

## **Will China's soft-power strategy on South Korea succeed?** by Sunny Seong-hyon Lee

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The pundits believe this is a honeymoon period for China and South Korea. Ironically, it is happening as Pyongyang has been ratcheting up its rhetoric and war posturing.

Many wonder whether China has finally lost patience with its intractable neighbor, North Korea, with differences between them deepening after Pyongyang's third nuclear test. Beijing's support for tougher UN sanctions against Pyongyang raised high expectations, especially in Seoul. President Obama also recognized China's toughened posture when he said China was "recalculating" its North Korea policy.

In fact, China's recalculation is more about South Korea. Amid China's rise and resulting geopolitical shifts, China increasingly sees South Korea as a "swing state" that can be won over by Beijing, argues Kim Heungkyu at Sungshin Women's University in Seoul. China sees South Korea as the "weakest link" among the Washington-Seoul-Tokyo alliance, agrees a Chinese analyst in Beijing. Taken together, China thinks it can work on Seoul to pull it away from Washington.

China has gained diplomatic currency from Seoul by more rigorously enforcing UN sanctions on Pyongyang. "South Korea was pleased with China," a Chinese interlocutor concluded. Seoul-Tokyo ties, a crucial element of Washington's Asia-Pacific web of alliances, have been troubled too by the neighbors' historical and territorial disputes. China, which has a similar problem with Japan, believes that Seoul is closer to China than to Japan.

China also senses that the Korea-US alliance is facing challenges as Seoul tries to reposition itself in the global order in a manner commensurate with its rising global status. In relations with Washington, that means Seoul's is trying to find its own voice. The dispute over the ROK-US civilian nuclear agreement, and Seoul's desire to produce its own nuclear fuel is the latest example.

China didn't miss Seoul's debate about the credibility of US deterrence against the threat posed by a nuclear-armed North Korea. It also noticed Seoul and Washington's differing expectations regarding the US threshold for entering the inter-Korean conflict.

While US-ROK relations are at a historic high, the alliance is evolving in a time of geostrategic and economic shifts in the region. Seoul feels that its alliance with Washington must overcome a "fairness" issue. Washington allowed Japan to produce its own nuclear fuel, but Seoul has

been barred from doing so. Washington shares intelligence with Australia on China, but it often doesn't do so with Seoul on North Korea. On several occasions, Washington even bypassed Seoul and struck a deal with North Korea, making Seoul nervous. Seoul's pursuit of the so-called "middle power" strategy and assertion of more independence in its foreign policy will strain on the Washington-Seoul alliance.

Meanwhile, China has been ramping up its charm offensive toward South Korea, one that is geared toward Park Geun-hye, the newly elected president. China's state media has given her a very positive treatment, hyping her ability to speak Chinese and her affinity with the Chinese philosophical orientation. China attention to details is impressive: When Chinese President Xi Jinping dispatched China's ranking female politician, Liu Yandong, to Park's inauguration ceremony in February, he made sure Liu visited Sogang University, Park's alma mater.

When Park wanted to talk with Xi to discuss North Korea, he readily honored the request. (Hu Jintao never spoke with Lee Myung-bak on the phone throughout Lee's entire presidency). A major publishing arm under the Chinese government printed Park's biography in Chinese with a lavish celebration. When US B2 bombers flew to the Korean Peninsula to participate in a joint drill with Seoul, the Chinese state-controlled media, which used to vociferously protest such actions, restrained from criticizing Seoul. Beijing's charm offensive toward Park is meant to influence her early in her presidency as she fine-tunes her foreign policy.

South Korea is recalculating too. Seoul wants to "work on" China so that China leans toward South Korea and eventually supports Seoul-led unification. The much-cited case of Deng Yuwen, deputy editor of the Central Party School's Study Times, suggested this effort might bear fruit.

Deng argued China should "abandon" North Korea in an op-ed piece in the *Financial Times*. He has since been suspended from his job for voicing a view that is apparently at odds with that of the Communist Party. Nonetheless, Seoul sees Deng's case as a sign of hope, reflecting an increasingly diversified debate in China over North Korea policy. Seoul is calculating that even if China doesn't immediately shift its North Korean policy, it could eventually. So, Seoul is willing to work on Beijing for the long-term.

So far, Seoul has been responding to Beijing's wooing. But Seoul has another audience in mind: Washington. Seoul hopes Washington notices the evolving romance between Beijing and Seoul and moves to accommodate Seoul's long-running complaints in their relationship.

For its part, China is curious to know how its charm offensive, including its toughened posture on North Korea, will influence Seoul's debate over whether to join the US-led missile defense (MD) program.

Perceptions matter in both a personal relationship and international affairs. A sustainable ROK-US relationship will require both sides to maintain clear expectations of the other's roles and accommodate mutual concerns. The danger is that while Seoul pretends to entertain Beijing's courtship to make Washington jealous, Washington may miss the signal. A couple who pretend to be lovers may sustain their infatuation, especially when one party is perceived as a rising star, rich and it aggressively courts the other. The courtship may even lead to unexpected pregnancy. The two then may decide to settle down. Washington should heed the writing on the wall.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.*

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