

## Assessment and Prospect of ROK-China Relations in Commemoration of the 30th Anniversary of Diplomatic Relations: On Foreign Policy and Security Challenges

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### I. Introduction

The Republic of Korea and China established diplomatic relations on August 24, 1992, and this year marks the 30th anniversary of ROK-China diplomatic relations. To develop Korea-China relations in a stable and sustainable manner in the decades to come, this article aims to identify major challenges in the diplomatic and security issues and categorize them into four areas: politics and diplomacy; economy and trade; military and security; society and culture. In terms of politics and diplomacy, the article focuses on differences in values and systems. And regarding the economy and trade sectors, it examines changes in industrial specialization in the ROK and China and their supply chains. In the military and security spheres, the article draws implications for the strengthening of the ROK-U.S. alliance and the ROK-U.S.-Japan regional security cooperation system. Last but not least, it examines looks into cultural spats between the ROK and China to draw implications for their future relations in the socio-cultural context.

In the 1980s, before the establishment of the ROK-China diplomatic relations, there were several occasions that required diplomatic negotiations, and Seoul and Beijing accumulated experiences in steering bilateral diplomacy which eventually served as a basis for the establishment of

diplomatic relations. The most significant events during the period are Chinese pilots' defection with their MIG-19 jet fighters on 16 October 1982 and 22 February 1986, the hijacking of a Chinese commercial airliner on May 5, 1983, the "Chinese torpedo boat incident" on March 22, 1985, and the drifting incident of a Chinese civilian vessel on June 17, 1986. Through a series of these events, Seoul and Beijing gradually built the foundation for diplomatic relations even before establishing diplomatic ties.

China was faced with international sanctions in the wake of the Tiananmen Square incident in June 1989. To escape diplomatic isolation, the Chinese government took a proactive stance on establishing diplomatic relations with Korea. And it appears that Beijing found a breakthrough in the Taiwan issue based on the "one China" principle, drawing some implications from the simultaneous admission of the two Koreas to the UN membership at its 46th General Assembly session in September 1991.

The various factors mentioned above played out with the end of the Cold War that triggered the rapid and dramatic changes in the global political landscape from the late 1980s, former President Roh Tae-woo's "7.7 Declaration," and his "Nordpolitik," culminating in the establishment of the ROK-China diplomatic relations in August 1992. However, there is still

controversy over cutting official relations with Taiwan in favor of diplomatic relations with Beijing. Of course, it is incontestable that severing ties with Taiwan was inevitable given the relationship between China and Taiwan, and establishing diplomatic relations with China was critical in a rapidly changing global political landscape and advancing the ROK's national interests at the time. However, some argue that the diplomatic actions taken by the Korean government were relatively inept compared to the diplomatic courtesy and considerations the U.S. and Japan showed in dealing with Taiwan, and this lack of consideration, which soured the ROK-Taiwan relationship.

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations, there have been differences in values and systems between the ROK and China. But as the U.S.-China strategic competition intensifies and the U.S. has been defining China as a threat to human rights, democracy, and the rules-based international order, the challenges emanating from such differences are looming larger. China would never back down in the strategic competition with the U.S. and in terms of the critical domestic issues related to the leadership and legitimacy of Xi Jinping and the CPC (Communist Party of China) such as sovereignty, territory, and unification. And for President Xi Jinping, it would be a sensitive domestic political issue as he aims to cement his third term as the CPC's general secretary at the 20th National Congress of the CPC, scheduled for October 2022, so Xi will unlikely make concessions to external pressure.

Therefore, the Korean government needs to first build a consensus nationwide on Korea's values and identities that works best for its people, and communicate this idea with China more clearly. On the other hand, the Yoon administration will have to select agendas after careful coordination with Beijing, utilize restrained messages and diplomatic language, and improve and capitalize on Seoul's multilateral diplomatic capabilities to ensure a smooth bilateral diplomatic interaction with China.

Korea and China have made great strides in developing bilateral relations across many areas. Among all areas, it is widely viewed that the most notable development has taken place in economic

and trade domains. Having said that, the three-way "division of labor" between Korea, China, and Japan is gradually breaking down, posing challenges to the trade and economic relationship between Seoul and Beijing. In the past, Japan with a comparative advantage in key technologies exported parts and materials to South Korea, which developed them into intermediate goods for export to China. Those goods were then assembled in China and exported as finished goods to the global market. The unraveling of this long-standing structure is prompting South Korea and China to compete, rather than cooperate across various industries.

This unfolding rivalry, coupled with the ever-intensifying U.S.-China strategic rivalry, has added uncertainties to the industrial supply chain that has linked Korea with China. As the rivalry continues to unfold in the technology domain, the Biden administration is gearing up to create the so-called "Trusted Value Chain" for key raw materials, energy, and high-tech goods with allies and like-minded or trusted partners while seeking to build a separate supply chain for cutting-edge products that does not include China. This is because the Biden administration is well aware of the military and security implications of the ongoing tech rivalry with China.

The Chinese leadership led by Xi Jinping, for its part, has flagged its aim to become technologically independent and pushed for the "dual-circulation" strategy focused on boosting domestic consumption to counter U.S. pressure in areas like economy, trade, and cutting-edge technology. To steer through this time of uncertainty, Korea must gain a competitive edge in cutting-edge technology, and impose harsher penalties to prevent tech and human resources leaks. On top of that, the Korean government should consider establishing a consultative body to regularly discuss a wide array of economic issues with China. Once formed, the primary focus of the consultative body should be on concluding the follow-up negotiations on the Korea-China Free Trade Agreement, which will provide an institutional framework for bilateral cooperation; seeking various opportunities to deepen economic relations; identifying and addressing the factors that could strain the ties between the two countries


in the coming years; and exploring ways to promote stable supply chains.

Since the establishment of bilateral ties, Seoul and Beijing have found it particularly difficult to advance cooperation in the military and security spheres. And the rise of strategic rivalry between the U.S. and China in recent years is making it increasingly challenging for Korea and China to keep their relationship stable. From China's perspective, there are many unsettling developments in the Indo-Pacific region - the Biden administration's recent drive to connect NATO members with U.S. allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific, coupled with rising tensions in the South China Sea and the East China Sea as well as in the Taiwan Strait are ringing alarm bells for Beijing.

On top of that, as South Korea's new administration seeks to consolidate alliance with the U.S. and to reinforce a South Korea-U.S.-Japan regional security cooperation, this significant shift in Korea's foreign policy is likely to present new challenges for the military and security relationship between Seoul and Beijing in the years ahead. Amid growing uncertainties, it is critical for Korea to reaffirm the stance it has maintained since the establishment of diplomatic relations with China: based on consolidated ROK-US alliance as the key pillar of its foreign and security policies, pursuing further cooperation with China. At the same time, the two sides should strive to restore and expand channels for strategic dialogue, and agree to hold dialogues regularly to ensure that both sides engage with one another through dialogue regardless of external circumstances.

Over the past decades, Korea and China have made significant efforts to promote cooperation and exchanges on social and cultural fronts, with these efforts bearing fruit across many areas. The people-to-people exchange between the two countries reached 10 million in 2014, and the "Korean wave," which charts the rapid ascent of Korean culture across Asia, has also received a great deal of attention from the Chinese people, particularly from the younger generation. But despite such developments, a series of events have heightened tensions between the two countries. In 2002, China launched the "Northeast Project" which attempted to incorporate parts of Korean history, the Goguryeo Dynasty for example, into its

history. This was followed by the so-called "xianhanling (限韩令)," which involved direct and indirect sanctions imposed by China as part of its economic retaliation against South Korea for the country's decision to deploy a THAAD battery on its soil in 2016. And most recently, spats over the origins of Kimchi and Hanbok fueled a fresh escalation in tensions between Seoul and Beijing. A flurry of social and cultural clashes has led to a constant increase in the number of Koreans holding unfavorable views of China, and such a trend has upset the Chinese public as well.

Addressing a deepening cultural rift will require not only a short-term solution but also a long-term remedy. One of the long-term solutions could be launching socio-cultural exchange programs to bring the Korean and Chinese youth together; governments on both sides could expand student exchange programs, initiate a new program aimed at fostering the next generation of leaders, and coordinate the exchange of young military personnel. Once formed, these programs should be held on a regular basis to allow groups of young people from both sides to meet and work on shared projects. 

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