

## **Common Misconceptions about the China-South Korea Relationship**

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There is no question that the current bilateral relationship between the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) is at its best since normalization of ties in 1992. In less than two years since South Korean President Park Geun-hye and Chinese President Xi Jinping took office in early 2013, bilateral cooperation between the two countries has flourished and expanded across the board. High-level dialogue channels were established in order to enhance and regularize strategic communication between Seoul and Beijing. As a result, Chinese State Councilor Yang Jiechi and South Korean Chief of the Presidential Office of National Security Kim Jang-soo held their first strategic talks in November 2013. A month later, government officials from the two countries also held the first Foreign Policy and Security Dialogue. In a sign of growing military cooperation, South Korea and China agreed to move forward with an agreement made in 2011 to set up a direct military hotline between their defense ministers. The only other country with which South Korea has such a high-level military hotline is the United States, which buttresses the significance of this development. The hotline also demonstrates increased Chinese willingness to cooperate with South Korea on contingencies in the Korean Peninsula. On the economic front, President Park and President Xi agreed to conclude negotiations of the Korea-China bilateral free trade agreement by the end of 2014. While the prospect of concluding the agreement by the deadline remains to be seen, the successful conclusion of the agreement would definitely give a boost to the two countries' already substantial economic relationship.

Above all, the growing ties between South Korea and China is highlighted by the two summits between the nations' leaders in just over a year. Japan is

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traditionally South Korean leaders' choice for the second overseas visit after the United States. Thus, President Park's decision to go to China in June 2013 for her second overseas state visit demonstrated her administration's resolve to revitalize Sino-ROK relations and strengthen their strategic cooperative partnership. Beijing welcomed South Korea's overture, and President Park's first successful summit with President Xi helped set a positive tone for relations between the new governments. The unilateral Chinese declaration in late November 2013 of a new air defense identification zone (ADIZ), which overlapped with South Korea's existing ADIZ around the Ieodo/Suyan Rock, created a hiccup in bilateral relations. Yet, the second summit between the two leaders in Seoul in July 2014 dispelled doubts of an early end to the honeymoon phase of their relationship. President Xi's trip was significant in that it marked the first time a Chinese leader visited South Korea before North Korea. Additionally, in the almost three years since Kim Jong-un assumed power in North Korea, Kim has yet to host a Chinese head of state or visit China himself. This unprecedented Chinese gesture elevated South Korea's hope for change in China's North Korea policy, but enthusiasm turned to disappointment when China remained opposed to including an explicit statement on the denuclearization of North Korea in the summit joint statement.

There is a common misconception about the growing relationship between South Korea and China. Despite the unprecedented summits and gestures of friendship, South Korea's expanding ties with China do not signify an emerging shift in its foreign policy. They rather reflect South Korea's diplomatic strategy in dealing with its inherent strategic dilemma vis-à-vis China. On one hand, China has become an important economic partner for South Korea, and cultivating and deepening ties with China has thus been an important policy objective. South Korea's need for Chinese cooperation in resolving the nuclear standoff with North Korea and achieving Korean reunification has also provided a major impetus for its engagement with China. On the other hand, South Koreans also perceive significant economic and security threats from China due to growing economic dependence, geographical proximity, and an expanding power gap.<sup>2</sup> According to a recent public opinion survey, more than 60 percent of South Koreans believe China's rise poses

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<sup>2</sup> Victor Cha and Ellen Kim, "Between Rocks and Hard Places: South Korea's Strategic Dilemmas with China and the United States," forthcoming.

both economic and military threats to South Korea.<sup>3</sup> In addition, while China continues to rank as the second most favorable country after the United States, the South Korean public exhibited less trust in China than in the United States.<sup>4</sup> Undeniably, Beijing's increasingly assertive foreign policy only serves to deepen South Koreans' concern about China's rise. Meanwhile, South Korea remains a key U.S. ally in Asia, and much of South Korea's national security is rooted in its military alliance with the United States. All of these geopolitical, economic, and security considerations contribute to South Korea's dual strategy of maintaining its security alliance with the United States while placing its economic future with China. As a result, South Korea's China policy has a tendency to fluctuate as it adjusts to and balances against a rising China.

The Xi government's charm offensive toward the Park government is no less strategic. Engaged in a growing competition with the United States for global leadership and embroiled in tension with Japan in Asia, China saw in the Park administration's extended hand a window of opportunity to kill two birds with one stone: to pull South Korea closer to China and away from the United States, and to undermine the U.S.-ROK-Japan security triangle, which Beijing has always perceived to be aimed at containing China. China's icy relations with North Korea also provided an opening for warmer relations with South Korea than had previously been possible. Certainly, Beijing's cool attitude towards and distant relationship with Pyongyang altered the strategic calculations of regional countries, including North Korea. But China's changed attitude largely stems from its deep frustration with Pyongyang and is not indicative of a larger shift in its North Korea policy. Rather, Beijing's strategy is to take advantage of the currently weak Sino-DPRK relationship in order to win over South Korea—without giving up its core geostrategic interest in North Korea.

What, then, do South Korea's growing ties with China mean for the United States and the region?

To some American politicians and policymakers, South Korea's warming

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<sup>3</sup> Kim Jiyeon et. al., "One Bed, Two Dreams? Assessing Xi Jinping's Visit to Seoul," *The Asan Institute for Policy Studies Issue Brief*, July 16, 2014, <http://en.asaninst.org/contents/one-bed-two-dreams-assessing-xi-jinpings-visit-to-seoul>.

<sup>4</sup> Kim Jiyeon et. al., "Public Opinion on the Korea-China Summit, Favorability of the Leaders of Neighboring Countries, Attitudes on the Minimum Wage," *The Asan Institute for Policy Studies Public Opinion Brief*, July 1-15, 2013.

ties with China amid growing Sino-American rivalry are a clear cause for concern, particularly as the United States rebalances to Asia. The Obama administration affirms the U.S.-ROK alliance as a “linchpin of peace and security in the Asia Pacific region” and an important foundation of U.S. policy in Northeast Asia and beyond.<sup>5</sup> Some in Washington may interpret South Korea’s policy oscillation between the United States and China as a problem that could undermine U.S. strategy in the region, especially considering that U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral cooperation has been stagnant over the past few years. This has been largely due to the deteriorating relationship between South Korea and Japan over resurgent historical and territorial disputes. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s controversial visit to the Yasukuni Shrine in December 2013 and his recent attempt to reinterpret the Kono Statement on comfort women have further aggravated ROK-Japan relations. Additionally, the two leaders have yet to meet in a state summit since they took office. South Korea’s closeness with China amid this continued diplomatic freeze between South Korea and Japan is viewed as a worrisome development that could endanger the U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral relationship. Others argue that the repercussions of South Korea’s tilt towards China will have a destabilizing impact on the balance of power and regional alignment in Asia. Certainly, all of these are valid claims that should not be ignored.

However, the future of the U.S.-ROK alliance is not as dim as people might think. Although some presume that South Korea’s warming ties with China may have weakened its relationship with the United States, such presumptions underestimate the reservoir of deep trust and friendship between the United States and South Korea. In South Korea, the United States continues to rank more favorably than China in opinion polls and remained a preferred cooperative partner even when Sino-ROK relations were buoyant after the July Park-Xi summit.<sup>6</sup> In the 2014 Chicago Council survey, American favorable views of South Korea also set a new record high, reaching a rating of 55 from the previous record of 52 in 2010.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The White House, “Joint Fact Sheet: The United States-Republic of Korea Alliance: A Global Partnership,” April 25, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/04/25/joint-fact-sheet-united-states-republic-korea-alliance-global-partnership>.

<sup>6</sup> Kim Jiyoung et al., “Issue Brief: One Bed, Two Dreams?”

<sup>7</sup> The rating is on a scale of 0-100 with 100 being the most favorable feelings toward other countries. In comparison, Canada ranked highest in country favorability with a rating of 79 followed by Great Britain (74), Germany (65), and Japan (62); Dina Smeltz and Ivo Daalder et al., “Foreign Policy in the Age of Retrenchment: Results of the 2014 Chicago Council Survey of American Public Opinion and US Foreign Policy,” 2014, [http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/sites/default/files/2014\\_CCS\\_Report\\_1.pdf](http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/sites/default/files/2014_CCS_Report_1.pdf).

The United States and South Korea have cemented a robust relationship under the Obama and previous South Korean Lee Myung-bak governments. Highlights of this relationship include close cooperation and coordination on North Korea in the aftermath of the *Cheonan* sinking and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island, as well as the conclusion of the bilateral Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA). These bilateral accomplishments and strong solidarity reflect years of successful U.S.-ROK relations. Against this backdrop, the two summits between President Obama and President Park also demonstrated the strength of the U.S.-ROK alliance and that Seoul-Washington ties remain steady. In October 2014, the Obama and Park administrations came to an agreement on another delay of the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) of South Korean troops from the U.S.-led UN Command to South Korea. Although Washington shared Seoul's concern that the previous transfer schedule of 2015 needed to be reconsidered following North Korea's third nuclear test in 2013, postponing the planned OPCON transfer that had already been delayed once in 2011 was not an easy task. The final decision to delay the OPCON transfer reveals the strength of the ties between the two allies.

Nevertheless, South Korea's growing tilt toward China needs to be properly managed because of its long-term geostrategic implications. South Korea's inclination toward China is not a transient trend given the geopolitical and economic dilemmas that the country faces. Unlike Japan, which views China more as a competitor, South Korea faces a policy challenge to coordinate and synchronize its U.S. military alliance with its evolving strategic cooperative relationship with China. However, as Victor Cha argues, South Korea's strategic value and leverage *vis-à-vis* China rests on and is derived from its strong relationship with the United States.<sup>8</sup> As a result, South Korea's lean toward China must be matched by concerted efforts from South Korea and the United States to continuously shore up and deepen the U.S.-ROK comprehensive strategic alliance. For instance, the two countries must update their alliance vision statements to meet present and future security realities in Asia. South Korea's accession to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) would also be a positive development. In addition to implementing KORUS, joining a U.S.-led regional trade agreement would balance against South Korea's decision to sign a

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<sup>8</sup> “韓·美 멀어지면... 中, 오히려 한국을 경시할 것 [If ROK-U.S. Alliance Weakens, China Will Not Take South Korea Seriously],” *Chosun Ilbo*, July 18, 2014, [http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2014/07/18/2014071800344.html](http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2014/07/18/2014071800344.html).

bilateral free trade agreement with China and participate in the China-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

The United States should also play a more active role as a mediator between South Korea and Japan to diffuse tension between its two key allies. At the same time, the United States, South Korea, and Japan should enhance U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral cooperation through regular trilateral meetings, which would help prevent South Korea from sending unintended messages to the United States and Japan as it seeks to enhance ties with China. Although the political environments in Japan and South Korea are still not ripe for a summit to take place between President Park and Prime Minister Abe, the two countries must work harder to resolve thorny issues and invest political capital to improve the relationship, thereby setting bilateral relations on a more positive course. Similarly, South Korea should carefully manage expectations and perceptions of both China and the United States. A U.S.-ROK-PRC trilateral strategic dialogue would be a good confidence-building measure that could avoid potential miscommunication, enhance member states' respective understanding of each other's intentions, help reduce the risk of miscalculations, and facilitate cooperation on issues of common concern and interest.

Sino-ROK relations have had a strong start under Park and Xi because the two countries' strategic interests have converged under Asia's current security landscape. But the future trajectory of bilateral relations remains yet to be seen. While there are opportunities for cooperation for South Korea and China to explore, challenges also lie ahead as both countries define their strategic interests and realize the limitations of their relationship.

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