



Deciphering China's Security Intentions in Northeast Asia: A View from South Korea

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The most noticeable shift of diplomacy and security strategy in Xi Jinping's government is the evolution of peripheral diplomacy. China's East Asia strategy is especially evolving in response to Washington's "rebalance to Asia" and Japan's "normalization," focusing on weakening any checks on its rise by the U.S.-led alliance through an active diplomatic offensive in East Asia. In this context, China's East Asia diplomacy and security strategy still has the characteristics of counteracting the United States. Nonetheless, the reason China's response is regarded as aggressive is that its actions go beyond a reactive attitude to keep its core interests intact and are evolving into advancing new institutions and norms that can challenge the existing U.S.-led ones. Many signs show that the Xi government is seeking a way to shift from being a rule taker in the international order to a rule maker. China's leadership is aiming at the U.S.-led Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership (TPP); pushing the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP); asserting that "the security of Asia should be upheld by Asians" at the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA); and leading the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).

In this context, South Korea is witnessing an intensified debate on China's emerging strategic intentions. The South Korean government, media, and expert groups have shown a lot of interest in whether China's more active diplomacy reflects both the will and capability to create a new international order and systematically pursue it at the level of grand strategy. Discussions on the rise of China focus on the new strategic reality that South Korea faces due to its unique characteristics, rather than on the essential issues of China's intentions and capabilities. As the competition over institutions and norms in Asia between the United States and China hit its stride, many discussions have centered on South Korea's dilemma, as it seeks to keep its ally close and steer China away from North Korea.¹ Such discussions cover the expansion of a rising China's role, how its influence in Northeast Asia and the Korean Peninsula affect the North Korean nuclear issue and reunification of the peninsula, and South Korea–China relations. Naturally, the North Korean issue, newly exacerbated by its early 2016 nuclear and long-range missile tests, figures heavily in the way South Koreans visualize what China has in mind for their country.

This paper examines such discussions in South Korea at the level of both the perceptions and policies of the government and the perceptions and responses of the non-government sector (media, academia, and the public). Through this process, the characteristics of and the problems in South Korea–China relations will be investigated by deducing the differences in opinions on South Korean policies to China and South Korea–China relations.

CHINA'S RISE AND ITS POLICY TOWARD NORTHEAST ASIA: CICA AND AIIB

The Government's Perceptions and Policies

In 2014–15, the South Korean government was clearly agonizing over making difficult choices between the United States and China in various domains. Key concerns were how to respond to China's new vision of Asian security at the CICA, China's invitation to join the AIIB, China's invitation for Park Geun-hye to attend its Victory-over-Japan Day celebration, U.S. interest in South Korea joining TPP, the U.S. desire for Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) deployment, and the U.S. demand for South Korea to support freedom of navigation in opposition to China's actions in the South China Sea.

In consideration of its alliance with the United States, South Korea did not sign a joint statement as China sought. When Xi Jinping proposed a “New Asian Security Concept” at the May 2014 CICA held in Shanghai, he advocated that “it is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia and uphold the security of Asia,” and “to beef up and entrench a military alliance targeted at a third party is not conducive to maintaining common security.”² The United States, which has been promoting a rebalancing strategy to Asia, accordingly recognized it as an attempt to build a new Asian security order led by China that challenges the U.S.-led security system. Chairing CICA for the first time, Xi ambitiously prepared for CICA by inviting the leaders of each country, including Park Geun-hye. South Korea, however, delivered a message of unwillingness to participate in the new security initiative led by China by not signing the joint statement and, in an unusual step, having the minister of unification attend the conference instead of the minister of foreign affairs.

In contrast, South Korea chose to join the AIIB after repeated requests from China, and to attend the “Commemoration of the 70th Anniversary of Victory of Chinese People’s Resistance against Japanese Aggression and World Anti-Fascist War” (the Victory-over-Japan Day parade). Regarding joining the AIIB, the South Korean government deferred its sign-up decision for eight months even when China requested it to join. The official reason to defer it was problems with the governing structure and operational methods of the AIIB, as also expressed by the United States and Japan, but in reality, the government was anguishing because of the choice between economic logic and alliance logic.³ The United States clearly perceived the establishment of the AIIB as a challenge to the financial order that it has been leading since World War II, and, therefore, it conveyed its objection to participation to its allies through official and unofficial channels.⁴ The South Korean government expected that joining the AIIB would be economically beneficial and judged that if it has to join it should secure a share and voice within the AIIB by joining as a founding member country, but it postponed its decision to join, as it was aware of the U.S. opposition.

The South Korean government eventually prioritized practical economic benefits over alliance reasoning, and in the process of seeking U.S. understanding, due to the unexpected variable of Great Britain’s joining, had an opportunity to escape from its dilemma without difficulties. South Korea was, consequently, able to join the AIIB as a founding member country while minimizing any strains in its relationship with the United States. Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se stated that South Korea obtained a diplomatic achievement that maximizes national interest by making a decision to join at the best possible time.

In summary, even though South Korea decided to join after prioritizing the practical economic benefits, without Great Britain making the decision to join, U.S. understanding could have been very difficult to win and there could have been a possibility of not being able to join as an establishing member country because of taking too much time to decide. In the case of both the CICA and AIIB, the South Korean government chose to cooperate with China in the non-security area, especially the economic area, without negatively affecting its alliance. Therefore, some commentators described the country’s strategy as “*anmi gyeongjung* (安美經中),” which means cooperate with the “U.S. for security, China for economy.”

Perceptions of the Media, Experts, and the General Public

The perception in South Korea of China's rapid rise is complex and multifaceted. Regarding joining the AIIB, the attitude of both experts and the media was generally welcoming. The case of the AIIB illustrates that the South Korean public is paying attention to the economic aspects of the rise of China, which is perceived as an opportunity and a challenge rather than a threat.

The public has a relatively positive perception of a rising China. According to a survey conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 71 percent of the South Korean public thinks that China will responsibly handle world problems, whereas only 34 percent of Americans and 20 percent of Japanese agree.⁵ South Korea is more trusting of China than the United States or Japan, and China is more trusting of South Korea than it is of the other two. This was the state of mutual perceptions before early 2016 when clashing responses to North Korean actions caused a sudden downturn in the level of mutual trust.

Regarding the public's perceptions, despite the considerable favorability for China, 78 percent are worried about a territorial dispute (seriously worried 31 percent, somewhat worried 47 percent). It is a high statistic, following the Philippines (91 percent), Vietnam (83 percent), and Japan (83 percent) that are in maritime sovereignty disputes with China. It is even higher than India (62 percent), which is the only country that has unsolved land boundary issues with China. Despite there being no official territorial dispute with China, since China has maritime sovereignty disputes with other neighboring countries, South Korea perceives a threat and worries about potential conflict. If strife should arise over Jeodo during current negotiations on the demarcation of exclusive economic zones (EEZ) between the two countries, the public's current favorability for China could rapidly deteriorate.

In contrast, experts are concerned about a security threat due to the rise of China. According to a survey of experts by the Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security (IFANS), the rise of China's economy was viewed as an opportunity for South Korea by 85 percent of respondents, while the rise of China's military was viewed as a threat to South Korea by 88 percent, and 72 percent of the experts either "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that China's recent foreign policy is assertive.⁶ Whether China's arms buildup will be a concrete and direct threat to the security of South Korea is debatable. Although there are security concerns about China's arms buildup, the possibility of a preemptive missile strike by China on South Korea is low and the assumption that China would preemptively use its armed forces against South Korea or the United States to protect North Korea is seen as unrealistic.⁷

Worries about a direct military security threat due to the rise of China are not relatively high among experts and the media in South Korea. But as China actively asserts itself—more so than in the past—the dilemma between the U.S. alliance and strategic partnership relations with China is intensifying. In March 2015, Kim Moo-sung of the Saenuri party stated, "Our priority is security. Therefore, for security, we should be under the nuclear umbrella of the U.S., and for economy, we should exchange well with China." The controversy deepened as "anmi gyeongjung" was presented as if it suffices as a survival strategy for South Korea in the middle.

The results of a survey of 61 experts and assembly members by *Hankyoreh* showed that they had negative views on the notion of "U.S. for security, China for the economy." Only 17.8 percent of respondents considered it sustainable, whereas 62.2 percent thought, "a new balanced diplomatic strategy should be found, centered on our survival and interests," and

13.3 percent responded that it is “unsustainable and sooner or later we will be asked to choose by both sides between security and the economy.” The “U.S. for security, China for the economy” strategy cannot really be a reliable strategy, considering that in international politics, economic and security issues often overlap. Nonetheless, discussions on it reflect how seriously South Korea is worried about the dilemma between its alliance with the United States and its relations with China.

SOUTH KOREA–CHINA RELATIONS IN 2015

The Government’s Perceptions and Policies

The close relationship between Park and Xi, whose administrations were launched almost at the same time, has driven bilateral optimism. In 2013, Park made a state visit to China before visiting Japan, the first time a president of South Korea had prioritized China. In 2014, Xi Jinping visited South Korea before visiting North Korea—again a first for China’s paramount leader—and the leaders of the two countries have displayed their special relationship through six summit meetings.

There was noticeable development in South Korea–China relations in 2015, enough to hear such phrases as the friendliest relations in history. It started with South Korea’s decision to join the AIIB in March 2015, and it reached a climax when Park attended China’s Victory-over-Japan Day parade in September, before it climbed to a new plateau when South Korea ratified the FTA agreement with China at the end of the year. The most symbolic event was Park’s attendance at China’s parade in September. In South Korea, there were arguments for and against her attendance. After all, she was the only leader in attendance from a western or U.S.-allied country, which made the decision difficult, as the pros and cons were weighed.

Having been subject to criticisms from western countries, including the United States, Park received “special hospitality” from China, and South Korea’s image among the Chinese public was raised. Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se stated that the visit to China is regarded as a “historical milestone” and concluded, “Through this summit meeting, South Korea prepared a footstool for the expansion of strategic space for diplomacy and the deployment of a strategic roadmap in the rapidly changing diplomatic landscape of Northeast Asia.”⁹

International variables similar to those in the AIIB case helped to minimize the side effects of Park’s attendance. First, because both the United States and China did not want to provoke the other ahead of their late September summit meeting, Park’s attendance did not become an issue for the two countries. Also, after the APEC meeting in November 2014 where Xi met Abe, China and Japan were also seeking to resume essential cooperation—so the parade did not directly target Japan. Therefore, the anti-Japan sentiment in China, which could have cast a shadow on Park’s attendance, did not become greatly apparent.¹⁰

Because the sharp confrontation between South and North Korea, brought about by the PMD-6 wooden anti-personnel mine incident, dramatically led to new momentum for conversation between them through the 8/25 agreement, China was able to give Park “special treatment” without considering the strained situation between North Korea and China. It also gave South Korea an opportunity to reaffirm the importance of China’s role in North Korean issues to the United States and other countries. Park’s attendance at the parade was perceived in Seoul as a successful choice, in line with the claim of the government. Nonetheless, a

review of a few important implications of Park's attendance is in order. First, the major reason that her presence drew attention is that South Korea was the only U.S. ally whose head attended the parade at a time of intensifying competition between the United States and China. Discussion swirled around the question of whether this meant that China is tilting more toward Seoul, increasing the prospect that in case of a North Korean provocation it would take a harder line with Pyongyang, or whether South Korea was moving closer to China, separating itself more from its ally's policy in the region. Many in Seoul reacted by applauding Park for striking the right balance, avoiding becoming engulfed in the whirlpool of competition between the United States and China (in case of an unwanted scenario where South Korea would be pressured to make choices between the two).

Second, in 2015, major decisions such as joining the AIIB, attending the Victory-over-Japan Day parade, and ratifying the FTA between South Korea and China, were seemingly brought to the fore through requests by China, and South Korea consequently "responded" to them. On other matters, South Korea refrained from doing things that China strongly opposed, above all, the deployment of the THAAD missile defense system. It appeared that the South Korean government was just waiting for China to "repay" it for such decisions. The problem, however, was whether China thought that it had received a unilateral "present." The South Korean government was expecting active cooperation from China on resolving the North Korean nuclear issue. After North Korea's fourth nuclear test, it was expecting a response from China, different from its earlier responses, but when the expectation was not satisfied, the South Korean government expressed its disappointment.

Perceptions of the Media, Experts, and the General Public

Although there were arguments about Park's attendance at the parade, many were of the opinion that the president should attend the parade but also find ways to minimize the side effects. According to the results of a survey of 61 experts and assembly members by Hankyoreh, 51.1 percent thought that Park should attend the event as she did, while 35.6 percent thought that she should attend the event but not the military parade. Only 6.7 percent of respondents thought that she should not attend at all. The large increase in Park's approval rating after her attendance provides indirect proof of national support for her decision.¹¹

The media extensively reported the outcome of the visit, centering on the "exceptional respect" given by China and evaluating that South Korean diplomacy had taken a self-chosen, careful step forward.¹² The responses to her attendance were mostly positive, but criticisms stated that the outcome was exaggerated. For example, one conservative think tank asserted that, unlike what the government was claiming, only China's role was highlighted by Park Geun-hye's attendance. China appeared now to have the initiative on the Korean Peninsula, and no new outcome could be detected for negotiations on the North Korean nuclear issue and the unification of the Korean Peninsula.¹³ In addition, as the media made the mistake of exaggerating Park's attendance in the parade by focusing on the exceptional respect given by China, the opposite extreme of defining the bilateral relationship by focusing solely on the disappointment felt right after North Korea's fourth nuclear test could also be a problem.

The more positive public perceptions on the development of South Korea–China relations are evidenced by the improvement in favorable opinions among people in both countries. According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2015, 61 percent of South Koreans viewed China favorably. Favorability ratings have increased 5 percent since 2014.

Although the favorability ratings for China increased in 2015, it fell well short of the level of that of the United States, which has not been negatively influenced at all. U.S. favorability ratings measured 84 percent in 2015, increasing from 78 percent in 2013 and up from 82 percent in 2014. U.S. favorability ratings have grown even after Park's relationship with Xi Jinping began to develop after 2013.¹⁴ Considering these sentiments, Washington's concern over the South Korean people leaning to China seems to be unfounded.

In addition, the South Korean public has recently viewed the relationships with China and the United States as equally important, but different aspects of each are emphasized. In contrast to the stress placed on the security and political dimensions of the U.S.-South Korea relationship, views of the South Korea-China relationship are almost solely focused on economics. Seventy percent of South Koreans state that improving economic relations with China is key, while just 15 percent say that improving political and security relations is most important for improving overall South Korea-China relations.¹⁵

In the survey of experts, 79 percent of respondents considered the United States the most important partner in both the economic and security realms, while 68 percent stated that security interests prevail over economic ones in Seoul's relations with the two states.¹⁶ In other words, both the public and experts in South Korea consider that, although economic cooperation with China is important, security cooperation with the United States is more important, which shows that they consider South Korea's alliance more important than its relationship with China.

Experts are not optimistic about the future of the relationship despite the 2013-15 development in South Korea-China relations: 63 percent described the future of relations as "strained neighbors," and just 17 percent as amicable relations of equal, sovereign states.¹⁷ This draws attention because their views largely differ from the government's positive evaluation, claiming that the current relationship is at its best. Experts are worried about the growing asymmetry in South Korea-China relations due to the rapid rise of China, militarily and economically. They point to inherent conflicting factors, such as the North Korean nuclear issue and South Korea's alliance with the United States.

Concerns over such vulnerability in South Korea-China relations in fact were shown through the media after North Korea's fourth nuclear test. The *Chosun Ilbo*, a conservative newspaper, ran an editorial right after the test that claimed, "The best South Korea and China relations in history turns out to be fictitious. Somebody has to take responsibility."¹⁸ Because the hotline between the ministers of national defense was not working and no phone conversations between the two leaders were held, the relations that the government had displayed were viewed as a fiction. The paper criticized the fact that Park had braved international criticism to attend a massive military parade, arguing that any boost in amicable relations has been nullified by Beijing's snub.

The phenomenon of domestic conservative media criticizing the conservative government is unusual. It reminds one of when the progressive party criticized the progressive government of Roh Moo-Hyun for pushing ahead an FTA with the United States. It shows that Korean society is not completely free from the mindset that the progressive party is pro-China and the conservatives are pro-U.S.

CHINA'S POLICY ON NORTH KOREA & THE NUCLEAR ISSUE

The Government's Perceptions and Policies

Until North Korea conducted its fourth nuclear test, the Park government had judged that there had been qualitative changes in the Xi government's North Korea policy. It had expected China to play a supportive role in resolving the nuclear issue and even in the unification of the Korean Peninsula, and accordingly, the government saw itself as having made significant accomplishments. For example, right after the crisis on the Peninsula caused by the mine incident in August 2015, the Chinese government and media essentially pointed the blame at North Korea and sent out "warning" messages, and the South Korean government responded very positively, thinking, "Now China will not side with North Korea's provocations. This has significant implications for the North Korean nuclear issue. The more advanced North Korea's nuclear capabilities, the stronger China's opposition will be."¹⁹

When Park was attending the military parade in Beijing, she was reported to have "expressed her appreciation for China's role in easing tensions in relation to North Korea's DMZ provocation," as if China's role would continue in this vein.²⁰ Park even mentioned to the accompanying press corps "various discussions between South Korea and China will begin for peaceful unification of the Korean Peninsula." Expectations for China's role were clearly elevated.²¹ Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se, after the president's visit to China, explained during an interview with KBS radio that due to "[t]he fact that both leaders of South Korea and China made clear their opposition to North Korea's dual economic, nuclear policies, and disapproval of the North Korean nuclear issues and agreed to promptly resume meaningful six-party nuclear talks, it could be considered that China expressed its will to play an active role in resolving the North Korean nuclear issues in the future."²² Subsequently, despite a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau, Liu Yunshan, visiting North Korea amid China's attempts to improve relations with North Korea, negative opinions in South Korea toward China were slow to be articulated.

After North Korea's fourth nuclear test, the South Korean government strongly expressed its expectations for China's cooperation in new and stronger sanctions against North Korea. In her New Year's address to the nation, Park stated, "A good partner is one that would hold the other's hand in times of difficulty." She urged China to cooperate in imposing sanctions against North Korea, including new restrictions, strong enough to change North Korea's attitude. In addition, Park proposed five-party nuclear talks, interpreted as saying that the Six-Party Talks are useless and that pressure takes priority over talks with North Korea.

Foreign Minister Wang Yi responded that China always upholds denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula, safeguarding peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, and solving issues through dialogue, presenting the three principles as a package and indivisible. Wang also said that China would firmly promote early resumption of the negotiations on the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula.²³ Later, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying responded to John Kerry's effort to get China to do more by stating that China is not the cause and crux of the Korean nuclear issue, nor is it the key to resolving the problem.²⁴

Although China criticized North Korea's test, it denied any responsibility. On the contrary, China strongly expressed its concern about stronger alliance ties among South Korea, the

United States, and Japan after North Korea's fourth nuclear test, refraining from putting the burden of denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula alone. Foreign ministry spokesperson Hong Lei told reporters when asked about the flight of a B-52 strategic bomber over South Korea and South Korea's resumption of the propaganda broadcasts, "We hope that relevant parties can exercise restraint, act with caution, and avoid ratcheting up tension."²⁵

The Park government's optimism about a qualitative change in China's North Korea policy was a backdrop for the resumption of arguments on China's role in the North Korean nuclear issue, especially criticisms of its exaggerated expectations. While there was recognition that the Xi Jinping government had changed its relationship with North Korea, leading to estrangement, it was decided that this was at the tactical level, not a matter of giving up China's strategic interest.

Criticisms were raised that the government's expectations were wishful thinking that China's North Korea policy would align with South Korea's national interests and hopes rather than a result of careful observation and analysis by focusing on China's words and deeds in regards to North Korea and the Xi Jinping government's active diplomacy with South Korea.

Although there were a certain amount of changes in China's perceptions of North Korea after new leadership appeared in China, the structural environment that could change China's North Korea policy—such as the agenda for China's rise, the restructuring of the regional order in East Asia, and the U.S.-China relationship—had not changed. On the contrary, due to the rebalancing strategy of the United States and the reinforcement of the U.S.-Japan alliance, North Korea's strategic value to China is strengthening. Even though North Korea's continuous provocations could annoy China, and depending on the intensity of the provocation, China could respond strongly, the response would be carried out through stable management of North Korea.

Perceptions of the Media, Experts, and the General Public

In South Korea, there has long been a debate over the balance of pressure and engagement toward North Korea largely between the conservative and progressive parties, and it revolves around China's North Korea policy and the perception of North Korea-China relations. The Lee Myung-Bak government distrusted China's North Korea policy and had a negative perception of China's role in the North Korean nuclear issue. Therefore, while the progressive media and specialists at that time opposed the pressure policy toward North Korea through strengthening the U.S. alliance, they expressed their position by stating that the emphasis that China puts on dialogue and negotiations, such as resuming the Six-Party Talks, is important.

Even though the Park government is conservative, it has been actively pursuing diplomacy with China. Although there were voices of concern in the conservative party over the government's new diplomatic moves, worrying that they could negatively affect South Korea's alliance with the United States, the conservatives controlled themselves and did not openly oppose the conservative government. Nonetheless, the government's judgment that qualitative changes will be brought about in China's North Korea policy due to the development of South Korea-China relations has continuously been the target for arguments. Experts and the media have presented various opinions on whether China's North Korea policy has changed, and even within the conservative party that supports Park. There were

both negative and doubtful opinions on any qualitative change in China's North Korea policy, and within the progressive party, there were assertions that important changes had taken place in the Xi Jinping government, along with criticisms that the government was indulging in wishful thinking.

After North Korea conducted its fourth nuclear test, the major media decided that China is not actively pressuring North Korea as expected and is even hesitating to cooperate with South Korea, and some conservative media brought up China's responsibility in North Korean nuclear issues. There was a consensus between the government, progressive and conservative media, and experts that China holds an important key to resolving the nuclear issue. For example, an IFANS survey shows that China was viewed by the majority of experts as both the key country (52 percent) in and the biggest disrupter (62 percent) to Korean unification.²⁶

Each party, however, has its own position on what China's expected role should be, on the way to get China to play that role, and on China's responsibility beyond its role. For example, the conservatively inclined *JoongAng Daily*, through its editorial "China Has to Change," urged China to strengthen its pressure on North Korea, based on the argument that it is China's responsibility.²⁷ In contrast, the *Hankyoreh* editorialized that the "China responsibility theory" pushes China away and does not work." It asserted that even though China's intervening role is important at this point, the room for China to intervene is receding because there have only been talks about China's role and strengthening the pressure on North Korea by the U.S. and South Korea.²⁸

Looking back over the past twenty years, the conservative experts judged that there is little possibility of China's participation in strong sanctions against North Korea, and, therefore, asserted that it is necessary to pressure China to participate in sanctions against North Korea by actively strengthening security cooperation between South Korea and the United States through publicizing the THAAD deployment. In contrast, progressive experts warned that cooperation among South Korea, the United States, and Japan might lead China to instead implement a conciliatory policy toward North Korea.²⁹ In addition, strengthening trilateral cooperation could lead to a power confrontation in Northeast Asia between China and Russia on the one hand and South Korea, the United States, and Japan on the other, which, in turn, could free North Korea from international pressure.³⁰

A few voices among both the progressives and conservatives considered China's role to be "useless." The conservative party asserted that China does not have the will or capability to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue and that, instead of expecting China to play a role, high-strength sanctions should be pushed forward by strengthening cooperation with the United States and Japan. The progressives asserted that since it is important to secure South Korea's leadership on the Korean Peninsula in the end, it is time to pursue a breakthrough through direct talks with North Korea.

CONTROVERSY EXPANDS TO THAAD, SANCTIONS, & PARALLEL-TRACK APPROACH

Widely diverse and complex views on China and South Korea-China relations have been expressed, leading to a series of sprawling debates on the issue in South Korea; these

continued in the 57 days preceding the U.N. Security Council's drafted resolution on sanctions against North Korea after the fourth North Korean nuclear test. The controversy was initially focused on the Chinese role and attitude toward the proposed sanctions against North Korea and South Korea-China relations. Then, its scope was expanded to include such issues as THAAD deployment; a parallel-track approach of denuclearization and a peace treaty; a possible accord between the U.S. and China on U.N. Security Council sanctions; and South Korea's role in the situation.

Immediately after North Korea's fourth nuclear test, the South Korean government promptly initiated a diplomatic offensive toward China, requesting for summit talks on the phone to elicit cooperation from China on the issue, while intensifying their pressure on North Korea. Dissatisfied with China's initially lukewarm attitude toward North Korea, the South Korean government swiftly made the stern decision to shut down the Gaeseong Industrial Complex and commence discussions on THAAD deployment. Amid these circumstances, even the South Korean government stopped describing its ties with China as being at their peak. Moreover, the press raised voices of concern over the suddenly chilling relations with China.

South Korea was dominated by opinions expressing discontent with and criticism of the lukewarm Chinese attitude toward North Korea. However, the situation also demonstrated that South Korean society has accumulated empirical understanding about the Chinese position. For example, a conservative newspaper, the *Chosun Ilbo*, observed in its editorial that it is difficult to expect China to move completely in sync with Seoul over North Korea, and its reluctance to take a hardline stance is understandable to a certain extent. It only criticized the refusal of China to respond to South Korea's request to communicate via a military hotline, calling this a deviation from international norms.³¹

There is, at least, indisputable consensus that China has a crucial role in applying pressure upon North Korea. However, there is discontent against and criticism of China and differences over the means to elicit Chinese support over the nuclear issue. There is also a consensus that South Korea-China ties should not be allowed to head toward a deteriorated conclusion. For example, the *Chosun Ilbo* maintained that the government should reconsider its decision not to send Prime Minister Hwang Kyo-ahn to the BOAO Forum in China, a means to express discontent with China over the North Korean nuclear issue and missile provocation. It suggested that the South Korean government should instead make every effort to persuade China by expanding the scope of its contact with the Chinese in every sector.³²

The issue has grown more complicated, as the South Korean government has officially started talks on the deployment of THAAD, and China has suggested a parallel-track approach of denuclearization and a peace treaty. These thorny issues are provoking heated debate in South Korea. When Chinese Ambassador to Seoul Chu Guohong warned that China's efforts to promote Seoul-Beijing relations could come to an end if Seoul decides to deploy the THAAD system, the South Korean government and press strongly denounced it as an "infringement on the sovereign rights of Korea."

Apart from the denouncement of the Chinese ambassador's remark as rude behavior, an opinion was raised highlighting the lack of strategic flexibility in South Korean diplomacy over the THAAD issue.³³ *Joongang Daily* suggested that Seoul should be flexible on THAAD deployment, citing a possibility that the U.S. and China might conduct negotiations behind the scene on the two issues: THAAD deployment and sanctions against North Korea.³⁴

Former foreign minister Han Seung-joo emphasized that THAAD deployment should not be regarded as an anti-China action, adding that he also opposed any move to abandon THAAD if such a decision was based on Chinese opposition to it.

In contrast, the progressive circle was opposed to THAAD deployment, on the ground that it is not a solution to the North Korean nuclear issue and might only heighten tensions and trigger a U.S.-China strategic confrontation on the Korean Peninsula. The South Korean press also raised concerns over possible responses from China to THAAD deployment. Even though some were optimistic that China would not resort to intensive or specific retaliatory action, there were more voices of concern over China's options of direct and indirect retaliation against South Korea, pointing to South Korea's economic dependence on China.

China's suggestion of a parallel-track approach is also intensifying the controversies in South Korea. The South Korean government and conservative politicians manifested their opposition to it, contending that there is no room for discussion on a peace treaty at this critical juncture of sanctions, the effectiveness of which might only be weakened. Conversely, progressive media and scholars think that Seoul should consider a parallel-track approach in a positive light, as it is fundamentally compatible with the September 19, 2005 agreement on the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.³⁵ An East Asia Institute report also claimed that South Korea should lead the peace regime initiative on the Korean Peninsula as a long-term measure to cope with the North Korean nuclear issue.³⁶

South Korean society generally welcomed the agreement of the U.S. and China on the strong sanctions against North Korea, recognizing the achievement of South Korea and the U.S. in cooperating to apply significant pressure on North Korea. However, there was an alternative view that it might have been the result of Chinese consideration of its relations with the U.S. and the THAAD issue, rather than the North Korean nuclear issue. This view holds that China might have proposed a withdrawal of the THAAD plan and a peace treaty in return for its agreement on the strong sanctions.

Contrary to the South Korean government's insistence that THAAD deployment and UN sanctions are separate issues, some observers claimed there is a possibility that China might tie its implementation of the sanctions with the abandonment of THAAD deployment. In particular, they emphasized that the actual implementation of the UN's sanction measures, even if sufficiently strong, depends upon the will of China to support them.

Noting that the U.S. move to reconsider THAAD deployment coincided with Chinese agreement on the sanctions, a concern was nonetheless raised that South Korea might be treated as an outsider in talks between the U.S. and China. There are also views that the focus might shift from sanctions to THAAD deployment and the parallel track approach to denuclearization and a peace treaty. In addition, there is speculation that the U.S. may accept the Chinese proposal and delay or withdraw THAAD deployment, depending upon Chinese cooperation with the sanctions, and initiate a dialogue with North Korea over a peace treaty.

CONCLUSION

The South Korean public is still paying attention to the economic aspects of the rise of China, which is perceived as an opportunity and a challenge after the fourth North Korean nuclear test. In contrast, experts are concerned about a security threat due to the rise of

China, but as China, more than in the past, is actively asserting itself, the dilemma between the U.S. alliance and strategic partnership relations with China is intensifying. Both the public and experts in South Korea consider that, although economic cooperation with China is important, security cooperation with the United States is more important, which shows that they consider South Korea's alliance more important than its relationship with China.

South Korea has a dilemma of strategic choice under the rapidly changing regional political architecture, with China's rise and the U.S. pivot to Asia strategy since 2008. When relations between South Korea and China were at their peak in 2015, South Korea faced a dilemma with its pro-China stance and having to choose between the U.S. and China in various domains. However, the North Korean nuclear test exposed the innate vulnerability of South Korea-China ties, paradoxically confirming the importance of the Chinese role in the North Korean nuclear issue.

In addition to this dilemma, South Korea was again confronted with the hard reality that it might be isolated from crucial decisions on the fate of the Korean Peninsula if it fails to maintain a proper position and status between the U.S. and China. In short, South Korea is now recognizing the necessity to consider its diplomatic choice, role, and status from a new, long-term strategic perspective, based on an awareness of the reality that the matter of North Korea, let alone the nuclear issue, is inextricably linked to strategic competition and cooperation between the U.S. and China.

South Korea-China relations developed into what were called the "best relations in their history." Nonetheless, concerns about the rise of China did not recede amid differences of opinion on latent problems in South Korea-China relations, which led some to warn about "leaning to China." The North Korean nuclear issue, the unification of the Korean Peninsula, and South Korea's alliance with the United States all aroused controversy. Contradictory viewpoints reflected the complicated reality that both Seoul and Beijing are in a relationship that is not limited to bilateral ties. South Korea-China relations are intricately interlocked with the international order, which leads observers to favor managing South Korea's diplomacy with China based on broader strategic considerations.

Although South Korea and China possess common motivation for cooperation, such motivation, when examined closely, is of a differing kind. On the surface, both South Korea and China support peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. China, however, is newly recognizing the necessity of cooperation with South Korea as a means of checking the U.S. rebalancing strategy in Asia and the rightist turn of Japan. Unlike in the past, China is beginning to propose a concrete alternative agenda to take initiative in reshuffling the East Asian regional order and is actively seeking South Korea's participation and/or support.

Considering its alliance with the U.S., South Korea still finds it difficult to readily respond positively to these concrete demands, but on the other hand, it focuses on its expectation of economic cooperation with China and "China's role" in resolving the North Korean nuclear crisis. South Korea and China, therefore, can be likened to two partners on a journey who believe they are on the same path, meanwhile, inwardly, they are aiming at different destinations. Unless there is sufficient understanding of each other's differing expectations, the journey may lead to conflict and friction.

ENDNOTES

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