

# South Korea Seeks to Balance Relations with China and the United States

## Current Issues in U.S.-ROK Relations

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In August 2012, South Korea (the Republic of Korea, or ROK) and China celebrated their twentieth anniversary of diplomatic normalization. During the past two decades, the two states have advanced their political, economic, diplomatic, and cultural relations with unprecedented speed and scope. This development has been driven by expanding bilateral economic cooperation and its resulting benefits. Trade between the two countries has increased approximately thirty-five times, from \$6.37 billion in 1992 to \$220.63 billion in 2011. Currently, China is South Korea's largest trading partner and South Korea is China's third largest. However, underneath the surface of this relationship is an increase in South Korea's negative perceptions of China.

A series of bilateral conflicts and entanglements has served to increase South Korean discontent with China. These include:

- tariff disputes arising from Chinese flooding of South Korean garlic markets in 2000
- China's controversial claim to the ancient Korean kingdom of Koguryo in 2004
  - Chinese violence during the torch relay for the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008
  - the sinking of the *Cheonan* and the Yeonpyeong Island bombardment in 2010
  - Chinese fishermen's illegal fishing and the murder of a Korean coast guard in 2011
  - Chinese repatriation of North Korean defectors

- potential disputes over Socotra Rock in 2012

East Asia Institute-Asia Research Institute (EAI-ARI) polls reveal that in the context of these developments in bilateral relations, South Korea's public perceptions of China have been ambivalent. On the one hand, South Korea recognizes the growing importance of China for its future economic prosperity and potential unification with North Korea. Given that South Korea's lopsided economic dependency on China has intensified (a quarter of Korea's 2011 total exports went to China), and that Beijing has consolidated its political, economic, diplomatic, and cultural influence over Pyongyang, South Koreans clearly acknowledge the significance of building and maintaining positive relations with China.

On the other hand, South Koreans feel apprehensive about China's growing influence. South Koreans are increasingly concerned that China's rise will be a source of instability. Along with North Korean security threats stemming from nuclear weapons and potential provocations, South Koreans rank the issues of China's continued rise, China's military modernization, and South Korea's increasing dependency on China's economy high on the list of potential security threats to South Korea in the mid- to long term.

In particular, South Korean negative perceptions of China have been most conspicuously reflected in North Korea–related security issues. China's attitude in the wake of the *Cheonan* sinking and the Yeonpyeong Island bombardment in 2010 disappointed the South Korean public. In contrast to South Korean expectations, the Chinese government has consistently defended North Korea from the inception of these two provocations, seemingly without regard for the growing multidimensional exchanges between China and South Korea.

EAI-ARI joint survey data released in October 2011 reflects South Korean concerns regarding China's support for North Korea. According to the survey, the majority of South Koreans believe that China has invariably been closer to North Korea than to South Korea in terms of security on the Korean peninsula. As a corollary to that, 64.3 percent of South Koreans negatively evaluated the likely impact of China's intervention in the case of a serious internal crisis in North Korea. China's position in the event of inter-Korea military conflict drew similar responses: 69.2 percent of the South Korean public thought China would support North Korea, while 25.8 percent speculated that China would remain neutral. Only 4.2 percent thought China would support South Korea.

In the same vein, the survey found that a majority of South Koreans see the strengthened relationship between China and North Korea as inimical to South Korean interests. Over two-thirds (68.1 percent) of South Koreans hold negative views toward the China-North Korea relationship, while 19.8 percent

expressed positive views. The majority of South Koreans suspect China eventually plans to dominate North Korea, even though they simultaneously view China's apparent support for North Korean economic reform as beneficial. Given that unification is a core element of South Korea's national interest, closer ties between China and North Korea have been considered an obstacle to a South Korea-led unification process. On the issue of unification, 59.1 percent of South Koreans believe China holds a negative attitude toward its realization. South Koreans tend to identify China's support for the status quo as the rationale for its continued support of North Korea's regime survival. From a South Korean perspective, therefore, China has been perceived as an obstacle to unification.

China's rise puts South Korea in a strategic dilemma between the United States and China.

Traditionally, South Korea has been a close U.S. ally. The ROK-U.S. alliance has been a major factor in South Korea's peace and political and economic success. Due to China's consistent rise, market growth, and size, however, South Korea is increasingly dependent on China's economy. Consequently, South Korea has to dually manage its security, which is grounded in the ROK-U.S. alliance, and its economic well-being, which is dependent on the ROK-China strategic cooperative partnership. The South Korean public tends to favor the diplomatic strategy of managing both bilateral relationships harmoniously. South Koreans believe that it is against their national interest to promote one relationship at the expense of the other. The last two South Korean administrations have attempted to follow this diplomatic strategy by managing the two interactions cooperatively but independently.

However, sustaining friendly relations with both powers has proven difficult. Former president Roh Moo-hyun and current president Lee Myung-bak struggled to manage these two bilateral relationships and failed in their search for an ideal balance. President Roh, recognizing China's growing power, accommodated China and maintained some diplomatic distance from the United States. For most of Roh's tenure, South Korea enjoyed intimate bilateral interactions with China, but it suffered severely from the resulting complications in its security cooperation with the United States.

In contrast, the Lee administration made strengthening the ROK-U.S. alliance its diplomatic priority and advanced South Korea's relationship with the United States into a more comprehensive, multidimensional "strategic alliance." China has not responded positively to the Lee government's seemingly pro-American diplomacy. Although President Lee has consistently attempted to cultivate South Korea's relationship with China, the latter does not seem to recognize these efforts to build an entente cordiale.

Lee's handling of the ROK-U.S. alliance has weakened ties between South Korea and China. At the beginning of his term, in 2008, Lee unveiled his diplomatic guidelines to consolidate the ROK-U.S. alliance. While this gesture was meant to merely address the damage in the relationship incurred during the Roh administration, China's response was extremely critical. When Lee made his first visit

to China that same year, the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson described the ROK-U.S. alliance as a "historical relic" and treated it as a remnant of the Cold War system. A number of China's Korea specialists have challenged the Lee administration's description of the U.S.-ROK relationship as a "value alliance" based on shared political, economic, and cultural principles.

In 2010, China reacted strongly to the ROK-U.S. joint military exercises in the wake of North Korea's two provocations, and even identified the ROK-U.S. alliance as a regional security threat. Unhappy with South Korea's emphasis on its relationship with the United States, China has often questioned whether the South Korean government can possibly manage the incompatibility between the South Korean-Chinese "strategic partnership" and the ROK-U.S. "strategic alliance."

China's growing criticism of South Korea's relationship with the United States has triggered debates in the ROK about the future of the ROK-U.S. alliance in light of Chinese security concerns and about whether the foundation of the relationship with the United States lies in common democratic values or is simply a reflection of a temporary convergence of strategic interests. Advocates of the ROK-U.S. alliance argue that the bilateral relationship is based on shared beliefs in democracy and human rights and should not be viewed as a threat to China, while critics argue that strategic cooperation with the United States need not entail efforts to export values, which China may perceive as threatening.

As the South Korean election approaches, the country's presidential candidates—Park Geun-hye, Moon Jae-in, and Ahn Chul-soo—will have to unveil their respective policies on how to coordinate the ROK-U.S. alliance and the South Korea-China partnership.

The conservative Park is likely to emphasize the necessity of the alliance with the United States and partnership with China in order to achieve South Korea's national interests. Recognizing that Seoul does not want to choose between Washington and Beijing, she is committed to concurrently promoting the ROK-U.S. strategic alliance and the ROK-China cooperative partnership.

The progressive Moon will underscore a policy favoring Beijing, which will entail a greater diplomatic investment in relations with China than with the United States. Having declared his intent to continue former president Roh's legacies, Moon is likely to modify the ROK-U.S. alliance to alleviate China's chronic security concerns.

As a political novice, Ahn's foreign policy direction is still ambiguous. But given the ongoing discussion for him and Moon to agree on a single progressive candidacy, Ahn's stance seems likely to lean closer toward that of Moon than that of Park.

Although the South Korean public's general view of China has deteriorated in light of that country's

recent assertiveness, most in the ROK still recognize the need for China's cooperation in dealing with North Korea. Thus, it is certain that the three South Korean presidential candidates will emphasize the importance of China for the ROK. But it is also true that no candidate will refute the pivotal role of the ROK-U.S. alliance for South Korea's peace and security. Still, only Park seems to be navigating toward balancing relations with China in a way that will not impose limits on the ROK-U.S. strategic alliance.

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