



Towards a “New Normal”: Explaining Developments in South Korea- China Relations

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South Korean President Moon Jae-in made his first state visit to China during December 13-16, 2017. The visit came at a critical juncture in South Korea-China relations which has been strained following Seoul’s decision to deploy THAAD missile defence system in July 2016. Seoul and Beijing reached an agreement on October 31, 2017, to swiftly bring bilateral exchanges and cooperation in all areas back on a "normal track". In this context, President Moon’s visit was a diplomatic follow-up in normalising the bilateral relation. However, the manner in which the visit was hurried at the risk of failure indicates Seoul’s urgency in mending ties with Beijing. The main reason for the rush was the winter Olympics in South Korea in February 2018. President Moon saw the Olympics as an opportunity for a diplomatic breakthrough in inter-Korean relations and to reduce tension in the Korean peninsula. On the background of President Moon’s China visit, the article explains recent developments in South Korea-China relations and its implication for the region.

Moon-Xi Summit

During his visit, President Moon had his third summit with President Xi Jinping. They met previously on the sidelines of the Hamburg G20 summit in July 2017, and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum in Danang, Vietnam in November 2017.

Ahead of his visit President Moon declared that his primary goal was to “restore trust between the two countries and open a new era for the South Korea-China relationship.” “Restoring trust” from Seoul’s perspective meant bridging differences between the two countries on THAAD by convincing Beijing that the deployment is targeted only on North Korea and in no way a challenge to China’s security. A diplomatic breakthrough was achieved with October 31st joint statement. However, the restoration of economic relation was overdue.

During the summit, Moon told President Xi that he “wish to solidify the foundation for a new era in the relationship between the two countries based on trust and friendship between us two leaders”.² In response, President Xi said "China-South Korea relations experienced a setback due to the reason we all know. I am confident the president's visit will be an important opportunity for us to improve our relationship by paving a better way based on mutual respect and trust."³ During his visit, President Moon also met Premier Li Keqiang. Premier Li at the meeting said that the "communication channels between economy and trade-related offices are currently suspended. The countries may restart communication channels and strengthen their dialogue in the future." President Moon said that his visit would “mark the first step in the countries' move toward a new era of co-existence”.⁴

According to South Korean Presidential Office, President Moon and President Xi “completely overcame the awkwardness over the issue of THAAD. Even though the THAAD issue isn't resolved completely, the frequency and intensity with which China raised the issue became markedly lower.”⁵ With an understating at the leadership level, Seoul and Beijing agreed to fully restore 77 channels of senior-level consultations, including Korea-China economic ministers' talks. President Moon and President Xi also agreed to set up a new communication hotline, to enable direct and frequent dialogue between the two leaders.⁶ Two leaders also agreed on four principles on North Korea; no war on Korean Peninsula, denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, peaceful resolution of all issues including North Korean nuclear problem and improvement of Inter-Korean relations.⁷

Economic agenda was top on President Moon’s visit. The President was accompanied by a strong delegation of 300 businessmen including top executives of Korean conglomerates like Samsung, Hyundai Motor, LG, SK, and Hanwha. In improving economic ties President Moon proposed three principles; strengthening the institutional foundation by expanding economic cooperation to new areas and industrial sectors, pursuing future-oriented cooperation including joint projects in third country, and expanding cultural exchange. The new vision was substantiated by a series of deals signed during President Moon’s visit. A MoU was signed to start negotiations on expanding bilateral free trade agreement to include the service and financial sectors. South Korea-China FTA, which went into effect in late 2015, focuses on manufacturing goods.⁸ South Korean Finance Ministry announced the agreement to resume high-level dialogue

to discuss financial and economic issues quickly. Agricultural Ministries of the two countries signed a MoU on animal safety and quarantine cooperation, which will facilitate information-sharing on the contagious animal disease.⁹

During the visit, President Moon also vowed to make efforts to link his “New North” and “New South” policies with China’s “One Belt, One Road” initiative. President Moon said, “I am confident a link between the One Belt, One Road initiative and New North, New South policies will lead to peace and joint prosperity in the region.” President Moon also called to build a “digital silk road” between the two countries to assist the development of their IT industries and fourth industrial revolution.¹⁰ On December 17, 2017, Beijing has approved the construction of three industrial parks to be jointly operated by South Korean and Chinese firms. The industrial parks are located in Yancheong in Jiangsu Province, Yantai in Shandong Province and Huizhou in Guangdong Province.¹¹ These projects are also being promoted as the Soul-Beijing cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative.

During the visit, President Moon also focused on promoting Pyeongchang Winter Olympics and sought President Xi’s support in using the sports event as an opportunity to make a breakthrough in inter-Korean relations and to reduce tension in the Korean peninsula. Both leaders in this direction agreed to make concerted effort to encourage North Korean participation in the Pyeongchang Games.¹²

President Moon’s visit was an important step in restoring South Korea-China relations at the official level. However, visit also witnessed events that undercut the image between the two countries. South Korean media claimed that China was disrespectful towards their president and was also angered by an incident involving the assault of a Korean journalist by Chinese security guard. On his arrival, President Moon was received by a vice-ministerial level foreign ministry official and was not invited to a customary lunch with Chinese Premier. Korean media called these two incidents as a snub. They compared President Moon’s visit to that of the President of the Philippines Rodrigo Duterte, who was received by Foreign Minister Wang Yi. Against the Korean media claim, it was argued that these incidents were the result of inadequate preparation by Seoul. President Moon’s visit coincided with the 80th anniversary of the Nanjing Massacre.

On the economic front, President Moon was successful in resuming projects that have been stalled and managed to initiate some new projects. However, the visit could not convince Beijing to remove the ban on the tourism sector completely. The absence of joint statement and joint press conference suggest that the difference between the two countries on THAAD persist. Agreement on the four principles on North Korea was a significant political gesture which highlighted the shared perspective. However, these are positions that the Chinese leaders have been repeating since the first nuclear crisis in the mid-1990s. The visit could not produce any

specific plans to resolve the North Korean threat nor could persuade Beijing to get along with Seoul's "maximum pressure" campaign. It was speculated that President Moon would request China to do more specifically asking to stop oil supply. In fact, Beijing stopped Seoul from making such a demand before the visit. Two days before President Moon's visit Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said: "China will not support or accept the demands of any party that are inconsistent with the resolutions or measures that go beyond the resolutions."¹³

Developments in South Korea-China Relations

In August 2017 South Korea and China celebrated the 25th anniversary of their diplomatic normalisation. In the last quarter of a century, South Korea-China relations have come a long way. Bilateral trade reached a record figure of US\$ 240 billion in 2017. South Korea's trade with China exceeds its combined trade with US and Japan, second and third largest trade partners.¹⁴ China has become the top destination for South Korean investment, with a total stock at about \$52 billion.¹⁵ The political relation between the two countries reached a high when former South Korean President Park Geun-hye attended China's military parade commemorating the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II in September 2015.¹⁶

Until the fifth nuclear test of North Korea in January 2016 South Korea and China maintained good relations. Following the nuclear test, President Park stated that Seoul would review its position on THAAD "solely based on our security and national interests".¹⁷ Previously Seoul reassured Beijing by maintaining "three No's"- there had been no request, no consultation, and no decision regarding the THAAD between the US and South Korea.¹⁸ On July 8, Seoul announced its decision to deploy THAAD by stating it as a "defence measure to protect the people of South Korea and the armed forces of the South Korea-U.S. alliance."¹⁹ Taking account of Beijing's concern Seoul stressed that it "will focus only on the threats from North Korea and will not be used against a third party".²⁰ Within one hour of South Korea's announcement, China's foreign ministry expressed "strong discontent and firm opposition," and summoned Seoul's ambassador to China. Beijing stated that if the system is deployed, it will "seriously" impair China's strategic interests and the security balance in Northeast Asia, and warned Seoul that the action "could destroy (Seoul-Beijing) bilateral relations in an instant".²¹

Notwithstanding Beijing's strong protest, Seoul went ahead with the deployment at a site provided by South Korean conglomerate Lotte.²² Lotte's decision to provide land for the deployment angered Beijing. It responded by conducting a tax probe as well as safety and sanitary checks into Lotte Group's units in China. In the following months, 87 out of Lotte's 112 hypermarket stores in China were shut down, and its mega-construction projects were stalled. According to a report, the South Korean conglomerate suffered \$2.2 billion in losses. In September 2017, Lotte announced that it is planning to sell off its local chain in China.²³

As Seoul continued with the deployment of THAAD in 2017 Beijing responded by imposing “informal” sanctions on the entertainment and tourism industries and “informal” penalties on South Korean consumer goods companies. The Hyundai Research Institute, estimated the Chinese sanctions cost a loss of 8.5 trillion won (US\$7.5 billion) in South Korea’s gross domestic product for 2017. The sanction effect was hard on the tourism industry. It was estimated to have led to some 7.5 trillion won (US\$6.8 billion) in losses for Seoul’s tourism industry.²⁴ Since March 2017 China banned the sale of group tours to Seoul.²⁵ The number of visitors fell 3.29 million in the first nine months of the year 2017.²⁶

According to Korean government sources, the “informal” sanction also affected South Korea’s cultural content trade.²⁷ South Korea’s surplus in the trade of films, dramas, songs and other cultural content was US\$179.9 million during the first half of 2017. The figure is down 23.2 percent, or \$54.3 million, from \$234.2 million tallied for the second half of last year and a further drop of \$96.2 million from \$276.1 million reached for the first half of 2016. THAAD row has also affected South Korean investment flow to China. South Korean companies’ investment in China declined 43.7 percent in the first seven months of 2017. According to Bank of Korea, FDI totalled US\$1.75 billion in the January-July period, down from \$3.11 billion in the same period last year.²⁸

The use of economic instruments to build pressure on South Korea to achieve foreign policy objectives featured emerging aspects of Chinese economic statecraft. Beijing retaliation targeting tourism and entertainment industry was obvious yet informal presenting it as a reaction of Chinese public to Seoul’s action. These two sectors constitute only a small portion of the bilateral economic ties, however, gained significant attention in the South Korea media. By selecting entertainment and tourism industry and avoiding interdependent sectors of manufacturing, Beijing managed to maximize the symbolic and physiological impact of the sanction, avoiding its negative effect on the Chinese economy. In fact, the trade between the two countries has grown thirteen percent in 2017.²⁹

There had been a sign of improvement in Seoul relations with Beijing following the election of Moon Jae-in as South Korean President in May 2017. Two THAAD launchers were declared operational in early May 2017. However, upon assuming office, President Moon decided to suspend the deployment of additional four launchers temporarily on the grounds of pending environmental assessment of the deployment site. Meanwhile, President Moon made attempts to improve Seoul’s relation with Beijing by sending a special envoy to meet President Xi and through Seoul’s participation in the first Belt and Road Forum.³⁰ President Moon’s ambiguous position on THAAD created the opportunity for the first Moon-Xi summit on the sidelines of Hamburg G20 Summit in July.

However, on July 28, 2017, following North Korea's second ICBM test, President Moon reversed his position, ordering a "temporary" deployment of the four additional launchers of the missile defence system.³¹ On September 7, 2017, South Korea's Defense Ministry announced the deployment of four launchers for the THAAD battery, in addition to the two already in operation, describing the move as a "tentative" step to counter the growing threats from North Korea".³² China strongly protested the deployment and "demanded South Korea and the United States stop relevant deployment procedures immediately."³³

On October 31, 2017, Seoul and Beijing announced their agreement in a joint statement to swiftly bring bilateral exchanges and cooperation in all areas back on a "normal track."³⁴ Seoul and Beijing apparently didn't completely resolve the prolonged dispute over the THAAD, but said that "they will continue to find a solution through dialogue." According to the joint statement;

"The Korean side took note of China's position and concern regarding the THAAD issue, and made it clear that the THAAD system deployed in Korea is, pursuant to the original purpose of its deployment, not directed at a third country. The Chinese side reiterated that it opposes the deployment. ... at the same time, The Chinese side took note of the position stated by the Korean side (Korean Foreign Minister's Statement on October 30, 2017). The two agreed to engage in communication on THAAD-related issues. The Korean side again explained the relevant position that the Korean government has publicly revealed."³⁵

On October 30, 2017, Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha announced the "three no" position of Seoul. The "three no's" are, no additional THAAD deployments, no participation in the U.S.-led missile defence (MD) networks, and no U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral alliance. In doing so, she also said that "the 'three nos' is not an issue to which we have agreed to China ... We have just repeated and confirmed our stance that we have so far presented".³⁶

The understanding between Seoul and Beijing on THAAD and agreement to improve bilateral relations paved the way for the second Moon-Xi Summit on the sideline of APEC meeting in DaNang on November 11, 2017. During the summit President Xi said the October 31 agreement marked a "new start and a good beginning." President Xi also underscored the importance of South Korea-China relations, saying the conditions on the Korean Peninsula were at a "pivotal juncture".³⁷ On November 13, 2017, President Moon Jae-in met Premier Li Keqiang in Manila on the sidelines on ASEAN meeting. The South Korean leader told Li in a bilateral meeting.³⁸ President Moon told Premier Li that he "feel South Korea-China relations are now at a new starting line".³⁹ In response, Premier Li said that a "new horizon" would open for the countries' bilateral relationship.⁴⁰

Conclusion

The issues surrounding THAAD was a point of departure in South Korea –China relations and marks the end of the smooth sailing phase. The impasse on bilateral relations was not simply an aberration rather manifest a structural contradiction in South Korea-China relations. The structural dimension of Beijing-Seoul relation is determined by the nature of US-China relations and inter-Korea relations. The deterioration of either of the two will have a negative impact on the Beijing-Seoul relation, and the impact will be high when both are in decline at the same time. The THAAD controversy also indicates Beijing's increasing assertiveness on the developments in the Korean peninsula. The development has also brought out the high degree of vulnerability in South Korean foreign policy in the context of great power competition, which it has been managing quite successfully for some time by balancing its alliance with the US and partnership with China.

Seoul's delicate balancing between Beijing and Washington for its advantage has been quite visible from the way it managed to break the impasse on China-South Korea relations issue without entirely succumbing to China's pressure nor hurting US-Korea alliance. By announcing diplomatic normalisation between South Korea and China a week before US president's visit to East Asia was a definite step on the part of Seoul was a clear diplomatic manoeuvre to maximise its interest by being in between US and China. President Moon's "balancing approach" was also reflected in Seoul's reluctance in endorsing President Trump's "free and open Indo-Pacific" initiative.⁴¹ The "no war" principle announced between Seoul and Beijing during President Moon's visit to China was also an instance where Seoul has been relying on Beijing to signal its strong opposition to Washington's talk of the military option as a solution to the North Korean nuclear problem.

Beijing's utilisation of its economic lever to build pressure on Seoul also reveals the changing nature of South Korea-China economic relations from interdependence to dependence. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992, Beijing's share of Seoul's total trade has reached from four percent to twenty-five percent. However, Seoul's share of Beijing's trade has remained static around 7 percent. Seoul's export dependency on China is twice as its dependency on the US. South Korea-China economic relations feature an asymmetric level of dependence, where South Korea dependent more on China than China's dependence on South Korea.⁴² Another evolving but important feature of South Korea-China relations is the increasing competition between the two economies. Structural complementarity which facilitated the economic partnership between the two countries over the last two decades is fading with the transformations in the Chinese economy. With increasing competitiveness in the economy, Chinese companies have emerged to become rivals to Korean companies in both domestic and

international market.⁴³ China's economic coercion has forced Seoul to fundamentally rethink about its China strategy and altered its perception of China. Seoul has been lately adopted a diversification strategy to avoid economic over-dependence on China. A key to this move is President Moon's 'New South Policy' with an emphasis to push economic linkages with ASEAN and India.

Though Seoul and Beijing have agreed to normalise their bilateral relation, the THAAD issue is far from over and unlikely to get solved anytime soon. While deciding on the return of bilateral ties to the "track of normal development," Beijing also maintained that its "position on the THAAD issue has been clear and consistent" and "remains unchanged."⁴⁴ Given that the issue is very much a part of domestic politics and a proxy for geopolitical competition, THAAD will continue to remain as a spoiler. The new context marked by heightened geopolitical tension in the Korean Peninsula, increasing rivalry between US and China and the fading complementarity between South Korean and Chinese economy, the bilateral relations between Seoul and Beijing won't be as easy as it was in the past. While walking a thin line between Beijing and Washington President Moon's attempt would be to avoid situations leading to the strategic dilemma of choosing between the two.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

Notes

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