAAD

deployment amid the deepening strategic conflicts between the US and China and the North's rapid nuclear advancement. To that end, the joint efforts should be called for to ease and resolve the crisis originated from North Korea's nuclear pursuit, the fundamental cause behind the deployment in the first place, while swiftly creating the ROK-US-China trilateral consultative body.

### **Strengthening the Resilience of ROK-Sino Partnership**

Going beyond a piecemeal approach of simply covering or managing recent difficulties in the ROK-Sino relations, a resilience - an ability to restore the bilateral relationship of the past in the face of another emerging potential crisis - should be strengthened to promote the mid- to long-term cooperation in the South Korea-China relations. It is because of the fact that China's constructive and proactive role is still important in bringing about peace on the Korean Peninsula and eventually opening up the road to unification and that Korea's strategic value is still high on China's external policy agenda in its pursuit of acquiring the status of superpower in the 21st century. To that end, first, the experiences of resolving conflicts and overcoming crisis should be accumulated and a mutual trust should be built by creating the regular strategic communication channels between the ROK and the PRC. Second, from the geo-economic perspective, measures for inducing North Korea into opening its door in the mid- to long-term should be created by leveraging a strategic linkage grounded on the mutual interest of both countries. Third, a role of policy-public diplomacy is becoming ever more pronounced to weather the crisis between the two countries and make a tangible result of the strategic cooperative partnership. Fourth, the mutual understanding and trust should be promoted to enhance the resilience of the ROK-Sino relations, not only between the government actors but also between the new actors, such as think tanks, NGOs, the national assembly, corporations, the local governments, and the media. ©KINU 2017



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