

Deepening Korea-China Relations

- Session:** 1
Date/Time: November 14, 2013 / 10:40-12:30
- Moderator:** Choi Kang, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies
- Speakers:** Chu Shulong, Tsinghua University
Jin Canrong, Renmin University of China
Kim Heungkyu, Sungshing Women's University
Scott Snyder, Council on Foreign Relations
- Discussants:** Kato Yoichi, The Asahi Shimbun
Kim Hankwon, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies
Wang Fan, China Foreign Affairs University

Session Sketch

Session 1, titled “Deepening Korea-China Relations” presented an opportunity to review the past two decades of achievements in Korea-China relations, and what kinds of obstacles or challenges may lay ahead in efforts to deepen those relations. The moderator of the session, Choi Kang, Vice President of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, began by inviting speakers and discussants to address factors that would promote or hinder bilateral relations between the Republic of Korea and China, emphasizing that participants should consider difficulties as well as positive developments.

Chu Shulong, Deputy Director of the Institute of International Strategic Development Studies at Tsinghua University, began by observing that despite remarkable improvement in economic and social relations, the Korea-China relationship is lacking in the strategic and security dimensions. He argued that the biggest obstacle to the improvement of ROK-China ties is an increasing South Korean perception that the rise of China is a threat. To overcome these concerns and sensitivities, Chu recommended deeper ROK-China consultations vis-à-vis North Korea, closer people-to-people ties to develop genuine friendship between the peoples of the two countries, and enhancing the academic capacity of Asian nations to focus on understanding one another, rather than focusing on their relations with the West.

Jin Canrong, Deputy President and Professor in the School of International Studies of Renmin University of China, emphasized that when ROK-China diplomatic relations were normalized in 1992, no one could have imagined the success that the two countries would achieve in enhancing their bilateral relations over the following twenty years. Despite a worsening in bilateral relations after the North Korean provocations toward South Korea in 2010, ROK-China relations were again improved when China began making it clear that the

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denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula was the top priority, as well as Chinese leaders' positive view of Park Geun-hye's presidency, and the weakened European and US economies, which continued to bring China and Korea economically closer together. Jin argued that ROK-China economic relations will remain close due to continuing economic challenges facing Europe and the United States, the likelihood of North Korea remaining a challenge in future, and China's determination to establish a new type of great power relations with the United States "to escape the traditional tragedy of great powers," for which South Korea can play a positive role because of its close ties to Beijing and Washington. Jin concluded by cautioning against overconfidence and encouraging cooperation on issues of global and transnational concern.

Kim Heungkyu, Professor of political science and diplomacy at Sungshin Women's University, discussed the Park administration's pursuit of enhancing the ROK-US alliance, harmonizing ROK relations with China, and Park's trustpolitik in taking China as a strategic partner vis-à-vis North Korea. Kim cautioned against potential obstacles to improving Korea-China relations, including North Korean efforts to encourage a "cold war environment" in Northeast Asia, as well as the gap between South Korea perceiving North Korea as an imminent threat whereas China does not. However, Kim spoke favorably of ROK middle power diplomacy in encouraging greater regional cooperation. In order to deepen ROK-China relations, he recommended the design of higher-level strategic dialogues with practical mechanisms to address critical issues; the formation of a research committee to develop an effective regional crisis prevention and management mechanism; and that Park and Xi resolve ROK-China territorial disputes in the East China Sea.

Scott Snyder, Senior Fellow for Korea Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, stated that no more significant transformation in bilateral relations has occurred than that between the Republic of Korea and China in the past twenty years. He posited that whereas China's relationship with North Korea has changed from being based on a shared ideology to being driven by geopolitics, China's relationship with South Korea is driven by geoeconomics. He argued that further improvement in ROK-China relations will be capped as long as China prioritizes geopolitics and until China and South Korea can come to a clear understanding on both North Korea and the role of the ROK-US alliance. Furthermore, Snyder cautioned that a worsening of public perceptions of ROK-China economic ties may occur if trade surplus becomes trade deficit as China continues to industrialize; that differences in perceptions of end-states may arise between South Korea and China were North Korea to become unstable; and that challenges may emerge depending on how a unified Korea perceives its place between China and the United States. Finally, he argued that the ROK-US alliance need not inhibit closer ROK-China relations. He believes this is, in part, because the alliance has developed from being based on external threat to being based on shared values and how the two may work together toward regional peace and stability. He also believes that China need not necessarily be too critical of the ROK-US alliance because South Korea may choose alternative forms of hedging against the rise of China if the alliance did not exist, which may not be as desirable to China in terms of Chinese interests.

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Kato Yoichi, National Security Correspondent for *The Asahi Shimbun*, began discussions by highlighting that good relations between China and South Korea are crucial for Japan. He cited historical examples of the importance of the balance of power on the Korean Peninsula to Japanese security interests. He also highlighted that Northeast Asia is presently going through an enormous historical shift, in which Japan may face a strategic choice between supporting the unipolar US primacy in the region, or supporting a more multipolar regional order by focusing on ties with its neighbors. He cautioned that should Japan fail to enhance ties with the United States, this may leave Japan more isolated and focused on rearmament. On the other hand, Japanese efforts toward greater regional multipolarity may lead to regional instability should divisions between groups of countries in the region arise. However, he posited that the latter scenario is less likely, and that Japan should encourage closer ROK-China ties and seek to enhance its own relations with its neighbors through 2+2 meetings and comprehensive strategic dialogues to prevent unintended misunderstanding and regional conflict.

Kim Hankwon, Director of the Center for China Policy at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, after noting the “Asian paradox” of improvement in ROK-China economic, social, and cultural ties not having a spillover effect on security issues, emphasized that Korea and China should focus on enhancing mutual understanding and trust. With regard to mutual understanding he observed that while the average Korean may claim that Koreans understand China well, given the thousands of years of shared history, Koreans do not understand modern China. Kim said the same may also apply to Chinese understanding of Korea. While the two countries’ intellectual leaders may focus on enhancing such understanding, this is less likely to be so among the two countries’ publics. Second, with regard to trust, Kim argued that the promotion of trust between South Korea and China is necessary to develop strategic cooperation vis-à-vis North Korea. He noted potential for Chinese frustration with the unpredictability of ROK domestic politics vis-à-vis policy toward China and North Korea, whereas Chinese Korean Peninsula policy remains relatively stable. In order to accumulate trust between the two countries in the durability of each other’s policies, Kim recommended that China and South Korea focus on developing trust between the two countries’ legislative bodies, rather than focusing too much on national leaders.

Wang Fan, Assistant President of China Foreign Affairs University, stressed that this is a good time to develop and promote the further improvement of relations between China and South Korea, particularly given the normalization of China’s relations with North Korea—rather than treating the relationship as special—and the general positivity in relations between China and the United States. Wang first focused his remarks on how bilateral security relations between China and South Korea may improve while South Korea shares a security alliance with the United States. He believes that the two security relationships can coexist, but he believes the main question is how this can be achieved. Second, he argued that China and South Korea can further enhance cooperation on the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula by focusing on long-term resolutions, such as establishing regional security mechanisms rather than short-term concerns; by focusing on processes and interactions rather than defending one side or another; and by coordinating on the development of multilateral constraints and self-constraints. He concluded that new thinking on regional security

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dynamics requires new concepts and the recognition that everything in the region is and will remain changeable, requiring consideration of even the more unlikely possible developments in the region.

In response to a member of audience during the question-and-answer section, Jin Canrong elaborated on an earlier point that the media in China and South Korea have been negative in their depictions of Korea-China relations. He tied this observation to Kim Hankwon's point that better understanding between the publics of Korea and China should be encouraged, for which the media within the two countries could play a more positive role.

The question-and-answer session also included discussion of Park Geun-hye's proposed Northeast Asia Peace Initiative, which Scott Snyder highlighted as a potential positive development toward the creation of multilateral institutions in Asia, which had earlier been stalled after the stalemate in the Six-Party Talks. Jin Canrong stated that with regard to Park's initiative, China views the proposal favourably but would want further details before being able to clarify China's stance on the matter. With regard to the Trans-Pacific Partnership, Jin Canrong observed that though China had initially been hesitant, there is a gradually emerging belief among Chinese elites that the TPP will match long-term Chinese interests.

When asked why Japan is contemplating the development of a national security council, Kato Yoichi responded that while there is no particularly pressing reason for Abe to form such a council, it may improve US-Japan alliance interoperability if Japan forms a security organization similar to that of the National Security Council in the United States. Another issue raised regarding Japan concerned which elements of the Japanese government know Japan best. Jin Canrong responded that no single agency within the Chinese government understands Japan best, leaving Japan policy to be formed through of compromise among different parts of the Chinese government with no single group dominating the process.

Scott Snyder concluded his remarks by stating that a further deepening in the ROK-China relationship will be limited by three other relationships—those between China and the United States, between China and North Korea, and between North and South Korea. Until these relations become of less concern to ROK-China relations, Snyder concluded that the ROK-China relationship will not be able to live up to its full potential.

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