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Xi Jinping's visit to South Korea: Finlandisation or Crimeanisation?

By Sukjoon Yoon

Synopsis

The Chinese President's recent state visit to Seoul may presage either 'Finlandisation' in which South Korea shrewdly retains some degree of self-reliance by balancing between the great powers; or 'Crimeanisation' with Seoul's interests increasingly subsumed within China's larger geopolitical influence.

Commentary

CAN South Korean President Park Geun-hye maintain strategic autonomy between the two great powers of the region- the United States and China? As she received Chinese President Xi Jinping for a state visit to the Republic of Korea (ROK) on 3 July 2014, there were two disparate visions of regional security on offer.

The first is the US rebalancing to Asia, reiterated by President Obama in his commencement address at West Point on 28 May. The second is Xi's vision of a "new regional security cooperation architecture" proposed on 21 May 2014 at the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia – a group in which the US and Japan are not members.

Elephant in the room

Xi's visit has been seen by some observers from the US and Japan as a clear attempt to unsettle the US-ROK-Japan security alliance, with Beijing growing ever closer to Seoul, and both expressing their displeasure with Tokyo allowing the Japanese military to engage in "collective self-defence" by reinterpreting their pacifist constitution. The visit also represents a snub to North Korea, and a rebuff to its strategic ambition to be acknowledged as a nuclear power.

With the evolving strategic environment in the region, China and the ROK are upbeat about their strategic cooperative partnership, which continues to grow broader and deeper. Park's "Eurasia Initiative" which seeks to deepen South Korean ties with Russia, China and Central Asia, also fits nicely with Xi's new Asian security framework. But they should not forget the elephant in the room: the US is still pushing its Asia pivot; so how can the ROK and China avoid alarming the US?

Significant differences remain between the ROK and China. Firstly, after North Korea's nuclear brinkmanship, China may seem to be abandoning political support, but will not cut off economic support for North Korea lest this precipitates collapse and reunification. Meanwhile the ROK continues to rely upon the US for protection against North Korean nuclear and missile attacks.

Secondly, Beijing and Washington are pulling Seoul in opposite directions over the ROK's alienation from Japan. China wants a joint response with the ROK to Japan's ongoing militarist revisionism, and is keen for the ROK to play a big role in next year's ceremonies in China commemorating resistance to Japanese WWII invasions. Meanwhile, the US is trying to persuade the ROK to cooperate more closely with Japan through a new and yet-to-be-formulated trilateral security structure with the US. Thirdly, the ROK would welcome China as a responsible international stakeholder within a rules-based framework, but China's "core interests" which have previously only concerned issues like Taiwan and Tibet, have been extended to maritime sovereignty in the South and East China Seas.

'Finlandisation' of ROK?

Since the accession of Presidents Park and Xi, their two countries have enjoyed an increasingly comprehensive mutual partnership, founded on economic cooperation but also encompassing collaboration on cultural, scientific, technological, and environmental issues. For China, as Xi made clear during his visit to Seoul, the best option would be a one-Korea policy. Park, during her visit to Germany in February, pledged humanitarian support to the North Korean regime and pleaded for increased trust from Pyongyang. The ROK and China share an obvious interest in regional peace and prosperity, so perhaps Seoul should set aside the issue of North Korean nuclear weapons, for now.

From this perspective, it is time for the ROK to adopt a neutral position, and Xi's visit is an ideal occasion to declare that the China-ROK strategic cooperative partnership is of equal importance with the US-ROK military and security alliance. The ROK's interests would be best served by explicitly refusing to choose between China and the US, resulting in a pragmatic kind of 'Finlandisation'.

According to a recent poll by the ASAN Institute for Policy Studies, South Koreans have a surprisingly positive image of China, with the US only marginally preferred; and President Xi is their second favourite foreign leader, after President Obama. Since the Korean War, the ROK-US alliance has been historically defined as, and largely limited to, a top-down relationship between nation-states.

Or 'Crimeanisation' of ROK?

In contrast, the current popularity of China and its president among the people of South Korea represents a bottom-up force for strengthening bilateral relations. The US-ROK military and security alliance is about sharing burdens, yet the China-ROK strategic cooperative partnership carries no political baggage.

But is there a risk that by emphasising its cultural, linguistic and geographical proximity to China, the ROK may be subsumed to become, in effect, merely a peripheral part of the Middle Kingdom?

Its reliance upon Chinese markets and investment may undermine the ROK's will to adequately defend itself. The recently published Defence Reform Plan 2014-2030 proposes a military budget of over 7% of GDP to build a self-reliant defence posture. But this is unachievable, given the increased demand for social welfare and the need to make infrastructure investments to facilitate reunification.

Xi Jinping's new Asian security framework, by establishing a modus vivendi to allow the flourishing economic and cultural interactions to continue, despite the North Korean issue, could lull the ROK into downplaying the long-term consequences. For centuries China was a hegemonic power, and it aspires to be one once more. Who can prevent China's ongoing annexation of the South China Sea, whatever neighbours like the Philippines or Vietnam may say or do?

If the ROK simply pursues business as usual, and places regional security issues on the back burner, perhaps South Koreans will wake up someday soon and realise that they have become a tributary of the Middle Kingdom.

Ideally, the ROK should not have to choose between 'Finlandisation' and 'Crimeanisation', but these may be the only options available. The ROK and China are both admired for their economic "miracles", and other countries of the region that wish to emulate their success but face a similar security dilemma to South Korea's will be paying close attention.

Can the ROK let down the US gracefully, without giving undue offence? Whatever happens, the continuing evolution of relations between the ROK and China will have wide-ranging ramifications throughout East Asia.

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