

# The Chinese Perception of the U.S.-China-ROK Triangle

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Since being applied to U.S.-Soviet-China trilateral relations after the Sino-American rapprochement in the early 1970s, the notion/theory of “strategic triangles” has been widely used to examine many trilateral relations. The model of “U.S.-China plus one” is popular among students of U.S.-China relations and, consequently, the policy community has witnessed an increasing amount of scholarship on triangles among U.S.-China-India, U.S.-China-Japan, U.S.-China-Russia, and even U.S.-China-Taiwan. Unsurprisingly, this begs the question whether a strategic triangle could be construed and constructed among the United States, China, and South Korea. Generally speaking, despite the trilateral nature of U.S.-China-ROK relations, the Chinese policy community rarely subscribes to the existence of a strategic triangle among the U.S., China, and South Korea. This is not necessarily because South Korea does not carry the same strategic weight as the two great powers, but more importantly is because China does not see South Korea as possessing the strategic autonomy to act as an independent player in the trilateral relations. Although arguably such autonomy might exist in economic and trade relations, on key political and security issues, the Chinese see South Korea as invariably constrained by the U.S.-ROK military alliance and unable to form its own independent national security policy.

In writing about the post-Cold War period with an emphasis on geopolitics, Chinese authors do not often treat South Korean policy or Sino-ROK relations as autonomous. Given the great weight given to the U.S. role, it is important, therefore, to take a triangular approach in assessing these writings centered on South Korea. I do so first explaining in more detail why the “strategic triangle” framework does not apply, then examining views on how this triangle has evolved in a period of rising Chinese power relative to U.S. power and fluctuating U.S.-ROK relations as the leadership in Seoul changed hands, and finally returning to the triangular theme to grasp how this shapes China’s understanding of Seoul’s policies with emphasis on the ongoing Moon Jae-in era.

## Does “Strategic Triangle” Apply?

There are primarily three angles that the Chinese policy community adopts in its discussion of relations with South Korea. The first one is the bilateral angle between China and South Korea, of which the Chinese assessment has been largely positive. The Chinese official narrative describes a long mutual isolation between China and South Korea during the Cold War, referring to the hostility and lack of official relations during this period. However, according to the government’s official definition, bilateral relations have experienced rapid growth since diplomatic normalization in August 1992. In 1998, the leaders of the two countries agreed to establish a 21st century-oriented cooperative partnership.<sup>1</sup> Two years later, the two countries announced their joint decision to expand areas of cooperation. In 2003, presidents Hu Jintao and Roh Moo-hyun agreed to enhance bilateral relations to the level of comprehensive cooperative partnership.<sup>2</sup> Roh’s successor, President Lee Myung-bak, added a layer of strategic importance to the partnership.<sup>3</sup> After President Park Geun-hye ascended to power, her interest in closer alignment with China further elevated bilateral relations to the so-called “honeymoon” period since diplomatic normalization.<sup>4</sup> The “honeymoon,” however, was short-lived after the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system decisively sank bilateral ties to its nadir, leading to China’s tacit sanctions to punish South Korea. Since the inauguration of the Moon Jae-in government, for China, South Korea has shown signs of again pursuing a balanced foreign policy between the United States and China. Although China’s efforts to undermine alliance

relations have not borne fruit, Moon Jae-in's desire to strengthen and improve ties with China has been particularly appealing for Beijing.

This bilateral lens concentrates on what Chinese authors regard as the state of evolving relations between Beijing and Seoul, but it does not escape the shadow of triangularity since Seoul gains credit by boosting bilateral ties with strategic implications while losing credit when it makes strategic decisions that ignore Beijing's concerns and demonstrate the greater U.S. significance. Even as an upward trajectory prevailed over a quarter century, Beijing's expectations for balance were growing along with its reasoning that its leverage over Seoul was rising. While leaders in Seoul may have tried to avoid openly flaunting their tilt toward Washington, they were under increased pressure due to North Korea's growing threat capacity and the U.S. response to it. Thus, in 2016 Park Geun-hye defied Beijing with THAAD, leading to assessments of a sharp setback to Sino-ROK relations, while Moon Jae-in has won some praise for paying more heed to the concerns over THAAD and other Chinese strategic interests since he took office in 2017.

The second lens through which South Korea is discussed in the Chinese foreign policy community is the regional one. For China, South Korea has an increasingly important regional role to play and could become a key positive and supportive force in China's desired regional order. China sees South Korea as a critical "ally" in battling Japanese historical revisionism and militarism and jointly keeping Japan's political and regional ambitions in check. As victims of Japanese occupation during World War II, China believes that it and South Korea share a natural interest in denying Japan's regional leadership role. In addition, South Korea as a "middle power" could prove highly valuable in China's pursuit of regional leadership. For example, South Korea's decision to join the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and Park's participation in China's anti-Japanese WWII anniversary military parade in 2015 strongly backed China's regional and political agenda, alleviating China's isolation and embarrassment internationally. Overall, although both are U.S. allies, South Korea is seen as categorically different from Japan and is regarded as generally complacent with China's future leadership role.

A test of this lens is whether Seoul subscribes to either U.S.-Japan-ROK triangularity, deemed to be aimed at containment of China, or the Indo-Pacific framework touted by both Abe Shinzo and Donald Trump in late 2017. Its refusal to endorse these concepts despite U.S. pressure is treated as a test in Beijing, avoiding crossing what could be a red line comparable to the THAAD deployment decision. Yet, creeping security cooperation with Tokyo is viewed with suspicion, and Moon Jae-in's decision to include as one of the "three noes" a promise not to join with Japan in a trilateral military alliance was one step in reassuring China on this dimension.

The third lens through which China-South Korea relations are examined and considered in China is the U.S. angle. No discussion on political and security issues between China and South Korea could happen without the United States being a critical, if not determining, factor. The Chinese essentially do not see South Korea itself as posing a serious threat to China's national security. However, in the Chinese view, all the damage and/or burdens that South Korea has imposed on China originates from the U.S.-ROK military alliance. Thus, the U.S. factor permeates nearly every discussion of the bilateral and regional dimensions as well as ongoing triangular analysis.

In the sense that inclusion of the U.S. factor is unavoidable in Chinese narratives on the history of South Korea's post-Cold War security policies, there is indeed a trilateral relationship among the United States, China, and South Korea. However, whether this trilateral relationship qualifies as a strategic triangle is far less obvious in the Chinese judgment. The Chinese instinct to deny the presence of such a strategic triangle, in fact, coincides with Lowell Dittmer's original definition of a strategic triangle. According to Dittmer, two conditions need to be fulfilled to form such a relationship:<sup>5</sup>

1. All three parties must recognize the strategic salience of the three principles. What are the 3 principles? Each player may concurrently engage in various side-games, but these must be subordinate to the central game with other members of the triangle.
2. The second condition is that although the three players need not be of equal strategic weight, each must be accepted as a legitimate autonomous player.

Obviously, while both the United States and China recognize the strategic salience of South Korea, neither really sees South Korea as a legitimate autonomous player. Especially for the Chinese, because of the existence of the U.S.-ROK military alliance, South Korea is not believed to have the authority to pursue completely independent national security policies. Therefore, for China, rather than this relationship qualifying as a strategic triangle, the trilateral relationship should be more accurately characterized as U.S.-China bipolarity, with the ROK existing as a pro-U.S. minor player moving along a spectrum with the U.S. and China on the two far ends.

## Evolution of China-U.S.-ROK Trilateral Relations

Since the diplomatic normalization between China and South Korea in 1992, six South Korean presidents have tried to navigate relations with the United States and China: Kim Young-sam, Kim Dae-jung, Roh Moo-hyun, Li Myung-bak, Park Geun-hye, and Moon Jae-in. The six are evenly split between conservatives (Kim Young-sam, Li Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye) and progressives (Kim Dae-jung, Roh Moo-hyun, and Moon Jae-in). While all of the presidents have attempted to pursue a more friendly and positive policy toward China to different degrees, in the Chinese perception their affinity toward and cooperation with China are subject to overarching dominance by and the priority of the U.S.-ROK military alliance. However, throughout the years, combined with South Korea's domestic aspirations for strategic independence, the Chinese have identified growing indications of South Korea subtly recalibrating its relations with China and the United States. Although the U.S.-ROK military alliance remains a dominant theme, the hope of a South Korean strategic realignment has always been on the Chinese horizon. In publications on each period, this theme is either explicit or implicit, beginning soon after normalization of ties.

### Initial Exploration: President Kim Young-sam

When President Kim Young-sam was inaugurated in February 1993, months after the diplomatic normalization with China, bilateral relations with China were still at an initial explorative stage. For China, the factor of North Korea played a key role in advancing positive development in China-ROK relations. North Korea's withdrawal from the Non-Proliferation Treaty in March 1993 and its provocative stance in the following negotiations with the

Americans and the South Koreans paved the way for South Korea's strategic demand for China to play a more important role in dealing with North Korea. In the Chinese perception, this hope for China to deliver more on North Korea made Kim Young-sam decide to pay the first visit to China by a South Korean head of state.<sup>6</sup> China reciprocated the visit by committing to a more "positive and cooperative policy to promote the solution of the North Korean nuclear issue."<sup>7</sup> This is also regarded as the first instance of cooperation between China and South Korea on the North Korean nuclear issue.<sup>8</sup> At least from the Chinese side, it has preferred to portray this relationship as cooperative during the following years. From 1997, China participated in six rounds of the Four-Party Talks in Geneva proposed jointly by the United States and South Korea.

Under Kim Young-sam, South Korea's relations with the United States endured some major turbulence, primarily because of different policies toward North Korea. First, between 1993 and 1994, the United States and North Korea held three rounds of bilateral talks on the nuclear issues. The Chinese believe that Kim Young-sam was irritated by these talks because they disregarded South Korea's priority of reunification based on absorption.<sup>9</sup> Second, when President Clinton informed Kim Young-sam of the U.S. decision to bomb the North Korean nuclear facilities, Kim Young-sam's ardent opposition eventually forced Clinton to abandon such an attack plan.<sup>10</sup> For China, these events indicated different priorities between the two allies. Although the differences were not sufficient to undermine the foundation of the alliance, it did show China the possibility of forging a closer relationship with South Korea even as a U.S. ally.

Such an opportunity rapidly emerged under Kim Young-sam in 1995. With the attack on the South Korean government's legitimacy by North Korea, the rift between South Korea and the United States, as well as the negative changes in South Korea-Japan relations, the Chinese saw the Kim Young-sam government in a serious domestic and foreign policy crisis. Therefore, when President Jiang Zemin accepted Kim Young-sam's invitation to pay the first state visit to South Korea by a Chinese head of state, the Chinese believed that they were doing Kim Young-sam a huge favor.<sup>11</sup> Chinese narratives took this rift in the alliance as an opening for triangularity of the sort that allowed some possibility of widening, but without promise of a strategic triangular relationship.

### **Troubled Alliance: Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun**

For China, the ten years under presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun (1998-2008) witnessed significant growth of China-ROK ties. The rifts between South Korea and the United States over the North Korea issue and South Korea's pursuit of equality with the United States were undermining, to some degree, the military alliance between the two.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, although China identified more common positions with South Korea on key issues such as engagement with North Korea and the future of the U.S.-ROK alliance, nationalism and growing national pride under Roh also brought out thorny historical issues between China and South Korea, such as over the ancient state of Koguryo.

Kim Dae-jung initiated the Sunshine Policy toward North Korea, which led to the inter-Korea summit with Kim's visit to North Korea in June 2000.<sup>13</sup> For China, the Sunshine Policy agreed with its desired approach toward the North Korean nuclear issue, which is through engagement, assistance, and reassurance. Chinese experts have not been shy about complimenting the significant historical achievements of the Sunshine Policy, such as the

promotion of inter-Korea engagement and dialogue as well as the realization of economic, social, and cultural ties between North Korea and South Korea. In their view, the Sunshine Policy was conducive to bringing China and South Korea closer together. On the philosophical level, China shares the premise of the Sunshine Policy to promote inter-Korea reconciliation and affinity through economic cooperation and social exchanges. China consistently calls for understanding and addressing the origin of North Korea's insecurity, which coincides with the approach of the Sunshine Policy. On the working level, the Sunshine Policy provided opportunities for China to play a bigger role in the inter-Korea dialogues and take credit for their progress. Under Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, many of the key inter-Korea dialogues in fact happened in China, such as those between senior officials, vice-ministerial level officials, and the Red Cross of the two countries.<sup>14</sup>

To China's greater satisfaction, the Sunshine Policy successfully deepened the rift between South Korea and the United States. The conciliatory tone of the policy fundamentally differed from President George W. Bush's hostile position toward North Korea. In his famous 2002 State of the Union address, he listed North Korea, along with Iran and Iraq, as an "axis of evil, armed to threaten the peace of the world."<sup>15</sup> Bush's insistence on North Korea's acceptance of the 1994 Framework Agreement conflicted with South Korea's priority of the implementation of the Sunshine Policy. Therefore, the differences in their North Korea policies became the main factor in the discord between the United States and South Korea in the Chinese perception.

Meanwhile, brewing anti-Americanism in South Korean society further undermined the social foundation for the U.S.-ROK military alliance. With the growth of South Korea's comprehensive national power, a rising sense of independence and sovereignty increased dissatisfaction in South Korea with the unbalanced relationship between Washington and Seoul.<sup>16</sup> The controversies over the activities of the U.S. Forces in Korea stirred up more anti-Americanism in the country.<sup>17</sup> For China, the anti-Americanism in South Korea was the foundation for Roh Moo-hyun's pursuit of "independent national defense," which eventually led to him raising the issue of the transfer of wartime control of South Korean troops.<sup>18</sup>

While the emerging anti-Americanism had undermined the military alliance with the United States, the underlying cause, South Korea's growing nationalism, was also affecting ties with China. Chinese experts found a list of issues that South Korean nationalists exploited that damaged bilateral relations, including but not limited to the disputes over the Koguryo kingdom, territorial disputes over Mount Baekdu, and the change of the Chinese translation of the South Korean capital Seoul from "汉城" to "首尔."<sup>19</sup> For China, South Korea's desperate attempt to strengthen historical legitimacy, credibility, national cohesiveness, and domestic support of the government's agenda distorted historical facts and led to the creation of extreme nationalism. The anti-China nationalism and the victim mentality of South Koreans also damaged relations with China, as well as China's potential support for a South Korea-led reunification.

### **Swinging between Two Extremes: Presidents Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye**

Although Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye both belonged to the conservative political party, their policies toward China and the United States represent the two extremes of the spectrum. Lee prioritized the military alliance and completely subordinated South Korea's

national security agenda to that of the United States, as seen in China, which considers him the most pro-U.S. South Korean leader since the diplomatic normalization with China. In order to regain the lost decade between the United States and South Korea under Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, Lee exhausted all possible efforts to repair U.S.-ROK relations, by catering his foreign policy to the American foreign and security policies, observing an ultra-conservative policy toward North Korea, restoring policy coordination with the United States and Japan on North Korea issues, strengthening cooperation on the regional missile defense system, actively participating in the U.S.-led war on terrorism, and repairing and consolidating the U.S.-ROK military alliance.<sup>20</sup>

China was further disturbed that during his visit to the United States in April 2008, Lee agreed to the establishment of a “21st century strategic alliance,” elevating the alliance structure from a traditional military one to a comprehensive strategic alliance that encompasses political values, mutual trust, and alliance in peace time. What was even more alarming was the decision by Obama and Lee to regionalize and globalize their strategic alliance during Lee’s 2009 visit to the United States. Chinese cannot help but see this as an extension of the U.S.-ROK strategic alliance beyond its original focus on the Korean Peninsula that inevitably will have a China-related utility.

Later developments on North Korea under Lee, especially the *Cheonan* sinking and the North Korean shelling of Yeonpyeong Island heightened South Korea’s desire to protect its national security through a strengthened military alliance with the United States. The two reached an agreement in June 2010 to delay the transfer of wartime control of the military from April 2012 to late 2015. The *Cheonan* incident also promoted the first “2+2” consultation between the two, in which they agreed to counter any threat from North Korea and to deepen their alliance cooperation on bilateral, regional, and global levels.<sup>21</sup> For a time, China saw the Lee Myung-bak government as the nadir of China-ROK relations since diplomatic normalization, blaming the decline on the *Cheonan* incident, the Yeonpyeong shelling, and the issue of North Korea defectors.<sup>22</sup> North Korea’s provocative behavior had precipitated South Korea’s desire to strengthen its U.S. alliance. However, China blamed the North Korean provocations and the cooling of inter-Korea relations almost entirely on Lee’s abandonment of the Sunshine Policy.<sup>23</sup> China’s biased position on the *Cheonan* and Yeonpyeong issues was obvious. Not only was it reluctant to hold North Korea responsible for the sinking, but it termed the Yeonpyeong shelling “North Korea and South Korea firing at each other” to mitigate North Korea’s responsibility.<sup>24</sup>

The significant deterioration of bilateral ties between China and South Korea laid the groundwork for the Park Geun-hye administration. Lee Myung-bak seemed to have proved to China that the campaign to drive a sharp wedge in the U.S.-ROK military alliance was rather futile. Even though South Korea understands that China’s support is essential for the reunification of the Korean Peninsula, faced with the real and acute national security threat by North Korea, Seoul has no other option than to consolidate its alliance with the United States, which, in turn, will inevitably undermine China’s support for reunification. At the same time, no matter what signs of improvement there are between Beijing and Seoul, North Korea always has the option to sabotage such rapprochement through its provocations, knowing that Beijing will not punish it to Seoul’s satisfaction.

This, as shown by the record of the Park government, is indeed the dilemma of China-ROK relations. It is no secret that for the first three years of her government, both China and South Korea attempted to test a different alignment strategy. Frustrated with North Korea's brinkmanship that continuously damaged China's security interests, Xi Jinping placed his hopes on Park to improve China's strategic position. At the heart of this scheme was a plan to turn South Korea into China's "pivotal" state in Northeast Asia, thereby undermining the U.S. alliance system in the region and diminishing its threat to China. According to Chinese specialists, "The paradigm shift of China's Korean Peninsula policy paid special attention to the China-South Korea relationship in order to replace the quasi-'special' state-to-state relations with North Korea."<sup>25</sup> This was the boldest attempt during the entire quarter century to fundamentally alter the shape of the triangle, although it came at a time of conservative leadership in Seoul and of intensified South Korean alarm about the direction of North Korea's actions. One might have assumed that expectations would not have risen so high in such inauspicious circumstances.

Xi Jinping seized the opportunity of Park's early overtures to intensify contacts and boost ties, while Chinese narratives extolled the significance of these improved relations. As a result of the China-ROK rapprochement, senior-level visits soared. Xi and Park held eight summits between 2013 and 2016, while until March 2018 there had been no meeting between the Chinese top leader and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.<sup>26</sup> China became South Korea's largest trading partner in 2014, and the two countries signed a Free Trade Agreement in 2015.<sup>27</sup> South Korea arguably supported China's global strategy, as manifested through its participation in the China-led AIIB as a founding member, and Park's attendance at China's World War II military parade in 2015.<sup>28</sup> The United States declined participation on both occasions, and China saw South Korea's participation as successfully arousing alienation in the alliance relationship.<sup>29</sup>

How fragile was the edifice on which Chinese optimism about Park's foreign policy and Sino-ROK relations in 2013-15 had been built? Kim Jong-un was testing the patience of Obama as well as many in South Korea. Obama was pressing for an end to the standoff between Park and Abe. Park may have gone to the September 2015 parade in a last-ditch effort to secure greater cooperation from Xi in pressuring Kim Jong-un, but China's booming economic ties with North Korea only emboldened Kim, in the eyes of many South Koreans. Xi's diplomacy was more a sign of taking Pak's straddling for granted than of wooing her in a sustainable manner. Chinese writings obscured the essence of the challenge and fueled the far-reaching letdown that followed.

Events after the fourth North Korean nuclear test in January 2016 entirely derailed China's scheme. Overestimating its presumed influence over Seoul, Beijing refused to adequately address South Korea's legitimate security concerns, which eventually led to Seoul's decision to deploy the THAAD system. China sees the THAAD deployment as a threat to strategic stability with the United States and an obstacle to its desired regional blueprint. In this sense, the year of 2016 witnessed a significant evolution of China's policy toward the Korean Peninsula—not because of North Korea's unprecedented nuclear and missile tests or South Korea's decision to deploy the THAAD system in response. Rather, it was important because it served as a wake-up call to China that simply aiming to improve ties with South

Korea and undermine the U.S.-ROK alliance without answering the critical question of China's relationship with North Korea is unlikely to succeed. It was evidence that South Korean security anxieties must be taken into consideration without blithely assuming that a balanced triangle can soon be within reach.

### **Moon Jae-in: A New Independent Foreign Policy?**

The deterioration of bilateral ties between China and South Korea in 2016 was triggered by North Korea's nuclear test, the South Korean decision to deploy the THAAD system, the perception in China that the THAAD deployment is a threat to its security, and the political and economic pressure it applied on South Korea to revoke the decision. When China realized in the fall of 2017 that the deployment had become irreversible, it abandoned its uncompromising position in favor of a more pragmatic course to halt the downward spiral in bilateral ties. To give Beijing cover for its retreat, the Moon government is reported to have agreed to the controversial "three noes": no further THAAD deployment; no trilateral military alliance with Japan and the United States; and no participation in the U.S. missile defense system. In response, the Chinese quickly agreed to Moon's visit to Beijing in December 2017.

To the Chinese, Moon appears more interested in a balanced approach toward the United States and China than did Park at the end of her time in office. He did not withdraw the decision to deploy THAAD, but at the same time tried to appease China with the "three noes." While his intention might be to avoid angering either China or the United States, the end result is that both Washington and Beijing are perturbed by the perceived damage to their interests. One issue on which South Korea may have exceeded, at least for the time being, the expectations of the United States and China is the inter-Korea dialogue. With improved engagement and relations with North Korea, South Korea has enhanced its bargaining position with both great powers, although this advantage seems to have been easily overwhelmed when bilateral channels opened between both countries and North Korea.

Chinese expectations for Moon have not reached the lofty heights seen in Park's first years. This could be because of the lingering THAAD impact. It could be because the security environment is sufficiently uncertain or even ominous, despite recent diplomacy, that the prospect of Moon pursuing balance against U.S. wishes appears too improbable. Yet, Moon is a progressive with an agenda focused on North Korean diplomacy that is problematic for the Trump administration and promising for China. The spring of 2018 just may be too early to assess Chinese responses to the impact of the Moon administration on prospects for major change in the trilateral framework.

## Back to the Triangle Concept

The Chinese narrative of China-U.S.-ROK trilateral relations is largely focused on the development of two bilateral relations: between South Korea and China, and between South Korea and the United States. Since the establishment of bilateral relations in 1992, what China sees is a gradual process of China strengthening ties with South Korea economically,

politically, and socially. Generally, China has seen the progressive governments of South Korea as more in line with its strategic agenda, particularly given South Korea's innate desire to pursue independence from the United States and its interest in engagement with North Korea. However, both the nadir and the peak of China-ROK relations occurred under conservative governments, under Lee Myung-bak and the first three years under Park Geun-hye respectively.

In China's view, given its regional power status, geographic proximity, and economic influence over South Korea, it is natural for South Korea to bear affinity and anxiety toward China at the same time. However, although China and South Korea do not share the same political system, there are no fundamentally irreconcilable differences or clashes of national interests between the two, other than the North Korea factor (for South Korea) and the U.S. factor (for China), according to Chinese thinking. From the Chinese perspective, all the most critical damage to China-ROK relations for South Korea invariably comes from the North Korea issue due to China's reluctance to abandon North Korea. Meanwhile, also from the Chinese perspective, all the most critical damage to China-ROK relations for China comes from the South Korean alliance with the United States. That is, out of its consideration for national security, South Korea has to choose to support American security deployment and policy in Northeast Asia, which is seen by China as undermining Chinese national security.

Dittmer listed three primary scenarios for a strategic triangle:<sup>30</sup>

- *Ménage à trois*: symmetrical amity among all three principals
- Romantic triangle: amity between one pivot player and two wing players, who have enmity between them
- Stable marriage: amity between two players against a third

Because China does not see South Korea as having strategic autonomy or independence, it therefore does not qualify as an essential player of the triad. This is similar to the China-U.S.-Soviet triad between 1949 and 1960, when China was perceived as a member of the communist bloc led by the Soviet Union, and the primary nature of the global power structure was a bipolar cold war. Therefore, a strategic triangle did not exist.

The current state of China-U.S.-South Korea dynamics is closer to the situation among China, the United States, and the Soviet Union from 1960 to 1971. Dittmer argued that during this stage none of the three scenarios applied fully, and the decade was an ambiguous and transitional one. Not until China decided to break away from the Soviet bloc and identify Moscow as China's biggest threat, and not until the United States decided to exploit that opening and pursue *détente* with Beijing vis-à-vis Moscow, did the real strategic triangle begin to form.

If we hypothesize that South Korea is an equal, legitimate, and autonomous player in the triad (which it is not), some Chinese characterize the U.S.-China-South Korea triangle as a "stable marriage" scenario. That is, the United States and South Korea enjoy amity between them but both bear enmity toward China. However, this characterization misses important factors such as South Korea's differing regional strategic outlook. If the determining factor of the amity between the United States and South Korea is their common enemy—North Korea—and if China is seen as essential to the resolution of the North Korea threat, it is conceivable that South Korea will not want to maintain a hostile policy toward China. This is

not just because the U.S.-ROK military alliance has proven insufficient to help South Korea achieve its goal of national unification, but also because China's economic and strategic influence over South Korea is so significant that South Korea must increasingly respect China's tolerance and accommodation in its national security policy.

Chinese specialists further point to a *ménage à trois* as China's desired endgame in the triangular relations among the three. Symmetrical affinity among the three may be desirable for South Korea, but China's ambition may not end at merely undermining and dismantling the U.S.-ROK military alliance. Given China's strategic aspirations under Xi Jinping, South Korea's neutrality might be China's bare minimum requirement for Seoul. In the long run, China would demand South Korea's deference on key strategic issues and not just its neutrality. In this sense, the Chinese narrative of a desired *ménage à trois* might just be bait to entice South Korea to distance itself from its military alliance with the United States.

Due to South Korea's fundamental constraints, including its status, national power, and, more importantly, its vital need for the United States to ensure its national security and for China to assist in reunification, it remains to be seen how South Korea could achieve the same status China enjoyed in the 1970s between the United States and the Soviet Union. Perhaps upon the completion of its national reunification, South Korea could really begin to assert itself as a middle power with strategic salience and autonomy.

## Endnotes

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