

China–South Korea Relations Amid the Sino-American Strategic Rivalry

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Abstract

South Korea's perception of China's role in both the denuclearization and peaceful unification of the Korean Peninsula has in part shaped the Republic of Korea's (ROK) current unwillingness to align itself with the US's *Indo-Pacific Strategy*, especially due to the significant effects Sino-US tensions have on Beijing's strategy toward the Korean Peninsula. In particular, Seoul remains concerned that outright alignment with the United States against China could exacerbate the Korean Peninsula's position in Sino-US strategic competition. For South Korea, this carries the risk of both Seoul's diminished influence in the pursuit of Korean denuclearization amid Sino-US tensions as well as a reduction of Beijing's prospective support for Korean unification under the ROK's lead.

Introduction

Against the backdrop of the US's official designation of South Korea as the "linchpin" of its Indo-Pacific Strategy, policy makers in the Republic of Korea (ROK) are struggling to define how they will promote and pursue Seoul's national interests on the Korean Peninsula amid the Sino-US strategic rivalry. Indeed, despite Seoul's designation as a strategic linchpin, the ROK has not officially endorsed Washington's Indo-Pacific vision.

In this context, US attempts to enlist Seoul in a framework aimed at containing China have combined with the ROK's emphasis on the need for both South Korean-led denuclearization and the peaceful reunification of the Korean Peninsula. What this may mean is that Seoul faces pressure to choose strategic alignment with Washington against Beijing's rising ambitions at the cost of some of its own core interests, the realization of which the ROK considers China's support to be indispensable. In particular, strategically aligning with the US against China will potentially prompt Beijing to harden any opposition it has toward major shifts in the status quo on the Korean Peninsula that appear favorable to US interests. This could include calcifying policy differences between China and the US regarding the best path forward toward denuclearization and strengthening Beijing's views of a separate North Korean state providing a buffer against US ally the ROK.

By its very nature, the ROK-US alliance prevents China and South Korea from becoming particularly close,¹ especially as China considers the ROK-US alliance to be set against North Korea and to constitute an integral part of the US bid to contain China.² Nevertheless, from South Korea's vantage point, Beijing's willingness to support Seoul's interests requires a solid China-ROK relationship despite South Korea's security alignment with the US. Indeed, the state of China-US relations has a significant effect on Beijing's ties with Pyongyang and Seoul, arguably more so than the state of the two Koreas' respective ties with the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Whereas a downturn in Beijing-Seoul relations does not necessarily translate into an uptick in China-North Korea relations, China's relations with the US significantly affect the state of play on the Korean Peninsula as far as Chinese interests are concerned, in part given that Sino-US tensions throw the strategic value (for China) of a separate North Korean state's role as a buffer into sharp relief.³ As such, a fear of needlessly undermining relations with the PRC has informed Seoul's hesitancy to fully endorse Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy.⁴ Instead, South Korea has pursued what is frequently labeled as "strategic ambiguity,"⁵ attempting to stake out a position between China and the US so that it can utilize the benefits it gains from its relations with both countries in pursuit of its own interests. Of course, key South Korean goals such as the denuclearization and unification of the Korean Peninsula also constitute core US interests. China likewise considers denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula to be a priority (although its position on unification is less certain). Yet the perceived risk for South Korea is that outright alignment with Washington against Beijing will undermine Seoul's ability to pursue these fundamental interests on its own terms.

The Korean Peninsula in Sino-US Strategic Competition

The Korean Peninsula has increasingly become a geographic locus of contention between Beijing and Washington due to a combination of the worsening crisis over the North Korea's weapons capabilities as well as the Sino-US trade war.⁶ Strategically, the Korean Peninsula has a dual significance for China, as peninsular stability is important for both China's Northeast Asian subregional interests as well as its growth as a great power.⁷

One of the essential principles of Beijing's Korea policy has long been to maintain strong ties with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), calling for restraint (as opposed to blaming Pyongyang) in the event of a North Korean security provocation. In recent years, China's policies toward North Korea have become increasingly couched in the specter of strategic competition with the United States.⁸ Helping to perpetuate the perception in many quarters of the

PRC's foreign-policy elite of the DPRK as a strategic asset providing a buffer between China and South Korea,⁹ it also attempts to exercise leverage in the North Korean security crisis in relation to the Sino-US strategic competition.¹⁰

Pyongyang's security provocations since the second North Korean nuclear crisis in 2002–2003 have, however, prompted a more robust debate regarding North Korea's value in Beijing's foreign policy.¹¹ Particularly due to the DPRK's 2013 nuclear test, Beijing took on a revised Korea policy based on the concept of China as a rising great power, de-emphasizing peripheral security in favor of the role that the Korean Peninsula plays in China's strategic vision of turning the PRC into an undisputed global power.¹² Nevertheless, Beijing continues to provide what it considers to be a necessary degree of support for the DPRK to prevent significant economic or political problems in North Korea from causing instability on China's periphery.¹³

Furthermore, the China-DPRK relationship has experienced a new sense of purpose in Beijing's foreign policy as the Korean Peninsula becomes a node of Sino-US strategic tensions. Historical narrative in particular has recently played an increasingly prominent role in the way the Korean Peninsula has become a focal point of Sino-US strategic enmity, with a recent emphasis on the notion of Beijing's participation in the Korean War as an act against American military aggression. The most notable example of this is Xi Jinping's speech at the Great Hall of the People on 25 October 2020 commemorating Beijing's actions in the war; also attendant is a pervasive revival of the Korean War-era rallying cry of "*resist America, aid Korea*" in Chinese public discourse as relates to Beijing-Washington strategic tensions. Recent examples include statements from Chinese military and civilian officials and other organs of the Chinese Communist Party that draw parallels between China's intervention in the Korean War and modern Sino-US tensions.¹⁴

Yet even amid a recognition of the DPRK's importance for China in Beijing's strategic standoff with Washington, Beijing's Korea policy under Xi Jinping—against the views of traditionalists in Chinese policy circles—has placed an unprecedented emphasis on relations with the ROK.¹⁵ The reason for this (China's continued recognition of the DPRK's strategic value notwithstanding) has been to decrease Beijing's emphasis on ties with a reckless North Korea and instead turn the China-ROK relationship into the node of Chinese influence on the Korean Peninsula. Beijing's motive for doing so in part stem from a belief that turning South Korea into China's "pivotal state" in Northeast Asia would undermine the ROK-US alliance.¹⁶

China–South Korea Relations: Evolving Yet Unbalanced

China–South Korean relations, formally established in 1992, have evolved significantly in terms of their official designation, expanding from their initial status as a so-called amicable cooperative relationship to their current state as a “strategic partnership” in 2008. Yet despite their outward appearance, designations such as “amicable cooperative relationship” and “strategic partnership” have in some ways negatively affected ties between Beijing and Seoul, as such official labels have led to so-called strategic expectations which, when not met, have led to “strategic mistrust” between the two.¹⁷

Even more so, however, South Korea’s relations with the United States have also significantly shaped the trajectory of China–ROK relations. Indeed, whereas China–ROK relations grew notably under Kim Dae-jung (1998–2003) and Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2008), under Lee Myung-bak’s administration (2008–2013), China–South Korea ties were not nearly as warm as they had been. This is in part because of Lee’s emphasis on recalibrating the ROK–US alliance, which had suffered as a result of serious policy differences over North Korea policy between the United States and South Korea under the Kim and Roh administrations.

The perceived lack of action taken by Beijing after North Korea’s 2010 sinking of the ROKS *Cheonan* and attack on Yeongpyeong Island caused further deterioration in ties between Seoul and Beijing. China, for its part, blamed the cooling of DPRK–ROK relations on Lee’s refusal to continue with the “Sunshine policy”-based rapprochement with North Korea that had occurred under Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun.¹⁸ Nevertheless, Lee perceived that South Korea’s future was invariably linked to strong relations with China and therefore sought to build upon the foundation in China–South Korean ties that his immediate predecessors had implemented.¹⁹

Considering China–ROK rapprochement and the difficulties in China–DPRK relations stemming from North Korea’s 2013 nuclear test, Xi Jinping made Seoul (rather than Pyongyang) the destination of his first visit to the Korean Peninsula in 2014. Maintaining this momentum, ROK president Park Geun-hye (2013–2017) pursued solid ties with Beijing even despite her staunchly pro-US stance.²⁰ Although China–South Korea bilateral ties suffered notably toward the end of Park’s administration due to the ROK’s decision to deploy the US’s Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in 2016–2017, China and South Korea’s relationship started to mend once again under president Moon Jae-in (2017–present)—to the point that Xi Jinping had expressed a strong desire to visit Seoul by the end of 2020. The visit never materialized that year, yet Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi visited Seoul in both late 2019 and late 2020. Around the

time of his second visit to Seoul, high-level officials from the Chinese and South Korean foreign ministries convened in Beijing, where they resolved to take Beijing–Seoul ties to a “new level.”²¹

All the same, China–South Korean relations are beset by persistent asymmetry, not only in terms of each country’s respective overall national power but also insofar as which aspects of bilateral ties are the most highly developed. Economics and trade dominate China–South Korea relations, while military and security issues occupy the lowest rung of their relationship.²² Even from the outset of the launching of China–ROK relations, trade has been the most important aspect of the bilateral relationship, with remarkable growth in economic exchanges over two decades from the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1992. By 2008 China took top place among South Korea’s trade partners.²³

China–South Korea relations have developed parallel to Seoul’s tight-knit security alignment with Washington to the extent that South Korean policy makers speak of their country’s relationship as being primarily rooted toward China in the economic realm and toward the United States in the security sphere. These spheres, however, are not entirely mutually exclusive, for as long as China–ROK ties in the security field remain affected by Sino–US tensions in the military and security sphere, other aspects of Beijing–Seoul ties will remain stunted as well.²⁴ This does not negate the fact, however, that South Korea plays a crucial role in China’s ability to push back against the US’s attempts to rein in China in the Indo-Pacific. Indeed, China’s maintenance of solid ties with the ROK is essential for Beijing’s ability to execute its strategic policies on the Korean Peninsula aimed at fighting back against what it sees as US encroachment on its sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific.

THAAD’s Long Shadow over China–South Korea Relations

Just as deterring the longtime threat to regional security the DPRK poses comprises the mainstay of ROK–US security relations, the biggest issue in China–South Korea security relations is also North Korea. The nature in which North Korea factors into China–ROK ties, however, is vastly different from the Seoul–Washington defense partnership, given that China is apprehensive about the ROK–US alliance while South Korea remains concerned about the China–DPRK alliance.²⁵ Any South Korean hardline stance toward the DPRK has the potential to damage China–ROK ties. North Korea knows this and, with its awareness that Beijing will not punish any North Korean provocations, has the ability to sabotage any improvement in China–South Korea ties if it so desires by provoking the ROK.²⁶

Indeed, the fallout from THAAD—a system installed to provide defense against the DPRK’s persistent existential threat to the ROK—underscores the effects the North Korean security crisis has over China–South Korea relations, particularly as relates to the ROK-US alliance. While debate within South Korea over the appropriateness of deploying THAAD started off as a domestic issue within the ROK, it quickly turned into a crucial factor in Seoul’s relations with Beijing. Chinese defense officials raised the THAAD issue during a February 2015 conference in Seoul, with then–Assistant Foreign Minister Liu Jianchao again raising this concern during a visit to the ROK the following month. Seoul attempted to assuage Chinese concerns by insisting that THAAD was not aimed at China but rather was only for North Korean ballistic missiles.²⁷

South Korean lawmakers from the Democratic Party (then in opposition) later wished to discuss THAAD with the Chinese foreign ministry during a visit to Beijing, drawing criticism from policy makers across the aisle that it would set a precedent for China to be able to interfere in the ROK’s own policy-making process. Nevertheless, in the face of punitive economic measures with the tacit blessing of the Chinese government, eventually even Democratic Party lawmakers came to believe that China had used excessive force in trying to overturn what was fundamentally a policy decision aimed at strengthening the ROK’s ability to defend itself from North Korea.²⁸ All the while within South Korea itself, the ROK’s relations with China and the US continued to be a source of domestic debate over THAAD. Some South Korean opinion-makers accused fellow citizens who opposed THAAD’s deployment as being pro-Chinese. In return, opponents of THAAD accused those supporting the missile defense system’s deployment in Korea as being excessively pro-American.²⁹

China’s punitive economic actions toward South Korea during the THAAD crisis appear to have been geared not only toward retaliating against the ROK but also toward sending a warning to other countries about the dangers of aligning with the US in opposition to the PRC.³⁰ Nevertheless, for China, South Korea’s decision to allow the US to deploy THAAD aroused particularly bitter disappointment. Despite South Korea’s status as a longtime US ally, China has, since the end of the Cold War, viewed South Korea as being a potentially solid partner for the PRC. Indeed, Seoul’s overarching security policy emphasis on North Korea (as opposed to any real significant wariness over China’s military rise) as well as shared skepticism between Beijing and Seoul over Japanese remilitarization fostered a feeling among some of Beijing’s foreign-policy elite that Seoul’s strategic worldview was not entirely incompatible with Beijing’s. The ROK’s decision to host THAAD, however, caused policy makers in Beijing to view South Korea as having stabbed it in the back.³¹

The worsening of China–ROK relations due to THAAD had negative effects on both Beijing’s and Seoul’s interests. For China, cooled ties with South Korea ran counter to Beijing’s interest in maintaining favorable relations with countries along its periphery, in particular Beijing’s bid to turn the ROK into the pivotal state of its Northeast Asia policy. From Seoul’s end, THAAD sharpened the sense that South Korea’s security relationship with the US, which fundamentally contradicts Chinese interests, puts the ROK in a bind where balancing between China and the US is concerned.³²

As such, the Moon Jae-in administration set out to implement a “reset” in China–South Korea relations.³³ Given that South Korea’s ultimate decision to deploy THAAD signaled a South Korean tilt toward the US against China, Seoul has arguably found it necessary to focus on strengthening its strategic partnership with China to maintain its balanced position between Beijing and Washington.³⁴ Yet Seoul’s best efforts at restoring ties with the PRC as a result of THAAD notwithstanding, a full recovery of China–ROK ties is hardly a foregone conclusion. Even as Xi Jinping had repeatedly expressed his will to visit South Korea in 2020, China–South Korea relations are still experiencing effects from the THAAD fallout.³⁵

Although THAAD demonstrated South Korea’s vulnerability toward China in the economic sphere, particularly as relates to Seoul’s security alignment with the US, South Korea has an acute sense of how China’s strategic enmity with the US can affect the ROK’s own interests beyond the scope of mere economic suffering. Particularly with the peaceful unification of the Korean Peninsula at front-and-center of South Korea’s foreign-policy interests, one of the most pressing questions regarding South Korea’s position between Beijing and Washington is whether Seoul can reach an understanding with China over the future of a reunified Korea while maintaining solid security ties with the US for the purpose of deterring a conventional attack from North Korea.³⁶ To achieve this, South Korea cannot afford to be seen as being willing to participate in US-led initiatives aimed at containing China given Beijing’s pervasive sensitivity to how South Korea–US security cooperation allows the US to project power too close for Beijing’s comfort in proximity to the PRC’s periphery.

South Korea between China and the US: Views from Washington, Beijing, and Seoul

The US, for its part, must contend with South Korea’s current unwillingness to fully endorse the US’s *Indo-Pacific Strategy*. For decades, policy makers in the US have too often assumed that the ROK will take their side and have failed to ap-

preciate the fact that policy positions that were unthinkable even up until relatively recently have now entered mainstream policy debates in South Korea.³⁷

Washington views China's drive for enhanced ties with South Korea as being part of a bid to undermine the ROK-US alliance. Jung Pak, currently the US deputy assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, has recently argued, for example, that China wishes to undermine the ROK-US alliance given its designated role as the "linchpin" of the US's *Indo-Pacific Strategy*,³⁸ conceivably through a combination of public assurances and private threats.³⁹ Even so, despite the ROK's hesitancy to sign onto Washington's strategic ambitions against the PRC, policy makers in Washington appear to be attempting to take the ROK-US alliance in a direction that will make it a component of its strategic standoff with Beijing. In recent years, the US government has implemented numerous laws and policies aimed at solidifying South Korea's position as a crucial partner in Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy, such as the Asia Security Reassurance Act of 2018 as well as the most recent iterations of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) 2020. Such policies, however, appear to be out of touch with the reality that Seoul has not fully bought into the US's strategic interests.⁴⁰

Regarding public pronouncements from Beijing, rather than outright advocating for a 180-degree shift in South Korea's foreign-policy orientation away from the US toward China, several prominent voices in China's foreign-policy community, ranging from practitioners to academics at elite state-funded universities have advocated for the ROK to occupy a sort of middle ground between the PRC and the United States.⁴¹ Such views align in many ways with the views of South Korean policy makers working at the highest levels of government. Moon Chung-in, who served as ROK presidential national security adviser until February 2021, has asserted that South Korea should not perceive China as a threat and as such there is no merit for South Korea in aligning itself with the US against China.⁴² Seoul's current track of "strategic ambiguity," however, has prompted criticism from a number of high-profile detractors of the current left-of-center Moon Jae-in administration, who say that the Blue House's timid approach to China comes at the detriment of relations with Washington.⁴³

To be sure, even while Sino-US tensions negatively affect Korean interests, the ROK believes that it must be ready to promote shared values within the Indo-Pacific.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, despite South Korea's decades-long alignment with Washington in the security realm, the notion that South Korea need not participate in the Sino-US strategic competition is hardly a taboo in South Korean policy discourse that has traditionally been staunchly pro-US. A 2020 report from South Korea's National Assembly Research Service, for example, advises that Seoul must evaluate the direction of its alliance with the United States in light of

Washington's strategic competition with Beijing, particularly given the aforementioned US legislative efforts aimed at strengthening Washington position vis-à-vis Beijing.⁴⁵

Sino-US Rivalry and Its Implications for Korean Denuclearization and Unification

At the core of the debate within the ROK is how South Korea can preserve its alliance with the US while still preserving its own national interest in such a way that does not needlessly provoke China.⁴⁶ One area in which this balancing act has manifested itself is the question of North Korean denuclearization. The US willingness to negotiate with the DPRK over denuclearization affects the way the Korean Peninsula factors into Sino-US strategic tensions from China's end.⁴⁷ This fact, unfortunately for the PRC, has brought to light the underdeveloped nature of security relations between Seoul and Beijing, which arguably has a negative impact on Chinese security interests.

The 2018–2019 “era of summit diplomacy” created momentum toward a negotiation-based solution to the Korean security crisis and provided Seoul an opportunity to improve relations with Beijing. However, the ROK's insistence upon being at the forefront of a political solution to the Korean security dilemma has undermined the potential for China-ROK security cooperation.⁴⁸ Incidentally, however, South Korean experts also fear the ROK could be marginalized in questions of Korean denuclearization in the context of Sino-US tensions.⁴⁹

As the Korean Peninsula takes on an increasing air of a geopolitical battleground between China and the US, there is a risk that South Korea could be sidelined in the Korean denuclearization process, especially as the US continues to apply the “China responsibility theory.”⁵⁰ In this regard, Seoul's objective is to ensure that it leads denuclearization efforts, rather than an associate of either China or the US in a Sino-American strategic rivalry in which the issue of Korean denuclearization is but one facet.

In addition, explicitly supporting the American Indo-Pacific strategy could anger Beijing, which may lead to delayed reunification with the North, another significant detriment to South Korea's core national interest.⁵¹ In this case, as opposed to apprehensions about being sidelined by either Beijing or Washington, Seoul recognizes China's crucial function in the issue of Korean unification and is reluctant to undermine potential Chinese support for unification.

Perhaps even more so than in the past, by virtue both of its geographic proximity to the Korean Peninsula and its solid ties with both the DPRK and the ROK, China is indispensable to questions of Korean unification. Although the US of-

ficially supports a reunified Korean Peninsula,⁵² at present, the PRC's position on Korean unification—whether under Pyongyang's or Seoul's lead—is unclear. Views among China's foreign-policy elite regarding Korean unification range from those who believe unification would promote stability on China's periphery to those who fear the negative effects the PRC may be forced to contend with as a united Korea works out how to manage issues such as integrating the economically disparate north and south.⁵³

The lack of clarity regarding Beijing's views on unification notwithstanding, China has hinted in the past that it may not be opposed to Korean unification under Seoul.⁵⁴ Chinese support for ROK-led unification, however, would likely hinge on the condition that, at the very least, South Korea's pro-US orientation not undermine Chinese interests.⁵⁵ Considering this reality, if South Korea and the United States cannot assure Beijing that the ROK-US alliance can serve its purpose of deterring North Korea without infringing on Chinese interests, Beijing may eventually double-down on support for North Korea against South Korean and US interests.⁵⁶

Conclusion

The particulars of South Korean foreign policy are subject to change according to the presidential administration in Seoul as well as external circumstances in Northeast Asia's strategic environment. As such, the possibility remains that the ROK could conceivably find itself pursuing a position that inclines to a greater extent toward US interests against the PRC than South Korea currently pursues. Nevertheless, the ROK has consistently found itself pursuing increasingly intimate relations with the PRC even while maintaining a treaty alliance with the United States.

Even as Seoul has repeatedly acknowledged China's indispensability in fostering Korean peace and security, the fact remains that China–South Korea relations will remain in a difficult position as the Korean Peninsula takes on a greater importance in Sino-US strategic tensions. For South Korea, security relations with the US are ensconced in the principle of pursuing the denuclearization and unification of the Korean Peninsula while maintaining support from Washington to ensure the ROK's survival through deterrence against the DPRK.

The United States seeks to enlist the ROK, a democracy and adherent of the US's espoused "rules-based international order," in efforts to contain China. The ROK is unique in its position as being the pro-US half of a divided country, the denuclearization and unification of which Washington's rival China serves an indispensable function. While memories of China's economic retaliation against South Korea in response to the THAAD deployment may partially inform Seoul's

unwillingness to join an explicitly anti-PRC group of nations, the roots of the ROK’s reluctance to join in Washington’s bid to oppose China extend to the heart of South Korea’s main foreign-policy interests.

Officially, Beijing appears content to let South Korea occupy a middle ground between China and the US, even as it is no secret the PRC would prefer to see US influence on the Korean Peninsula diminished significantly. In contrast to the pervasive view in Beijing’s that the DPRK is a strategic asset (even as many among China’s foreign policy elite also view North Korea as a strategic liability⁵⁷), Washington does not necessarily view a divided Korean Peninsula *per se* as offering any strategic advantages as a component of a wider strategic competition with China. Nevertheless, at present the US appears to view Seoul’s participation in a US-led strategic initiative aimed at China as being more important than allowing the ROK to pursue a security relationship with China that may be to South Korea’s benefit. In any case, the Sino-US rivalry will continue to exert significant influence on China-ROK relations, in particular Seoul’s ability to pursue policies in which both Beijing’s and Washington’s participation and support are crucial. ❁

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