

Issues and Prospects for Cross-Recognition: A Chinese Perspective

James T. Myers^{*}

On 24 August 1992 the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Korea concluded an agreement to establish formal diplomatic relations. It was the hope of some at the time that this would lead to a process of cross-recognition whereby Japan and the US would recognize North Korea while China and the USSR exchanged full diplomatic recognition with the ROK. As events developed, this was not to come to pass. This article attempts to assess the Chinese view of the diplomatic situation with reference to the two Koreas following the exchange of ambassadors between Beijing and Seoul.

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Background

China and The Koreas

At both the 1943 Cairo Conference and the 1945 Yalta Conference, the subject of Korea was considered. On 8 August 1945, as agreed at Yalta, the USSR declared war on Japan. Within a matter of days, on August 15, Japan announced its unconditional surrender ending the war in the Pacific. The line of demarcation for accepting the surrender of the Japanese forces and for the ensuing occupation of Korea was set at the 38th parallel. There appears to have been no compelling reason to have chosen this particular line of demarcation other than the fact that it divided the country approximately in half and left Seoul in the American zone of occupation.

Failure of the occupying US and Soviet authorities—and later of the United Nations—to reach agreement about procedures for unifying Korea eventually led to a continuing division of the country. The Republic of Korea was established in July 1948 under the leadership of President Syngman Rhee; in September of the same year The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) was established under the leadership of Kim Il Sung. The regime in the North, created under Soviet occupation and dominated by a Communist majority in the ruling Korean Workers' Party, formed a natural ally for the new Communist government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) which was proclaimed on 1 October 1949. Indeed, a little more than a year after the creation of the PRC, on 25 November 1950 the Chinese sent 150,000 troops of Lin Biao's Fourth Field Army over the border into North Korea to intervene on the side of their Communist allies in the Korean War. The Chinese would eventually suffer upwards of one million casualties in the bloody conflict, including the death of Mao Zedong's oldest son, Mao Anying.

Though the DPRK was obligated for its creation and early survival principally to the Soviet Union, in the wake of the Korean War, North Korea developed a patron-client relationship with the PRC as well. The Chinese typically described North Korea as “lips” to China’s “teeth.” China, along with the Soviet Union, became a principal source of economic and military aid for the DPRK. Over time, the Sino–North Korean relationship experienced ups and downs. There were times when the DPRK moved closer to the PRC, such as the intense period of the Sino-Soviet dispute, and other periods such as the years of the Cultural Revolution in China when the DPRK moved closer to the USSR. In general, though, North Korea tried to play a balancing game with its two big Communist neighbors.

The 1970s brought a number of important changes to the established relations of the region. In 1972 President Richard Nixon made his historic journey to the PRC resulting in the signing of the Shanghai Communique. The years that followed were marked by growing contacts and an improving relationship between the United States and China. This trend culminated in the normalization of relations between the two countries in 1979. During the previous year (1978) the PRC had also put a formal end to hostilities with Japan by the signing of the Sino-Japanese Treaty of Peace and Friendship. The 1970s also brought the beginnings of what would continue to be a growing trade relationship between the PRC and the ROK.

North Korea moved closer to the USSR as China expanded contacts with the US and Japan. It was also during this period, perhaps in part as a consequence of the Sino-American rapprochement, that the North and South began a series of dialogues which led to the issuing of the 4 July 1972 South-North Joint Communique on Korean reunification. It was at this time, writes Ilpyong Kim, “that the major powers involved in the Korean Peninsula—China, the Soviet Union, Japan and the United States—proposed the policy of cross-recognition: China and the Soviet Union would recognize the ROK in the south; the

United States and Japan would recognize the DPRK in the north. Cross-recognition would promote peace and stability on the Korean peninsula, a volatile area often called the tinderbox of Asia."

The series of meetings that followed the 1972 joint communique revealed that, while reunification was a common goal, there remained major differences between the approaches of the North and South. Likewise, as indicated above, full, four-way cross-recognition was not to be achieved.

China and South Korea

The "Northern Policy"

South Korea's attempt to expand its diplomatic contacts to include China, the USSR and the states of Eastern Europe dates back to the presidency of Park Chung Hee in the 1970s. For its part as indicated above, China had maintained relations with the DPRK since the time of establishment of the PRC. The ROK had likewise maintained full diplomatic relations with the Republic of China on Taiwan.

With the death of Chinese leader Mao Zedong in 1976 and the ending of the so-called "ten years of disorder" (the years of the Cultural Revolution), Chinese policy toward the outside world began to change. We have already noted that there was an increase in trade and contacts between China and South Korea during the 1970s—principally through third countries. This trend accelerated in the 1980s under the impetus of the new policy of reform and opening to the outside world instituted by the PRC following the political comeback of Deng Xiaoping at the historic Third Plenum of the 11th Communist Party Central Committee in December 1978. China's commitment to economic reform and to a limited marketization of their economy also brought an opening of China to new foreign investment and a search for new trading partners and markets for Chinese goods.

South Korea provided an attractive target of opportunity for the new Chinese effort. During the years of the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution in China, the ROK economy had stabilized and began to soar. The annual South Korean GDP growth rate which measured about 4.8 percent in the years 1955–64 jumped to 8.9 percent over the period 1964–91. *Per capita* GDP in the ROK more than doubled in the eighteen years from 1955–73 (\$502 to \$1126) and then more than tripled again in the next eighteen years from 1973–91 (\$1126 to \$3845).

Though the South Korean policy of seeking contacts with any country regardless of ideology dates back to the 1970s, significant contacts with China only began to grow during the 1980s. China used the opportunity provided by the May 1983 hijacking of a Chinese commercial aircraft to South Korea to open contacts with the Seoul government. This was followed by expanded trade, cultural and athletic contacts over the next several years including Chinese participation in the Asian Games hosted by South Korea in 1986. It is estimated that by 1986 Sino–South Korean indirect trade through Hong Kong had reached US\$1.5 billion

For China, the benefits of the growing relationship with South Korea went beyond trade or economic considerations. China's economic reform also required what the leaders of the PRC called a "peaceful" international environment. High on the list of Chinese priorities was a peaceful and stable situation on the Korean Peninsula. China was eager to avoid hostile entanglements over Korea with the US and Japan, both of which nations assumed major importance in China's economic modernization plans. In addition, the growing relationship provided China with the possibility, at least, to re-establish the historically close relationship that had existed between Imperial China and a tributary Korean State. This relationship would be important to the PRC as it attempted to reassert its influence as a regional power especially as it pertains to its close neighbors and former vassal states. As Professor Scalapino observed, the leaders of the

PRC "perceive their nation as influential or at least worthy of being influential, and they behave accordingly."

For all these reasons, China never retreated from its policy of pursuing better and expanded relations with the ROK. In fact, as Scalapino writes, for some time before the recognition of South Korea by the PRC, China was already following a "*de facto* two-Koreas policy."

In 1988, new ROK President Roh Tae Woo formally launched his "Northern Policy." The principal objective of this policy was to establish diplomatic relations with the PRC and USSR. Already under President Roh's predecessor, Chun Doo Hwan, the ROK had enjoyed success with its diplomatic efforts in Eastern Europe. The Korea Trade Promotion Office (KOTRA) opened a representative office in Hungary at the end of 1987 and Hungary opened an office in Seoul a few months later. South Korea and Yugoslavia exchanged trade offices later in 1988. Also in 1988 Seoul hosted the 24th Summer Olympic Games in which athletes from Eastern Europe, the USSR and the PRC all participated. By the end of 1989, South Korea had established diplomatic relations with all East European countries. In December 1990, following several summit meetings between Roh Tae Woo and Mikhail Gorbachev, relations were normalized with the USSR.

Normalization of Relations with China

An important ingredient of President Roh's Northern Policy was the idea of cross-recognition. As originally conceived, this policy would seek the recognition of North Korea by the United States and Japan while the USSR and the PRC would recognize South Korea. This would then be followed by the simultaneous entry of both Koreas into the United Nations. Ultimately, it was hoped that such a series of events would lead to the reunification of Korea. In his search for a path to reunification, President Roh appeared to embrace the "two-plus-four formula" which had contributed to the unification of East and West Germany. In the

German case, the "two" were the two Germanies; the "four" were the occupying World War II powers, the United States, Great Britain, France and the USSR. In the Korean case, the "two" would be the two Koreas while the "four" would be the United States, Japan, the PRC and the USSR.

North Korea initially rejected any formula for entry into the United Nations that might imply a permanent division of Korea and likewise rejected the idea of anything like a "two-plus-four" formula on ideological grounds as outside interference in Korean affairs.

At the same time, as indicated above, South Korea continued to pursue its successful Northern Policy including expansion and improvement of its relations with the PRC. The 1989 Asian Development bank meeting in Beijing included an official representative from the ROK. 1989 also saw the opening of several sea routes between South Korea and China for freight and passenger service. Trade volume between the two nations increased rapidly. By 1991 two-way trade had reached US\$ 5.8 billion. By 1992, South Korea had become China's third largest trading partner. From the Chinese point of view, a "strong complementarity" exists between the various sub-regional economies of Northeast Asia in which China plays a unique role. Specifically, with reference to South Korea trade, the Chinese saw the opportunity to provide cheap, good-quality food and textiles to the ROK while benefiting from South Korea's successful "commercialization of scientific and technical achievements."

In the autumn of 1990, KOTRA signed an agreement with the Chinese Chamber of International Commerce (CCOIC) to exchange trade offices. KOTRA opened its office in Beijing in January 1991; several months later, CCOIC opened its office in Seoul. The Beijing KOTRA office was opened by Roh Jae Won, who had been the ROK's Ambassador to Canada and who would become South Korea's first Ambassador to the PRC. Several rounds of talks followed over the next year and a half between

ROK Foreign Minister Yi Sang Ock and Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen.

On 19 August 1992 the Central News Agency of Taiwan announced that the PRC and ROK would establish diplomatic relations; this report was denied by the government of South Korea. The following day, North Korean sources reported that ROK Foreign Minister Yi Sang Ock would travel to Beijing on Sunday 23 August to formalize diplomatic relations between China and South Korea. A Japanese source commenting on the report declared:

Establishing ties with China would finalize South Korea's "northern diplomacy," of setting up relations with the former Soviet Union and East European countries to boost its international standing, and deals a severe blow to Pyongyang, the sources said.

On 22 August the government of the ROK confirmed the reports, indicating that Yi Sang Ock would leave the next day for Beijing, and that the PRC and ROK would establish formal diplomatic relations on Monday 24 August.

The pro-PRC *Ta Kung Pao* in Hong Kong pronounced this a "great accomplishment" for China's diplomacy:

Over the years China has harbored misgivings about opposition from Pyongyang, and now China is making this realistic and necessary step; this shows that China has made a wise decision to comply with the Asian and world situation. Beijing must have worked hard with Pyongyang to avoid disappointment.

In fact, Pyongyang appears to have received very little benefit from the development. Rumors that China might significantly increase its economic assistance to North Korea following normalization with ROK were apparently unfounded.

In the final stages of the negotiations between Beijing and Seoul, events developed rapidly. One theory holds that Deng Xiaoping himself blessed the development and issued instructions that it should be done. Negotiating directly with Chinese

Foreign Minister Qian Qichen who apparently had been given full power by Deng, Ambassador Roh Jae Wan reported that answers from the Chinese side would come back almost hourly and that the entire matter was concluded in about two months. At the end of the negotiations, the Chinese side asked for a month's delay before announcing the normalization so that Qian Qichen could brief the Chinese leaders who had been kept in the dark about the secret negotiations he had been authorized to conduct.

The communique signed by the two sides declared that "the Government of the Republic of Korea recognized the Government of the People's Republic of China as the sole legal government of China, and respects the position of the Chinese side that there is but one China and Taiwan is a part of China." In addition to the other economic benefits that flowed from the diplomatic recognition, the PRC took over control of the Chinese embassy compound in Seoul, one of the most valuable parcels of land in Korea. Chinese Foreign Minister Qian pronounced the normalization of relations with the ROK of "great importance." The exchange of ambassadors, said Qian:

...will produce a positive impact on the relaxation and stability of the situation on the Korean peninsula and on the peace and development of the Asia-Pacific region.

Cross-Recognition

By the time of the normalization of relations between the PRC and ROK, North Korea had been persuaded—perhaps as a result of China's urging—to accept simultaneous entry into the United Nations. When the two Koreas became members of the United Nations in 1991, many expected more responsive North Korean behavior. DPRK UN membership also provided additional, official channels of communication between the US and North Korea. With the establishment of diplomatic relations between the PRC and ROK, therefore, one part of the cross-recognition

plan had been realized; the second part of the cross-recognition system proved considerably more troublesome.

At the August 1992 Beijing meeting between Qian Qichen and Yi Sang Ock, it was reported that Minister Yi asked Qian Qichen for China's cooperation in ensuring resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue. Qian responded by saying that China has continuously asked North Korea to accept the International Atomic Agency's nuclear inspection. He added that China did not want either North or South Korea to have nuclear weapons and made it clear that China hoped for de-nuclearization of the Korean peninsula. Both Japan and the United States, the other pair of the original cross-recognition plan, insisted that North Korea abandon its nuclear program and open its nuclear facilities to international inspection as a condition for improving relations. The nuclear issue has continued to prove troublesome up to the present (summer 1994). As one Korean observer wrote of the suspension of talks between Japan and the DPRK: "Unless the mine of North Korean nuclear doubts is swept away, there is no prospect for the resumption of the talks." Nor has North Korea been entirely forthcoming with a number of "confidence-building measures" awaited by both the United States and Japan.

China and the DPRK

While the normalization with the ROK may have been a triumph of Chinese diplomacy as some observed, it was at least a mixed blessing as far as China's influence with the DPRK was concerned.

By 1992 when the normalization took place, the ROK had already established diplomatic relations with the USSR—now Russia—and with all the countries of Eastern Europe. Because there had not been a similar move by Japan and the United States to recognize North Korea, the idea of reciprocity was already lost. There is no way to know what might have resulted had the USSR and the PRC withheld recognition of the ROK until full,

reciprocal cross-recognition by the four sides had been achieved. For their own reasons, both the USSR and PRC pursued a different course of policy.

Given the way things developed, with first one and then the other of their big socialist allies recognizing South Korea, and with the tremendously rapid growth in PRC-ROK economic relations, it would be easy to understand if the DPRK felt abandoned by its friends. As a consequence, one must question exactly how much influence the PRC has in Pyongyang at the present time; to wonder how great is the Chinese ability to persuade, to reason with or to advise the DPRK on matters of either domestic or foreign policy.

The North Korean nuclear issue has presented the PRC with something of a dilemma. The PRC has all along pledged its friendship to the DPRK. At the time of the normalization of relations with the ROK, the Chinese Foreign Ministry declared, "China will continue to develop the good-neighborly, friendly and cooperative relations with the DPRK on the basis of the five principles of peaceful coexistence." While pledging friendship, however, the PRC has never wavered in what Qian Qichen described as its "definite" position: "no nuclear weapons should appear on the peninsula." On the other hand, Qian indicated his opposition to raising the issue at the United Nations and declared China to be "opposed to sanctions." Asked about the same issue at a later press conference, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman declared, "Dialogue is the only correct way to solve these kinds of problems." And, the spokesman added, "China hopes for stability and a relaxation of tension and stability on the Korean Peninsula, denuclearization in the region and a negotiated settlement to issues related to nuclear inspections there."

One can readily share China's "hopes"; what is not clear is the degree of influence China can bring to bear on the problem to realize these hopes.

Conclusion: The Chinese Perspective

Issues

Since the normalization of relations with the ROK in 1992, the PRC has been attempting to implement what one observer has called a "two-faced strategy" toward the Korean peninsula. On the one hand, China has continuously maintained its friendship, socialist solidarity and support for the DPRK. On the other hand, as indicated in the preceding pages, China has pursued a policy of growing contacts across the board with South Korea. By 1993, trade between the PRC and ROK had reached US\$ 10 billion; China's two-way trade with North Korea amounted to less than US\$ 700 million. Moreover, the terms of North Korea's trade with China had become less favorable. The per-ton price of Chinese crude oil sold to North Korea, for example, was raised from \$60 in 1989 to \$137 in 1992, and China was demanding payment in hard currency.

Thus, while China has professed its desire to maintain its socialist solidarity and traditional friendship with North Korea, its real interests in the Korean Peninsula appear to lie in the South.

On the unification issue, China has consistently held that it supports the peaceful reunification of Korea and that the United States and Japan should forge diplomatic ties with North Korea as soon as possible. The Chinese have, however, repeatedly expressed concerns about how unification might take place. They have stressed the importance of the "equality" of the two Koreas and specifically rejected the notion that a solution of the German type, in which South Korea would "absorb" North Korea, would be acceptable to them. As Kim Il Sung is said to have phrased it, "neither of them [should] eat the other, nor be eaten by the other." At a recent meeting between Chinese Ambassador Zhang Tingyan and President Byoung Yong Lee of

the Research Institute For National Unification in Seoul, the same Chinese concerns about "absorption" were expressed.

On the nuclear issue, as suggested above, China has strongly advocated a non-nuclear future for the peninsula while at the same time opposing United Nations sanctions against North Korea. The Chinese, fearing instability on the peninsula, have also urged the outside powers not back North Korea into a corner on the nuclear issue; at the same time, China is thought to have been urging Pyongyang to accede to the demands for full inspection of its nuclear facilities.

Prospects

The recent death of North Korean leader Kim Il Sung adds to the uncertainties regarding Chinese–North Korean relations and particularly the question of China's influence in Pyongyang. Once senior Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping and a small handful of Party elders pass from the scene—as they inevitably must—both China and the DPRK will be ruled by a new generation of leaders. China has clearly set itself on the "capitalist road" despite the persistence of communist rhetoric. What path toward the future will be chosen by the new leaders of North Korea remains open to question.

On the unification question, the Chinese would seem to prefer a slow negotiated coming together of some sort that would not be seen as "absorption" of the North by the South. Such a development would undoubtedly put unification some years away, which would probably well suit the Chinese interests. It is difficult to imagine that the Chinese would be happy to see a rapid coming together of the two Koreas where the North would become a magnet for South Korean investment and a labor market for South Korean industry which might now find a home in China.

China must have similar ambivalent feelings about the remaining incomplete links of the original cross-recognition idea.

While the PRC has continued to express its support for normalization of North Korea's relations with the United States and Japan in the interests of promoting stability on the Korean peninsula, China's economic interests might be ill-served if the normalization should actually come about. Should Japan and the DPRK establish diplomatic relations, Japan's development assistance might well be diverted from China to North Korea. If North Korea and the United States should eventually exchange recognition, China's remaining influence over Pyongyang would be further weakened.

The nuclear issue remains a serious and complex problem for all concerned. At the moment (July 1994) we are waiting to see what develops in the North following the death of Kim Il Sung. It may be, if North Korea insists on pushing ahead with the development of nuclear weapons, that the PRC might eventually support some plan of United Nations sanctions, though this is far from certain. What is interesting to contemplate is what might be the Chinese attitude toward a unified Korea at some future date with a developed nuclear weapons program.

In the final analysis, one must wonder whether North Korea will remain much longer in the Chinese orbit; given the manner in which China rushed to exchange diplomatic relations with South Korea without extracting any *quid pro quo* for the North, China may have little right to question any path chosen by Pyongyang.