



South Korea and China: A Strategic Partnership in the Making

by Alain Guidetti

Key Points

- President Xi Jinping's July 2014 visit to Seoul indicates that the strategic partnership between China and the Republic of Korea is moving forward against a backdrop of growing power competition and instability in the region.
- Both Seoul and Beijing have strong interest in close cooperation:
 - Beijing wants to prevent a full-fledge trilateral alliance between the US, Japan and South Korea aimed at containing China's rising power
 - Seoul needs Chinese support in its efforts to reach out to Pyongyang and work towards future reunification

The visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Seoul in July 2014 shows how the relations between China and South Korea have taken center stage in North-East Asia. Both countries are building up a growing strategic partnership, as a result of emerging cross-interests in the region and robust trade relations. This dynamic underlines the dilemma Seoul faces in maintaining a strong military alliance with the United States, while turning increasingly toward China as its core partner for both its economic development and its North Korea policy.

The international press has been prompt to make a point on the snub Xi Jinping's visit to Seoul represents to the DPRK, as it is the first time a Chinese President pays a visit to the Republic of Korea before having met with the North Korean leader. Indeed, Beijing has understandable reasons to be displeased with the behaviour of its ally and

the continued buildup of its nuclear programme that directly affect China's strategic interest in the region. The announcement by Pyongyang of a fourth nuclear test angers Beijing as well as Seoul and Washington. However, the significance of this visit goes much beyond the signal of discontent towards Pyongyang.

Indeed, developing the partnership with South Korea further is of strategic importance to Beijing, both in the context of its confrontation with Japan over regional leadership in North-East Asia, and because of the challenge represented by the US 'pivot' to Asia, mainly perceived as an effort to contain China. Already confronted with the military challenge of two main regional powers, it is a core concern for Beijing to keep the RoK at distance from Tokyo and Washington in the regional power competition.

A full-fledged trilateral alliance between the US, Japan and the RoK, as advocated by Washington, would substantially alter the balance in East-Asia to the detriment of China. Such an alliance would put Beijing in a defensive posture, while the US is rebalancing in Asia and Japan is striving to reemerge as a major regional security actor with its new born collective defense policy, at a time it increasingly sees China rather than North Korea as the major threat to its own security. Instead, Beijing calculates that a 'neutral' posture of the RoK toward China would be the preferable option. It would preserve the core, perhaps non-negotiable, interest of Seoul: the military alliance with the US for the deterrence of North Korea, while offsetting the threat of a potential trilateral alliance.

The red line for Beijing is that the South Korean defense posture is not directed at China, as it would be at least partly in the framework of a trilateral alliance, but remains restricted to ensuring that Seoul's military strategy is geared towards deterring the DPRK. The current debate on Missile Defense illustrates the dilemma for Seoul, which has to make a choice between developing its 'own' system (KAMD, Korean Air Missile Defense), which, as a deterrent against North Korean missile threat, would be Beijing's preference, and the alternative option, namely to join the US Missile Defense program (THAAD – Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) and the trilateral missile defense cooperation with the US and Japan. The latter is advocated by Washington but considered by Beijing as ultimately aimed at China and thus a direct threat to its own security. Xi Jinping's July 2014 visit is thus 'accidentally timely' in view of the planning of the South Korean decision makers.

The (re)emergence of Japan as a major security actor in the region accompanied by a tough nationalistic posture and the revision of its pacifist military doctrine provides Beijing and Seoul with a strong argument for a common approach against what they decry as the "revisionism" and "militarism" of the Japanese leadership. Seoul is cautiously maneuvering in order not to provoke Washington by conspicuously partnering with Beijing, as the absence of public reference to this issue during the Seoul Summit shows. There is, however, little doubt that Tokyo's inclination to revise parts of Japan's historic role in the region will further give ground to the Chinese efforts to consolidate the Sino-South-Korean approach to this issue and indirectly complicate further military cooperation between Seoul and Tokyo.

However complex the dialectic of the North-South dialogue may be, Seoul considers that its course passes through Beijing.

Besides the main concern of keeping the RoK from a full-fledged alliance with the US and Japan, Beijing has also to revamp its neighborhood policy that is seriously affected by the instability in the China Seas. If all neighbours of the China Seas have arguably some degree of responsibility in the multiplication of territorial disputes caused by various attempts to change the status quo, China is now increasingly seen as the most assertive in this dynamic. Growing into a great power, China can hardly maintain the posture defined thirty years ago by the late Deng Xiaoping to keep a low profile while building strength. Nationalistic

pressure and political dynamics at home pushes China importantly to engage more robustly in the defense of its claimed national interests in the region, even more in the context of new challenges presented by the other actors, in particular Vietnam, the Philippines and of course Japan.

Beijing's new great power posture, at the time of a resurgent Japan, comes at a price: the security situation in the region has never been more precarious since the Second World War, with the proliferation of maritime disputes, in addition to traditional conflicts and disputes on the Korean peninsula and Taiwan. Chinese diplomacy is facing a major challenge in striving to accommodate a friendship policy with its neighbourhood and the new constraints posed by a great power posture. Thus, developing a flourishing relationship with the RoK introduces a positive element against a rather confrontational regional landscape, as Seoul, though not an ally, has now turned into Beijing's privileged partner in East Asia.

The nuclear quagmire

For Seoul, developing a strategic partnership with China is a priority. This is the case in part with regards to its booming trade relations (higher than its trade with the US and Japan combined), but increasingly in the context of its North Korean policy and its deep expectations towards a reunification of the Korean Peninsula. The nuclear quagmire is the first obstacle. In the absence of any military alternative, the Six-Party Talks framework offers the only option to break the deadlock. A resumption of the Six-Party Talks would not provide any easy solution but it would open new avenues for dialogue, which in turn would also facilitate advancement of the North-South dialogue.

The problem is that neither Washington nor the DPRK are enthusiastic about resuming the Six-Party Talks, for various reasons. The US has more important strategic priorities in the region and no consensus at

home of an alternative to the “strategic patience” that imposes conditions to the resumption of negotiations; furthermore, it currently lacks the appetite for risk and initiative that would be necessary to engage again with what it considers an unreliable interlocutor. For its part, the DPRK benefits from said “strategic patience”, which leaves room to further develop its nuclear deterrent, without the limitations that a negotiation process would impose. Thus, there remain two parties willing to engage: the RoK and China.

Though its position on the conditionality towards dialogue is not clear, Seoul has little alternative but to turn to Beijing in search of a possible support to the resumption of the negotiation process. The South Korean diplomacy calculates that China, as the sole guarantor of the North Korean security and paramount economic partner of Pyongyang (with 80% of North Korean external trade) is the best lever to push Pyongyang towards a more conciliatory stance, be it a political gesture that would help to bring the US back to the negotiation table or a more amenable attitude towards bilateral dialogue with the South.

Over decades, the constant priority of China has been to secure stability and status quo in its neighbourhood, and to oppose harsh sanctions that would destabilise Pyongyang. Against this backdrop, for China, forcing the resumption of the Six-Party Talks by severely pressing Pyongyang to indulge is what it calls a “mission impossible”. Yet, Beijing has not given up and cautiously pursues various diplomatic initiatives to this end, perhaps partly out of the sense that China has to be at the center in case of a new momentum. Even if the status quo has prevailed for decades, the dynamic may change rapidly. Such would be the case in the event of a fourth nuclear test, a development that Pyongyang has already announced and which is likely to trigger strong international reactions, especially since a new nuclear test might decisively advance the capability of North Korea to develop a deliverable nuclear device. New sanctions will be requested that will bring additional pressure on Beijing.

North-South dialogue

In spite of its limited ability to move North Korea back to the nuclear negotiation table under the terms imposed by Washington, Beijing is expected to play a constructive role in easing the North Korean stance in the North-South dialogue. Seoul calculates that the Chinese influence over Pyongyang might make it more responsive to its own diplomatic initiatives towards the North and help create a climate more hospitable to inter-Korean cooperation

and the development of various confidence building measures aimed at improving bilateral relations.

Indeed, since 2011, the North Korean strategy of Ms. Park has been to develop a policy in sharp contrast to that of her predecessor. To this end, she set up a concept of “Trustpolitik”, aimed at engaging the North by developing dialogue and cooperation through a step by step confidence building process. This strategy, designed to incrementally rebuild relations with the North, is made conditional on positively evolving inter-Korean relations. It is also paralleled by the buildup of a strong deterrent against the North Korean military.

The problem with “Trustpolitik” is that it has barely brought fruit so far. The beginning of Ms. Park presidency, in spring 2013, witnessed one of the most confrontational periods between Pyongyang and Seoul against the backdrop of the third North Korean nuclear test and US-RoK military maneuvers involving nuclear capabilities in the region. Then, efforts aimed at resuming dialogue between the two parties faced considerable constraints and saw little progress until the end of the year. 2014 started under better auspices with an overture from the North Korean leader Kim Jung Un at a New Year speech. It was followed by the resumption of high-level dialogue designed to set the conditions for improving bilateral relations, and a first family reunion meeting in four years. But the momentum did not last and by mid-spring the atmosphere between the North and the South has returned to unpleasant verbal exchanges.

These developments have led observers to question the sustainability of the “Trustpolitik” approach. One of the basic principles in any attempt to build trust is indeed to pay particular attention to the messages one delivers to the other side, presuming that the latter will genuinely test the resolve of its interlocutor. A telling example is the very sensitive issue of reunification of the Korean peninsula, which has been at the core of long term strategies from both parties since the Korean War. It also features as a goal of the “Trustpolitik” of Ms. Park presented in her defining paper in 2011¹. The irony is that the reunification narrative has evolved dramatically over time and circumstances and has been delivered via very different messages. A prominent example is the “Dresden Speech” of Ms. Park, delivered in the former East Germany in March 2014, which refers to the German model of reunification. Put in the

1 Foreign Affairs, *A New Kind of Korea*, September-October 2011.

South Korean context, this model translates, however, problematically into reunification through absorption of the North by the South. This kind of unfortunate message does certainly not help the dialogue. Nor does the absence of further understanding on other important issues for both sides such as: new family reunion meetings; the restart of the cooperation in the Kumgang resort; and the development of humanitarian cooperation and further economic projects.

However complex the dialectic of the North-South dialogue may be, Seoul considers that its course passes through Beijing, at least to some extent. Ms. Park already expressed her strong conviction in this regard in her 2011 essay, saying that “China can play a critical part in prompting Pyongyang to change”. The “situation on the Korean Peninsula” figured at the top of the agenda of the Seoul Summit, and it is unlikely that the Chinese President encouraged Ms. Park to revise her judgment. Furthermore, the various diplomatic efforts undertaken by Beijing despite tense relations with Pyongyang highlight its commitments even without tangible outcomes.

There is ample space for the strategic partnership between Beijing and Seoul to further consolidate, as witnessed by the Seoul Summit. The pace of its development will be in part defined by the room of maneuver that Seoul can manage, between its need of US security guarantees, on the one hand, and its expectations towards Beijing in terms of North Korea related policy prospects and economic potential, on the other. The first variable is Beijing and its capacity to persuade Pyongyang to follow a more cooperative course with Seoul. The more China can do in this respect, the more it will be able to influence Seoul in its security choices towards Washington. Another variable is Japan, whose regional power policy will impact both Chinese and Korean strategies. The more

nationalistic and militarist its posture, the more it will advance the Sino-South Korean partnership.

Clearly, there are substantial limitations in the capacity of Beijing to influence the DPRK policies. Positive incentives, such as economic assistance, have proved of limited efficiency in restraining missile and nuclear programs or improving the North-South dialogue. Negative incentives, such as economic pressures face strong North Korean resilience, and Beijing does not want to risk instability with tough measures. Yet there is still room for action, as Seoul is obviously convinced.

Besides, part of the South Korean electorate is weary of the growing power of China. The threat perception is a very fluid notion, and there is little doubt that this perception is partly based on the current instability in the China Seas, in addition to the support granted by Beijing to the DPRK. Would China further strengthen its partnership with Seoul and be able to persuade Pyongyang to engage more consistently with Seoul, by sponsoring North-South rapprochement and other initiatives enhancing cooperation, this perception might substantially change. In this area too, there is much room for maneuver. Close economic ties also help to enhance a positive perception towards China, and the series of economic and financial agreements signed during the Seoul Summit can only contribute to this end.

In conclusion, as experience shows in Asia, strategic shifts do not necessarily translate in abrupt changes. They rather grow through gradual, and sometimes rapid, transformation. The building of the strategic partnership between China and the RoK is certainly part of the current transformation of the East-Asian order, to which China plays the big part.

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NB: This paper is solely the opinion of the author and does not necessarily reflect the official view of the GCSP.

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