

The ROK adrift? Not quite. by Brad Glosserman and Akira Igata

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SEOUL: Nothing inflames South Korean sensitivities these days like the claim that Seoul is moving into China's orbit, a charge that is made with increasing frequency in Tokyo and in Washington. Korean interlocutors counter that South Korean outreach to China is just that – outreach, not a repositioning – and reflects tactical considerations about the best way to deal with North Korea. More significantly, they insist that successful engagement with China requires a strong US-ROK alliance. Seoul is not turning its back on the United States.

It's not hard to make the case that Korea is reorienting toward China. There is President Park Geun-hye's personal relationship with Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping – they have met six times over the past two and a half years – and her trips to Beijing, most recently her attendance at the Sept. 3 military parade in Beijing to celebrate the end of World War II, during which she praised China's "constructive role in defusing [recent] tensions on the Korean Peninsula"; the convergence of thinking between Seoul and Beijing when dealing with Japan and its "revisionist" views toward history; the growing economic relationship between the two countries (China is South Korea's number one trade partner); Seoul's readiness to finalize its FTA with China and to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) while refusing to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations; and the perceived reluctance to accept the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system, a position that aligns with Chinese preferences.

Public opinion polls validate the drift hypothesis. [In a Japan-US-China-ROK quadrilateral opinion poll](#) conducted earlier this year, the answers by ROK respondents to questions of strategic significance were often closer to that of China than the US and Japan. For instance, large majorities of Chinese (90.1 percent) and Koreans (70.6 percent) thought that China is a country that would deal responsibly with world problems, while only a minority of Americans (34 percent) and Japanese (14.9 percent) felt this way. Over 70 percent of American and Japanese respondents back Japan's UNSC bid, but only a fraction of Koreans (19.2 percent) and Chinese (8.5 percent) are in favor. A common feature of these and many other answers in this poll is the alignment of China and the ROK on the one side and the US and Japan on the other.

The conclusion that critics draw is damning. Seoul, which has historically "bandwagoned" with Asia's dominant power,

is reading the winds and anticipates a shift in the region's balance of power.

They are wrong. While there is no missing China's growing power and reach in Asia, and its increasing importance to the ROK economy, South Korean officials and analysts remain deeply suspicious of Beijing's intentions, worried and irritated by its heavy-handed and imperious behavior, and committed to their alliance with the United States.

In recent meetings in Seoul (and numerous conversations over the last year), Korean interlocutors emphasized concerns over China's intentions. They point to the inclusion of Korean territory – Jeodo island – when Beijing declared its East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone in 2013. They bristle at Chinese calls for both Koreas "to act responsibly" when only Pyongyang threatens regional stability. There is still considerable anger over Beijing's hesitation to extend condolences to the South when the ROK Navy ship *Cheonan* was sunk by North Korea. In one meeting, a Blue House official was visibly angry, insisting that China cannot be trusted and enumerated a long list of offenses for which Beijing owes Korea an apology.

While acknowledging that Korea and China share grievances against Japan for its aggression in the past, Korean officials and security specialists promise that they will not "be used" – their language – by Beijing as part of an anti-Japan campaign. "We are too smart for that." They explain Seoul's hesitance to join the TPP as the [product of limited diplomatic resources](#) – the government is working on other trade deals – and the fact that Korea has free trade agreements with 10 of the TPP's 12 members, and one of those – the Korea-US FTA – already embodied the "gold standard" TPP seeks to create.

Finally, Koreans understand that it is their alliance with the US that gives Seoul credibility in China's eyes. The relationship with the US forces Beijing to treat South Korea seriously. Speaking to [military officers earlier this year](#), President Park explained that the Korea-US alliance, "the core axis of Korea's national defense over the past 70 years, will continue to contribute to the future stability of the Korean Peninsula and, furthermore, it will become an important axis for world peace." Significantly, she stressed that South Korea's "national security system [stands] on the foundation of a much stronger Korea-US alliance."

This recognition of the enduring value of relations with the US and the larger, existing constellation of forces in Asia is evident in opinion polls. The previously mentioned four-country study of public opinion shows similar numbers of Koreans (98 percent) and Japanese (92 percent) consider their bilateral relationships with the US either "very important or somewhat important." Curiously, a larger number of Koreans value relations with Japan – 84.1 percent call them very or

somewhat important – than Japanese value relations with Korea: just 73.7 percent consider them very or somewhat important. More Koreans (87.4 percent) have confidence in the US to handle problems responsibly than do Japanese (77.3 percent). It is hard to call this an erosion of the alliance, or a shift in thinking about the balance of power in Asia

If there are changes in Korean thinking, they reflect tactical considerations. The current government in Seoul believes that the road to Pyongyang runs through Beijing. The ROK government wants to use China's influence on North Korea on its behalf, to prod or encourage the North to resume serious negotiations and inter-Korean dialogue. It is likely that Seoul overestimates Beijing's influence over Pyongyang, but the policy is worth exploring. It is critical, however, that it be recognized for what it is – a tactical approach – rather than proof of a more significant and ominous development – the loosening of South Korea's ties to the US. The alliance and the larger relationship with the US remain strong.

Still, even if “just” tactical, these changes have practical implications. President Park's decision to attend the military parade in Beijing raises doubts among and alienates Japanese with pro-Korean sentiments. There is a real danger that this will fuel more “Korea passing” in Tokyo. Even questions about Korea's orientation give Japanese decision-makers pause and can slow the deepening of US-Japan-ROK trilateral security cooperation, which would be beneficial not just for the three countries involved, but also for regional stability. The ROK's decision to prioritize an FTA with China and joining AIIB over TPP gives Beijing greater leverage over the shaping of economic order in the Asia-Pacific. And finally, South Korea's apparent reluctance to accept THAAD may well anticipate its likely future position and US military planning may be increasingly constrained by Chinese opposition filtered through ROK concerns.

Regardless of whether the current changes in ROK's foreign policy are “repositioning,” “drift,” or “outreach,” three points remain central to this discussion. First, the US-ROK alliance will continue to be the bedrock of ROK policies, and it is inconceivable that South Korea will “fall into China's orbit.” Second, China's rise is likely to continue, which means that South Korea will afford China a larger weight in its foreign policy calculations. Third, changes in ROK policies may be tactical and temporary, but they have practical and negative implications for both the US and Japan. The challenge for Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul is to minimize those consequences. The first step in that process is an accurate assessment of what is in fact going on.

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