

# **A View from China on Triangular Relations**

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What will it take to jump start trilateral talks among Beijing, Seoul, and Washington over the situation on the Korean Peninsula, including the denuclearization of North Korea? If this subject has been on the minds of South Koreans in 2016-17 with some approaching their counterparts in Beijing and Washington, DC in the hope that such triangular talks can be launched—the more official, the better—not many Chinese have addressed what would be necessary to enlist their country in this endeavor. This chapter argues that, at present, China is unprepared to take this route. A major factor is the sense that there are imbalances that complicate the triangle. Beyond the substance of what would be on the agenda, Chinese are concerned by South Korea’s alignment and how it would affect the course of the discussions.

South Korean advocates of trilateral talks have in mind a narrower agenda than the Chinese envision. They focus on combining carrots and sticks in pursuing denuclearization and on contingency planning in the event of unanticipated developments in the DPRK. Their Chinese counterparts doubt that this is a sufficient set of themes to deal realistically with the challenges facing the region and prefer, if talks were to begin, a wide-ranging agenda of more appeal to the DPRK and more in keeping with the national interests of the parties involved. A balanced strategic environment on the Korean Peninsula figures into calculations for what talks they would seek, if doubts could be overcome about their efficacy and promise.

## IMBALANCES IN TRILATERAL RELATIONS

Serious security and economic imbalances cloud trilateral relations among China, the United States, and South Korea. As the security situation on the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia is constantly changing, the China-U.S.-South Korea trilateral relationship has become troubled by inequalities, which have grown more complicated. Under these circumstances, trilateral relations, although embodying certain characteristics of a classic strategic triangle, as understood by international relations theory, do not fit the overall profile. According to Lowell Dittmer, this kind of relationship is formed only when every country enjoys full “legitimate autonomy” in trilateral interactions and in the competition for making the most of power balancing. The prerequisite for a strategic triangle is thus, that each country is free from the manipulation of the others. As China and the Soviet Union were allies from the early-Cold War period to the early 1960s, Dittmer does not consider China-U.S.-Russia relations during that period a typical strategic triangle.<sup>1</sup> The same reasoning applies to this situation. As North Korea makes substantial progress in its nuclear capabilities and the security situation on the Korean Peninsula worsens, the U.S.-South Korea alliance is stronger than ever in matters pertaining to defense and depth of cooperation, but the absence of strategic triangularity complicates China’s role.

Each year, the U.S.-South Korea “two-plus-two” talks reevaluate the nuclear deterrence capability of North Korea and devise new responses. The persistent hesitation, leading to delay by the South Korean government in transferring wartime operational control, also indicates that amidst the worsening regional security situation, South Korea is becoming more reliant on the United States for defense. The U.S.-South Korea military alliance can only grow closer as North Korea advances its nuclear technologies; South Korea will likely be more susceptible to greater pressure and influence from the United States when making security-related decisions, as evidenced by the recent decision in favor of the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD). Therefore China-U.S.-South Korea relations cannot be viewed as a strategic triangle due to the issue of military security.

Based on Dittmer's analysis of the gaming rule in triangular relations, the United States and South Korea are actually in a "stable marriage" because they hold negative views of China in common, and the three parties fall into two camps in terms of security, one being China alone and the other the U.S.-South Korea alliance.

The U.S.-South Korea military alliance and the security dependence of South Korea on the United States result in serious asymmetry in China-U.S.-South Korea relations, which often obstructs development in economic, educational, and other fields. According to the analysis of China-U.S.-South Korea economic and trade relations, more transactions are concluded between China and South Korea than between the United States and South Korea; however that does not suffice for balance. The statistics of China's Ministry of Commerce show that, in 2015, China-South Korea trade amounted to around \$270 billion, exceeding the sum of U.S.-South Korea and Japan-South Korea trade.<sup>2</sup> South Korea's exports to China accounted for 26 percent of its total, three times that of South Korea's exports to the United States. In 2016, South Korea surpassed Japan as the second largest trading partner of China, behind the United States. In terms of "cognitive proximity" in economic and trade relations within this triangle, the "stable marriage" is unquestionably shared by Beijing and Seoul.<sup>3</sup>

As the security situation on the Korean Peninsula worsens, however, the "stable marriage" between the United States and South Korea is becoming increasingly prominent. Both of them place more confidence in their negative cognition of China, which further divides the three sides in the fields of politics and military affairs. There is a lack of equilibrium, in which relations between China and South Korea and China and the United States lag far behind those between the two allies.

There are multiple reasons accounting for these imbalances. Since North Korea is determined to develop advanced nuclear strike technologies and nuclear power, which Chinese deem aimed at ensuring national safety, South Korea is feeling more and more insecure. In their pursuit of what Chinese refer to as "absolute safety," the United States and South Korea have agreed to deploy THAAD in South Korea, which in turn poses a severe threat to China's security, according to Chinese analysts. Because of this and other measures, the tendency for confrontation is becoming more pronounced in Northeast Asia. In their response to the security threats posed by North Korea, the United States, Japan, and South Korea are threatening China's security is the conclusion that drives China's response.

What Chinese consider to be ungrounded U.S. accusations against China for its "inaction" regarding North Korean issues and the determination of South Korea to mitigate the influence of North Korea's nuclear weapons finally led to the THAAD deployment in Korea. The anti-missile system may destroy the strategic balance between China and the United States, according to Chinese officials. It is also clear that Northeast Asian countries, under these circumstances, will adopt security policies guided by the strategic thinking of a "zero-sum game." As a result, the possibility of a security dilemma in the region is greatly increased. Thus, it is essential for the three countries to proactively seek a solution, so as to rebalance their relations concerning political security, economy, and trade, and shift the focus of their trilateral relations from "stable marriage" to healthy interactions.

This logic holds that not only does the THAAD deployment tilt the triangle sharply in the direction of imbalance versus China, but that South Korea must downgrade its alliance as the focus of security and give greater weight to political and security relations with China if it

seeks to reduce the security dilemma in the region. Rather than North Korea's actions being the principal source of this dilemma, the argument holds that the U.S. priority for putting pressure on China and altering the strategic balance in Sino-U.S. relations, backed by South Korea, has resulted in this dilemma. If Washington is not prepared to rethink its approach, then South Korea should recognize the costs of the imbalance it is causing.

## ONGOING DEVELOPMENT OF CHINA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

To achieve balance in the strategic triangle, the key lies in shifting the U.S.-ROK relationship from “stable marriage” to a “*ménage à trois*” with China.<sup>4</sup> South Korea's increasing reliance on the United States in security can be directly attributed to North Korea's progress in developing a nuclear striking power, China's “willful blindness” to North Korea's actions, and South Korea's disappointment in the lack of resolution of the issue. If security relations between China and South Korea improve, China will not be as concerned as it is now when the United States and South Korea set their defense policies against North Korea; meanwhile, the structure of China-U.S.-South Korea trilateral relations would be rebalanced. Given that China-U.S. relations basically remain unchanged, according to this line of analysis, the improvement of China-South Korea relations becomes critical for the three sides to rebalance their relations.

Though the relationship between China and South Korea improved after President Xi Jinping visited South Korea in 2014, it worsened quickly after the Park Geun-hye administration agreed on THAAD deployment. Although China reiterated its stance on this issue several times, South Korea dismissed the warnings. As a result, many Chinese experts became pessimistic about future bilateral relations. It is widely believed in the Chinese academic community that the North Korean nuclear issue is the most essential factor in the deterioration of China-South Korea relations.<sup>5</sup>

Ever since the Six-Party Talks ended in failure, sanctions by the international community against North Korea's nuclear tests have been unable to obstruct the country's nuclear technology advancement. In 2016, North Korea made another substantial breakthrough in its nuclear power development, further reducing the possibility of stopping it. As North Korea becomes more capable of deterring South Korea with its advanced nuclear power, South Korea attributes North Korea's nuclear progress to China's reluctance to adopt effective measures, such as cutting off energy and food supplies and trade contacts with North Korea, and views China as an indirect helper—or even the only helper—of North Korea's nuclear program.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, China's concerns are kept out of the scope of South Korea's considerations in military blowback against North Korea, which frustrates China-South Korea relations.

Chinese specialists also believe that the existence of the U.S.-South Korea alliance hampers the establishment of political and security trust between China and South Korea. South Korean policies towards North Korea and China are influenced by U.S. political preferences. However, the national interests of South Korea and the strategic planning of the United States in Northeast Asia do not correspond in all aspects. Faced with pressure from the United States, South Korea eventually agreed to the deployment of THAAD, which, as a result of China's response, adversely impacts its economic and trade relations with China.<sup>7</sup> It can,

thus, be inferred that the United States is capable of damaging China-South Korea relations by exerting pressure. The spokesperson of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs made clear at a press conference held on August 23, 2016 that, "At present, China-South Korea relations are faced with some problems."<sup>8</sup>

The above-mentioned pessimistic views of the development of China-South Korea relations have a basis in reality; however, there are also exaggerations of how the China-U.S.-South Korea security dilemma will influence China-South Korea relations. Such views have neglected the development and significance of China-South Korea relations, as well as their resilience to shocks. Hence, in the case of security issues, though the deployment of an anti-missile system on the Korean Peninsula and U.S.-South Korea joint military exercises harmed China-South Korea relations, the political, economic, cultural, and military exchange channels between the two sides have functioned over a long period. Bilateral relations enjoy a strong foundation.

China should, using various means, urge South Korea to take into account THAAD's adverse influence on China's security interests and act judiciously. Since Park Geun-hye's visit to China in 2013 and Xi Jinping's visit to South Korea in 2014, China and South Korea have become strategic cooperative partners, and bilateral cultural and personnel exchanges have climbed to a peak. By maintaining communications and cooperation on security issues, the two countries can prevent chaos in Northeast Asia from degrading into conflict. By strengthening collaboration on denuclearization and exploring peaceful settlement of the North Korean nuclear issue, the two sides can find solutions through negotiations rather than war. Therefore, due to the deep foundation and frequent exchanges in this relationship and the necessity of sustaining bilateral relations, China must stay on good terms with South Korea while handling numerous difficulties. In retrospect China-South Korea relations have always been laden with obstacles, contradictions, and conflicts. If it were not for mutual efforts, China-South Korea relations would never have made it this far.

## DEVELOPMENT AND ACHIEVEMENTS OF CHINA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

After the Korean War, the Cold War affected world politics. As a socialist country, China offered political support to North Korea, which supported communism, and confronted the Syngman Rhee and Park Chung-hee administrations of South Korea. As China-U.S. relations improved after President Nixon visited China, China and Japan established diplomatic relations, and inter-Korean dialogues were held. China and South Korea started to trade indirectly via Hong Kong in 1979.<sup>9</sup> Since South Korea started economic modernization in the 1960s and China opened its economy to the world in 1978, the harmony between the two economies became even more prominent. Meanwhile, they shared a similar stance on Japan's militarism and wartime past. Propelled by trade, cultural, and sports exchanges, the two finally established diplomatic ties in 1992.

Within 20 years after establishing formal diplomatic ties, China and South Korea had made huge progress in politics, economics, and people-to-people exchanges; bilateral relations had caught up with and even surpassed the development level of China-U.S. relations on these dimensions. In politics, the general partnership reached its peak by transforming into a "strategic cooperative partnership" after Xi's visit to South Korea in 2014. China and South

Korea were the first two countries that agreed to establish the dialogue mechanism of four-party and Six-Party Talks, which raised the possibility of settling the North Korean nuclear issue through negotiations rather than violence. In economy and trade, China surpassed the United States as South Korea's largest trading partner in 2004, and South Korea, replacing Japan, became China's second largest trading partner in 2016.<sup>10</sup>

China-South Korea economic relations have extended from developing investment, finance, and logistics to establishing high-level platforms such as free trade agreements. In people-to-people exchanges, as the Chinese and South Korean cultures are intimately tied to each other, the two sides always share a natural affinity. According to the consensus reached between Park and Xi during their visits to each other's countries, the two countries are expected to further take advantage of the China-ROK Joint Committee on People-to-People Exchanges to promote greater advancement in this regard.<sup>11</sup>

In October 2015 when Premier Li Keqiang paid a visit to South Korea, the two sides signed the "Development Plan of China-ROK Joint Committee on People-to-People Exchanges," in which the principle of "designs by top level, guidance from governments and participation of all" was stated.<sup>12</sup> The next year saw the issuance of the "Project List of Exchanges and Cooperation of China-ROK Joint Committee on People-to-People Exchanges 2016." Consisting of 69 communication and cooperation programs touching on education, localities, teenagers, and cultures, the list has presented a full-range of progress in this regard.<sup>13</sup> Thanks to geographical proximity, exchanges between the two countries are developing at an amazing speed. According to the Korea Tourism Organization, in 2016 visitors from China accounted for 40 percent of total international visitors to South Korea, registering a sharp increase of 40 percent over the previous year. Such exchanges play an irreplaceable role in enhancing mutual understanding and affinity between the two countries.

In military security, as early as 2008, China and South Korea signed an agreement on setting up a military hotline, put into use later, which could facilitate communication on issues regarding the Korean Peninsula and help to safeguard peace on the peninsula.<sup>14</sup> Three years later, the two established a senior national defense strategic dialogue mechanism, which showed that they had entered the stage of military cooperation.<sup>15</sup>

At present, although bilateral relations are impacted by the THAAD issue, the foundation of relations remains unimpaired; the condition is even better than that of China-U.S. relations in aspects of public favorability and trading ties. However, the long-term conflicts perplexing China-South Korea and China-U.S. relations remain to be resolved, and they may limit or even worsen the trilateral relationship.

## OBSTACLES IN TRILATERAL RELATIONS

According to Chinese observers, there are two main factors influencing the balance of the trilateral relationship: the North Korean nuclear issue and U.S. strategies towards China. The North Korean nuclear issue is the main constraint for China-South Korea relations. Since North Korea is determined to expand its nuclear capability, the sanctions imposed by China and other UN Security Council members have failed to work effectively. At present, South Korea is becoming increasingly anxious about the constant growth of North Korea's nuclear capability. Moreover, due to the great progress North Korea has made in

developing nuclear explosive capabilities, nuclear explosion technology, and deliverable nuclear weapons in recent years, South Korea is deepening defense ties with the United States to confront the threats.

Although both China and South Korea agree to denuclearize North Korea, the two differ in their approach and priority options. China holds that the six parties should resort to an approach featuring “peace and stability, denuclearization, and dialogue,” and work to address the North Korean nuclear issue by simultaneously conducting Korean Peninsula peace talks and denuclearization negotiations. In this situation, the stability of the Korean Peninsula would be considered a prerequisite; no war or dispute could be allowed.<sup>16</sup>

Hence, China has always upheld that the sanctions initiated by the UN against North Korea should be implemented based on the principle of not disturbing the everyday life of the North Korean people. China still insists on the return of all sides to Six-Party Talks. However, South Korea and the United States interpret this as China’s unwillingness to cut off the energy and food aid for North Korea, and even claim that China is “intentionally” shielding North Korea from sanctions. Both believe that the international community should do its utmost to pressure North Korea by cutting off its financial resources, so as to bring about what China regards as the internal collapse of the country, although the two allies argue that the goal is a new calculus for denuclearization.

The three countries remain at a stalemate while North Korea gains more nuclear power; South Korea and the United States blame China for the deterioration. South Korea appears tougher on the deployment of THAAD. In response, China will show firmer opposition against this behavior.

The second factor influencing China-South Korea relations is that the United States incorporates its strategy regarding China into its policies towards Northeast Asia and the Korean Peninsula. Undoubtedly, it has ulterior motives in its deployment targeting North Korea’s nuclear weapons: the weapon systems can contain and counter China in addition to North Korea. This is Chinese reasoning about the U.S. behavior toward the peninsula. The signs are clear when one considers the THAAD deployment in South Korea requested by U.S. leaders. For instance, the radius of the radars in THAAD goes well beyond the requirement of the defense system for North Korean missiles and affects Northeast China, which will significantly impair the strategic balance between China and the United States. Tying U.S. policy towards Northeast Asia to South Korea’s policies towards North Korea gives rise to problems in China-South Korea relations. The U.S.-South Korea joint military exercises against North Korea in the Yellow Sea were, in part, intended to counter China, insist Chinese observers. In other words, China-U.S. relations are also frustrated by the U.S. policies regarding North Korea.

## HOW TO ACHIEVE A BREAKTHROUGH IN TRILATERAL RELATIONS AND DEAL WITH THE SITUATION IN NORTHEAST ASIA

The United States plays a key role in resolving the security dilemma in Northeast Asia and the dilemma of the trilateral relationship. U.S. strategies towards Northeast Asia are designed to contain North Korea and also counter China; it urges South Korea to incorporate U.S. policies towards North Korea and China into its own policies. Therefore, when dealing with relations with China, the United States, and North Korea, South Korea, in the view of Chinese, was forced to make some choices. In the recent deployment of THAAD, for instance, South Korea had to choose between a U.S. view of national security and its own economic interests, and between relations with China and relations with the United States.<sup>17</sup> Under these circumstances, the conflicts in China-U.S. relations have given rise to problems in China-South Korea relations, as seen from China. If the three sides wish for balanced, healthy trilateral relations, the United States has to give up its attempt to check and even contain China. Both China and the U.S. stand to gain from cooperation and to lose from confrontation. South Korea, under less strategic pressure, would no longer need to choose sides when dealing with the United States and China, or choose between security and economic interests. Remove U.S. pressure, and it would seek a new relationship with China and balance in triangular relations.

The deployment of THAAD in South Korea may jeopardize South Korea's long-term plans. The United States, in insisting on this intends to make China suffer from security threats for "shielding" North Korea's nuclear programs. However, instead of prompting China to address the North Korean nuclear issue, the deployment of THAAD has amplified the voices of China's hardliners to support North Korea; it is an awkward miscalculation by the United States.

The deployment of THAAD, along with the U.S. strategy pressuring other parties, has worsened the security dilemma faced by China and the United States, contributed to instability in the strategic situation of Northeast Asia, and greatly impacted the security of China and South Korea. Therefore, both China and South Korea should recognize that, though serving U.S. strategic interests in Northeast Asia, the situation on the peninsula and China-South Korea relations do not benefit. Moreover, China will not be forced into submission. The United States must adjust its thinking regarding Northeast Asian and Korean Peninsula policies, consider China's security interests, and take into account the real interests of South Korea in negotiating the denuclearization of North Korea.

Although the United States forces South Korea to incorporate American policies into its policies towards North Korea and China, and to take sides between China and the United States, South Korea should seek a more balanced stance. South Korea should work to promote the thawing of China-U.S. relations, rather than tie itself to the United States and serve its strategic interests. It must be more independent strategically. When faced with U.S. pressure, instead of solely focusing on security issues. In security, there is no need for China and South Korea to strategically confront each other, and China has never posed a threat to South Korea's security since the two countries established diplomatic relations; on the contrary, the two sides are sharing more and more in common when it comes to the Korean Peninsula issue, such as the consensus to denuclearize North Korea, and the common will



to avoid war and control conflict on the peninsula. China and South Korea do not have fundamental security conflicts. Additionally, China and South Korea share the same view on Japan's wartime past. Hence, South Korea needs to be aware of the significance of a truly independent diplomacy and its important role in moderating China-U.S. relations.

China should be more proactive, strengthening its efforts to promote denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula, a peace agreement, and the construction of a peaceful development mechanism in Northeast Asia. China's proposal for a dual-track approach can comprehensively meet the security requirements of countries concerned about the North Korean nuclear issue;<sup>18</sup> however, as China-North Korea relations normalized and then grew frosty, and China split with the United States and South Korea on sanctions against North Korea and military exercises conducted in the Korean Peninsula region, China could not leverage any tools on all sides to return to the Six-Party Talks or prevent conflicts between North Korea and the United States from escalating. As a result, diplomatic pleas and multilateral mediation become the only option available to China. Nevertheless, if China wants to mitigate North Korea's progress in its nuclear tests, ease concerns about the security of North and South Korea, and prevent the worsening of the security dilemma on the peninsula, it must more proactively implement its proposal to pursue, on parallel tracks, the denuclearization of the peninsula and the replacement of the armistice agreement with a peace treaty. Hence, China should attempt to persuade the United States to return to the talks so as to begin a dialogue on the issues with all concerned parties. Meanwhile, China should also give reassurances, and help South Korea and the United States to regain their confidence in peace talks and their efficacy.

All sides should take advantage of the proactive efforts of the academic community and think tanks to promote: trilateral Track-2 or 1.5 dialogue frankly and profoundly talking about their own strategic concerns, while allaying misperceptions and strategic miscalculations and seeking an innovative strategic path in place of the inadequacies of official communications.

Currently, the three countries are vexed by a number of misperceptions about the North Korean issue. The United States and South Korea believe that China refuses to cut off economic ties with North Korea or suspend energy and food supplies, so as to support North Korea in the development of its nuclear capability. Such misperceptions are prevalent in South Korean society.

The Obama administration began to adopt the strategy of "strategic patience" after the collapse of Six-Party Talks, hoping to pressure North Korea to fall apart gradually, according to Chinese observers. Both China and the United States agree on continuing the sanctions, but they differ a lot on the content and scope of sanctions.<sup>19</sup> How much pressure on North Korea is considered appropriate when imposing sanctions? On the one hand, the sanctions are expected to change the North Korean leader's cost calculations in developing nuclear weapons; on the other, they could undermine the domestic stability of the country, if not handled with caution. This is a question that affects the future of North Korea.

For China, the stability of the Korean Peninsula, as an indispensable part of the "three core goals" (denuclearization, stability, and peace talks) it proposed, affects the stability of China's own neighborhood and its core national interests. This point has been emphasized by Xi Jinping and Wang Yi several times.

China, the United States, and South Korea can make their positions clear through dialogue organized by the academic community and think tanks. For instance, in October 2015, under the joint organization of the School of International Studies at Peking University, the Korea Foundation for Advanced Studies, and the Brookings Institution, a trilateral dialogue was held at Peking University. The participants had in-depth discussions on topics including how they understood the international order, what are the characteristics of the postwar order, and how they view the South China Sea issue, China-U.S. relations, and the North Korean nuclear issue. Academic conferences of this kind can enable the three sides to frankly express their views, clear up misperceptions, and eliminate strategic miscalculations.

Finally, China, the U.S. and South Korea shall seek consensus of a higher level to promote the peaceful development of Northeast Asia. The integration of Northeast Asia has been repeatedly brought up by scholars. The countries in Northeast Asia, China and South Korea in particular, undoubtedly enjoy built-in advantages in cultural affinity, geographical position, and economic interdependence. Nevertheless, due to various high-level political issues in Northeast Korea, such as the great power games of power and politics, the North Korean issue, and the reunification of the Korean Peninsula, the region has always been a source of pressures frustrating China-U.S.-South Korea cooperation. This is largely because the three countries tend to stick to the short-sighted goals valuing realistic interests when wrestling with one another.

If the three countries want to achieve breakthroughs for trilateral relations, they must redefine the relations based on higher-level national interests and logistics, so as to seek consensus of a higher level. In this way, China, the U.S., and South Korea can be less disturbed by security dilemmas when dealing with the situation in Northeast Asia, and create a political environment in which the three sides understand and cooperate with each other. Such a higher-level consensus can be revealed and summarized through trilateral dialogues.

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