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Direction and Challenges: the New ROK government's Policy on China

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With the start of the new South Korean government, the relationship between Korea and China has been warming up. The improvement of the relationship has been exemplified by events, such as the Xi Jin-ping's congratulatory message to Moon Jae-in immediately after Moon's ascension to the presidency (May 10), which was followed by the first phone call between the two leaders on the next day, the dispatch of representatives of the Korean government to the Belt and Road Initiative summit meeting (May 14), and the dispatch of special envoy Lee Hae-chan (May 19) to China. Nevertheless, there are still a number of mounting challenges that must be resolved to continue such mood so that this recent improvement does not end up a mere temporary phenomenon. The following discussions will aim to set the new government's basic policy direction concerning China and lay out some recommended tasks to be tackled.

1. Basic Direction

In order to have the Korea-China relations develop in the direction of promoting national interests, the basic direction of policy on China should be developed in the following ways: first, it is necessary to reestablish the goals of the Korea-China relationship. While the current partnership should continue to be strategy-oriented, goals should be set with a focus on real-life situations, rather than building the relationship full of rhetoric. In other words, exchange and communications channels between Korea and China, which have long been severed, should be restored and the weakened framework of cooperation should be reestablished in order to stably maintain the bilateral relationship.

Second, mutual trust between Korea and China should be built and promoted. The recent deterioration of the bilateral relationship has been undeniably caused by excessive expectation and misunderstanding on issues of North Korea's nuclear missiles and the THAAD deployment. Therefore, the Korea-China relationship must be built in a way that will allow it to go in a direction of fostering the mutual trust.

Third, Korea-US relations and Korea-China relations must be simultaneously promoted in a balanced way. In other words, the incumbent government should not pursue policy in a direction that improves one relationship at the cost of the other, but rather find a way that enables co-prosperity for both.

Fourth, a peaceful and cooperative atmosphere in Northeast Asia should be created. The relationship between South Korea and China becomes limited when approached within the framework of considering it solely as a bilateral relation. Given South Korea's national interests and China's status and role, the two countries should share mutual benefits and expand the common ground on mutual issues on the Korean Peninsula, Northeast Asia and beyond.

2. Future Challenges

Considering such basic direction of policy toward China, the new ROK government should tackle the short and medium to long-term challenges as follows.

A. Holding South Korea-China Summit Meeting

The summit diplomacy with President Xi Jinping is very important considering the nature of Chinese political system where power is concentrated at the top – the President. In particular, its significance lies in that it will be the first step toward restoring strategic communications channels, improving relations, and regaining South Korea-China trust. The summit meeting between the ROK and China should be held as promptly as possible after the ROK-US summit meeting scheduled in late June, so that it can lead to a creation of favorable environment for the new government to implement policies concerning North Korea and unification.

B. Management of Conflicts over THAAD

Managing South Korea-China relations over the THAAD controversy is a top priority. In fact, the THAAD controversy is a complex issue involving the ROK-US alliance, domestic public opinion, and the North Korean nuclear threat. Therefore, the THAAD deployment should be pursued following thorough domestic procedures and evaluation and reflecting the public opinion. If the Korean government adequately conveys our position to the Chinese government and seeks their understanding, they would not have high expectations for the withdrawal of the THAAD and as a result the conflict over the THAAD deployment could be well-managed.

C. Restoration and Institutionalization of Mechanism for South Korea-China Strategic Dialogue

The new South Korean government can host an official event marking the 25th anniversary of formal Korea-China diplomatic relations, as well as various

academic and cultural events and utilize them as a way to improve the bilateral relationship and restore inter-government communications channels. It also must be able to contribute to preventing unnecessary misunderstanding and building mutual trust between the two states by restoring the foreign deputy-ministerial level strategic dialogue and promoting various exchanges and communications in the security field, which have been closed off due to conflicts over the THAAD issue.

D. Holding South Korea-China Strategic Economic Dialogue

The ROK and China should share and discuss the medium and long-term visions for economic cooperation between the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia, such as the strengthening of the ROK-China FTA and participation in the Belt and Road initiative. And at the same time, the two should make efforts to avoid conflicts that hinder the bilateral economic relations, such as China's retaliation over the THAAD. It is desirable that the strategic economic dialogue should be held around next year with the start of President Xi's second term, after having the meeting agenda set at the summit and reaching related agreements first.

E. Creating Space for Cooperation through Strategic Communications

South Korea and China can find rooms for cooperation in the process of achieving peace and stability of the Korean Peninsula and peacefully resolving the North Korean nuclear issue. However, there is a need for strategic communications concerning the differences of opinions between the US and China, the level of sanctions against North Korea, and the timing and format of the dialogue. Cooperation among South Korea, North Korea, and China or among Northeast Asia nations for the purpose of inducing changes from North Korea is also an area, in which Seoul and Beijing can work together in the medium to long-term. Should strategic communications get expanded, it will be helpful in creatively exploring the possibility of promoting South Korea-China cooperation on various issues: 1) illegal fishing

and North Korean refugees – which are currently limiting the bilateral relations; 2) the establishment of peace regime on the Korean Peninsula; 3) cooperation among ROK-US-China and ROK-China-Japan; and 4) multilateral security cooperation in Northeast Asia.

F. Strengthening Public Diplomacy in Policy on China

As it is essential to build a favorable consensus between the public in China and Korea in order to promote trust between the two countries, public diplomacy should be expanded and strengthened for the sake of enhanced understanding through sustainable and mutual exchanges. To that end, exchanges in humanities and social sciences, which have been so far cut off, must be increased, and public diplomacy must be maintained and strengthened so that the two countries will come to share vision and values in areas, such as regional peace, prosperity, and cooperation. ©KINU 2017

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