

The 20th Anniversary of South Korean-Chinese Diplomatic relations, The Path toward South Korean-Chinese Cooperation for the Resolution of the North Korea Issue

Ki-Hyun Lee

Research Fellow, KINU Center for International Relations Studies

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This August 24th is the 20th anniversary of the formal diplomatic relations between South Korea and China. Since the beginning of this year, various events have been held in many different fields for this historic anniversary, but it seems that the mood is not as positive as had been previously expected. Twenty years have passed since the two countries have been engaged in friendly relations, which is a period that may be long enough to understand each other but not quite long enough for the two to become best of friends. In retrospect of the history of this relationship, the changes have been quite astonishing. The total volume of trade between the two nations has increased 30 times in comparison to that of 20 years ago, and there are currently positive dialogues concerning the implementation of an FTA. Human interaction is also very active; according to statistics, one in three South Koreans have visited China and one out of five foreigners who visit South Korea are from China. There are many China fans who are enthusiastic about K-pop stars performing in large stadiums in Beijing, while buses filled with Chinese tourists create traffic jams in Myeongdong, Seoul when department stores host sales. This demonstrates that China and South Korea are, indeed, very good friends. Furthermore, from a political standpoint, the relations between the two countries, which were once hostile, have now developed into a strategic cooperative partnership where important issues can be discussed. President Lee Myung-Bak had met with the Premier of China ten times during his tenure, and South Korean-Chinese relations have matured to the degree in which defense strategy dialogues concerning sensitive military and security-related issues are regularly held.

However, it is difficult to deny that maintaining a friendship with China, a country that has grown into a superpower, is still an anxious and burdensome task for South Korea. What concerns South Korea the most is China's attitude toward North Korea. Whenever North Korea engages in military provocations, China always supports North Korea rather than actively seeking cooperation with South Korea. China has surreptitiously provided considerable economic aid to North Korea and has even considered consistently implementing policies that favor North Korea in regards to issues, such as North Korean human rights and defectors. South Korea, a country in preparation for unification, finds it extremely difficult to understand China's actions, which blindly support North Korea's wrongdoings.

Then, why is cooperation between China and South Korea difficult to achieve in regards to the North Korea issue? The first reason is the strategic interests of China. While North Korea's nuclear weapons and military provocations may pose direct security threats to South Korea, they pose no threats to China. This is due to the fact that China's neighboring countries are already nuclear nations, and even if North Korea possesses nuclear weapons, China believes that it will not dare to launch an attack on Chinese soil. The fact remains that from a security perspective, North Korea's military aggressions cause instability in the international order of Northeast Asia and therefore, violates China's security interest. However, China views the collapse of North Korea as far more of a threat than North Korea's nuclear weapons. Although problems that will arise from the instability of the North Korean regime may be inevitable challenges to South Korea, it will be a worst-case scenario for China in concerns to American intervention, mass refugees, and other security and economic difficulties. Thus, this is the main reason China continues to provide economic aid and support to North Korea despite the latter's nuclear tests and missile launches, which were both direct and indirect efforts to hastily establish the Kim Jong-un regime, in addition to China's continued efforts to support North Korea on the issue of its defectors.

There is another reason China endeavors to defend North Korea – it is the United States. China's policies in regards to the Korean Peninsula have been heavily influenced by the changes in the American policies on China. As a result, China has always been cautious of the United States adopting Northeast Asian policies that would buffer or besiege China, and has never hidden its concerns about the possibility that neighboring countries, including South Korea, might actively participate in those American policies. China perceives the United States' Asia-oriented policy and strengthening of its alliances with China's neighbors as the equivalent to besieging China. Under such circumstances, North Korea's geopolitical and strategic value can only increase, and China has strengthened its cooperation with North Korea for the purpose of balancing the power structure in Northeast Asia. From this perspective, South Korea's security strategy, which is based on the U.S.-ROK alliance within the changing Northeast Asian security environment, is more likely to face increased conflicts with China. In addition, as the variables of North Korean military threats increase, the principles in the balance of power will be applied first and foremost to South Korean-Chinese relations, which will surely expose the cracks in the cooperative framework that has been constructed thus far.

These are the circumstances from the Chinese perspective. The problem is South Korea's responsibility, as it must prepare for unification. Unification is an extremely difficult task that will break the current

framework of Northeast Asia, and China must make an effort to not hinder South Korea's endeavors. As such, cooperation with China is necessary in order to resolve the North Korea issue. Thus, which strategy will be necessary?

First, it is important to establish South Korea's goals. The ultimate purpose for cooperating with China is to induce change within North Korea. China is also aware that North Korea's unpredictable behavior is an obstacle to its own interests. Therefore, the North Korean nuclear crisis must be prevented because it can cause a nuclear domino effect, which may accelerate the nuclear procurement in neighboring countries including South Korea, Japan, and especially Taiwan, while in the worst-case scenario, the collapse of North Korea. For these reasons, China values the Six-Party Talks and is actively engaged in persuading North Korea to reform and liberalize. In this aspect, there are common points of interest for China and South Korea. South Korea must continuously use the China card to abolish North Korea's nuclear weapons and should also seek methods to make the rapidly increasing economic cooperation between North Korea and China beneficial to South Korea.

Second, it is important to have an understanding of China's security threats. Although this is not a common belief, some of China's most important figures believe that South Korea is riding along with the United States' policy of buffering China. Regardless of South Korea's true intentions, it is vital to acknowledge the reality that China maintains this misconception of South Korea. While it is important to increase cooperation with China in regards to security matters, it is also necessary to devise intelligence strategies and attitudes that do not conflict with the U.S.-ROK alliance.

Third, a principle for South Korean diplomacy toward China must be established. South Korea must clearly demonstrate that there is a line that cannot be crossed under any circumstances in regards to particular matters, such as the North Korea issue. China is prepared for conflict with even the United States, the world's greatest superpower, by using words such as "core interests." Confrontations in which South Korea's sovereign rights and human rights are closely involved, including the North Korean military provocations, deportation of North Korean defectors in diplomatic missions abroad, and the Kim Young-Hwang incident among others, are not incidents in which strategic diplomacy can be applied according to the circumstances.

Fourth, South Korea must raise its level of influence and capabilities through alliances with neighboring countries. Cooperation with China cannot be implemented through understanding and persuasion alone. The two countries can be equal partners when South Korea gives China the impression that it is also powerful and competent. This does not have to be achieved alone. For this reason, alliances with other countries that are on a similar level to South Korea are vital. However, one must be cautious about pressuring China by aligning itself with another powerful country because wounding China's pride may evoke unexpected consequences. Until recently, South Korea had focused its energies on superpower diplomacy, so it is now time to stand on an equal footing when dealing with China on power issues by aligning itself with China's neighbors or other medium-sized nations.

Fifth, the continuous efforts to engage in bilateral dialogue with China are necessary. Frequent interaction

is crucial to understanding one another and seeking solutions to the issues. A regular channel for dialogue where high-ranking personnel can meet must be established. Despite the numerous potential incentives for conflict, China and the United States are able to maintain their mutual cooperation due to a well-functioning senior-level channel of dialogue between the two nations. It will be a major task for South Korea to create a regular channel for dialogue that allows for discussion that go beyond the current topics, such as diplomacy and national defense strategy, and include the North Korea issue and a variety of other topics. Within this context, contact with the next generation of Chinese leadership must increase. Unfortunately, President Lee Myung-Bak was unable to establish sufficient contact with Xi Jinping, the reputed future leader of China, during his many visits to Beijing. Other forms of channels, in which future relations between South Korea and China can be discussed with other next-generation leaders in the political and economic fields, must also be established.

It is most important to let go of all excessive expectations of China. One must clearly recognize that China strictly acts according to its own national interests and practical gains in regards to the North Korea issue. Whether it is the matter concerning reform in North Korea, the improvement of inter-Korean relations or unification, these problems cannot be resolved by China, and it is ultimately South Korea's responsibility to find the solutions. Lowering its expectations of China will allow South Korea to avoid situation in which it is forced to withhold its views on China in addition to engage in dialogue and cooperation from a more equal footing.

One expression that the Chinese are so fond of is, “keep the same, ponder the difference.” It means that the similarities should be expanded and developed while the differences can be discussed at a later time, and this is an extraordinarily effective method for friends from different backgrounds to maintain their camaraderie without conflict. However, its shortcoming is the tendency to ignore and cover-up problems, which may be disadvantageous or susceptible, by using “our differences” as an excuse rather than making efforts to resolve the problems. It has been 20 years since China and South Korea have become friends. It is now time to adopt the attitude of “keep the same, ponder the difference,” so that similarities can be further developed while differences can be gradually minimized. Of course, touching on sensitive wounds or matters of pride must be avoided in this process. © KINU 2012

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