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South Korea Needs to Properly Respond to China's 'Five Points'

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This year marks the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Republic of Korea (ROK) and People's Republic of China (PRC). Since the establishment of official ties, the bilateral relationship has developed into a 'strategic cooperative partnership,' but there are cases that call into question whether China considers South Korea a true cooperative partner. One example is the recent Korea-China Foreign Ministers' meeting in Qingdao, Shandong Province, which is the first meeting since the inauguration of the Yoon Suk-yeol administration. Following the meeting, the Chinese Foreign Ministry posted on its website a statement that State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi had emphasized the 'Five Points' for the development of Korea-China relations.

The 'Five Points' stressed by China are: “① The two sides need to stay committed to independence and keep this relationship free from external interference; ② the two sides need to stay committed to good neighborliness and friendship and accommodate each other's security concerns; ③ the two sides need to stay committed to openness and win-win cooperation and keep industrial and supply chain stable and unfettered; ④ the two sides need to stay committed to equality and mutual respect and not interfere in each other's internal affairs; and ⑤ the two sides need to stay committed to multilateralism and follow the purposes and principles of the UN Charter.” On the surface, these Five Points appear to be the basic principles for the development of bilateral relations in general, but it is disappointing since it reveals China's unilateral and distorted historical understanding and world view. The reason why we need to take these seriously is that this reflects China's view of the Korea-China relationship as hierarchical and condescending rather than horizontal and reciprocal. Of all the countries with which we have diplomatic relations, there is no other country that treats South Korea as dismissively as China.

The first of Foreign Minister Wang Yi's 'Five Points' about "independence and free from external interference (autonomy)" is to criticize and to demand the dissolution of the ROK-U.S. alliance which is essential for South Korea's national security. In North Korea, media outlets such as Rodong Sinmun emphasize 'anti-imperialism and autonomy,' and Kim Jong Un mentioned "the dignity and sovereign right of autonomy of the Fatherland" when he congratulated the launch of Hwasong-17 intercontinental ballistic missile in March 2022. Since North Korea often refers to 'autonomy,' when China used this word, we felt as if we were hearing a statement by North Korea.

So far, the Xi Jinping government has been trying to reduce U.S. influence in Asia. At the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) held in Shanghai in 2014, President Xi Jinping outlined his 'new Asian security concept,' saying that Asian security must be "safeguarded by Asian countries themselves." Given this, first of the 'Five Points' about 'not to be subject to external interference' can be interpreted as meaning that the United States is interfering with South Korea. This contradicts China's own behavior of bringing in Russia, which can hardly be regarded as an Asian power, to strengthen military cooperation. Alliances are formed through one's own choice and in agreement with related countries to counter a common threat, not through coercion. If alliances undermine independence and autonomy, NATO member states such as the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Italy should be regarded as countries that have given up their independence and autonomy by forming a military alliance with the United States. But the reality is just the opposite. China claims it is not allied with any country but it is in de facto alliance with Russia and North Korea. How should one take this contradiction?

The ROK-U.S. alliance was created because North Korea started the Korean War 72 years ago. After the drop of two atomic bombs on Japan in August 1945, Korea was liberated from Japanese rule and had the opportunity to become an independent state. However, at the Yalta Conference in February 1945, the Soviet Union and the United States agreed to divide and occupy the Korean Peninsula to disarm Japanese troops. Following Japan's surrender, Soviet troops took control north of the 38th parallel, while American troops took control south of the 38th parallel.

In November 1947, the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution calling for "a general election for North and South Korea" under UN observation, but it was rejected by the Soviet-controlled North Korea. In February 1948, a resolution to hold elections only in South Korea was submitted and passed in the Interim Committee of the UN General Assembly. After the May 1948 general elections, the Government of the Republic of Korea

was established on August 15. The United Nations adopted Resolution 195(III) stipulating that, “there has been established a lawful government (the Government of the Republic of Korea) having effective control and jurisdiction over that part of Korea ... in which the great majority of the people of all Korea reside; that the Government is based on elections which were a valid expression of the free will of the electorate,” recognizing the Republic of Korea the legitimate government on the Korean Peninsula. Since then, Kim Il Sung’s North Korea had been an unrecognized entity unlawfully occupying the northern part of the Korean Peninsula.

After the establishment of the South Korean government, approximately 40,000 U.S. troops withdrew to Japan. When North Korea, equipped with Soviet weapons, invaded South Korea in June 1950, United Nations Security Council Resolution 84 calling for the formation and dispatch of a UN forces was passed. The UN troops helped the Republic of Korea overcome the crisis of being wiped off from the map. Under the flag of the UN Command, 16 Member States – the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, Greece, Belgium, Luxembourg, Turkey, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Thailand, South Africa, Ethiopia, and Colombia – deployed two million combat troops in total and five Member States – Sweden, India, Denmark, Norway, and Italy – sent 3,000 medical personnel.

After the outbreak of the war, in only a month, North Korea occupied most of South Korea except Busan, a southern port city. But the intervention by UN forces turned the tide of the war. With the success of Incheon amphibious landing operation led by General Douglas MacArthur, South Korean and UN forces recaptured Seoul in September. And they continued to advance north and reached the border with China and were on the cusp of unification. Then China began to intervene militarily in late October 1950 and dashed hopes of unification. During the three years long Korean War from 1950 to 1953, 140,000 South Korean, 37,000 UN troops including US soldiers, 140,000 Chinese and 520,000 North Korean soldiers died. South Korea’s civilian casualties were almost one million.

The ROK-U.S. alliance was formed with the signing of the ROK-U.S. Mutual Defense Treaty in October 1953 following the Armistice Agreement in July. At the time, the United States was reluctant about signing the Mutual Defense Treaty because it saw little strategic value in the ROK as when it had declared the ‘Acheson line’ in 1950. But it was President Syngman Rhee’s persistent demand that created the ROK-US alliance.

If China had not intervened militarily in the Korean War against the UN forces, the Republic of Korea, which was recognized and supported by the United Nations, would have already become an independent and unified country. It is rather unconscientious that China does not feel any sense of responsibility for the problems caused by the division of the Peninsula.

The second of China's 'Five Points,' which is about "each other's major concerns" appears to criticize the deployment of the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD). China has not responded to the deployment of the X-band radar – used with THAAD – in Japan but has insisted that the deployment of THAAD by U.S. Forces in Korea undermines its security interests. When South Korea took the minimum measure of deploying THAAD to protect its national security from North Korea's nuclear and missile threats, China did not accept it but instead unilaterally carried out economic retaliation against us. Given that THAAD is a defensive weapon, China's claim that THAAD threatens its security interests is difficult to comprehend. General Robert Abrams, who served as the Commander of US Forces in Korea, refuted China's claim by saying that, "China must explain clearly how a defense system such as THAAD infringes on China's strategic security interests" and pointing out that "rather China should explain the new radar and long-range missiles that it has installed that pose a threat to South Korea."

Foreign Minister Wang Yi's remarks on "keeping industrial and supply chains stable and unfettered" refers to the issue of South Korea's participation in the US-led global supply chain. With the United States trying to build a new and stable global supply chain, the Yoon Suk-yeol administration attended the 'Supply Chain Ministerial Forum' hosted by the United States in July and agreed to promote transparency, diversification, safety, and sustainability to strengthen supply chain resilience. The Yoon administration also announced that it would participate in the preliminary meeting of 'Chip 4 (Fab 4),' a U.S.-led semiconductor supply chain consultative body. China is pressuring South Korea not to participate in these new initiatives.

China proclaims "non-interference in each other's internal affairs," when in fact it demands silence about its coercive policy toward Taiwan and domestic human rights violations. As the movement to support universal values such as liberal democracy and human rights has intensified with the US support, the international community took issues of the human rights violations against the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, obstruction of freedom of navigation in the East and South China Seas, and pressure on Taiwan. But China has responded with the argument that this is an interference in its internal affairs.

Lastly, China's demand for South Korea to "stay committed to multilateralism and follow the purpose and principles of the UN Charter" also implies that South Korea should take China's side since the United States is a hegemonic power and China is pursuing multilateralism. China's diplomatic slogan has always been that the United States should be excluded. China's argument that the United States is a hegemonic power is not convincing for the international community.

The biggest reason why China's 'Five Points' will be hard to gain support in the international community is that, in fact, China is the one that is seriously infringing on these issues. China emphasizes independence and autonomy and insists on accommodating "each other's major concerns," yet it opposes THAAD which is an essential defense measure for South Korea's national security. It is China which calls for stable global supply chains while weaponizing economic transactions by encouraging domestic boycotts.

Even though it is a permanent member of the UN Security Council, China is the leading violator of UN sanctions on North Korea. When a World Health Organization (WHO) investigation team visited Wuhan in 2021, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus asked China to be "transparent, open and cooperate[sic], especially on the information, raw data that we asked for at the early days of the pandemic" in August 2021. China appeared to be reluctant to cooperate to solve humanity's common problems.

The second serious problem with China's 'Five Points' is unilateralism. China has continued its unilateral diplomacy, insisting that only its position is the most important and retaliating against countries that do not agree with this assertion. It took trade retaliation against South Korea over the THAAD deployment, and it banned imports of Australian products after Australia supported calls for an international investigation into the origins of 'COVID-19.' Even though North Korea has tested 22 missiles and multiple rocket launchers so far this year and even mentioned the possibility of preemptively using its nuclear weapons, China is showing an attitude that it is not interested in South Korea's security while emphasizing the friendship with North Korea. It also even supported Russia's position in its invasion of Ukraine. Chinese-style unilateralism in which only the values promoted by China are the absolute good and that the safety or interests of other countries are not important is embodied in the 'Five Points.'

The final problem with China's 'Five Points' is the problem of its attitude toward other countries. In Chinese, 'ying dang' means 'something that should be done.' This can be used

in a vision or statement when a country explains its own policy line. However, it is inappropriate to do so in a meeting or dialogue with other countries. Former U.S. President Donald Trump once said that President Xi Jinping told him during a meeting that “Korea actually used to be a part of China,” which reveals one aspect of China's current attitude toward South Korea. China's ‘Five Points’ is an expression of an anachronistic Sinocentrism that reflects the attitude of a suzerain towards its tributary state and is an act that leaves a scar on the 30 years long Korea-China relations. For the past 30 years, Korea-China relations have been based on shared interests but in the future they should be developed based on shared values. It will be difficult to expect this from today’s China.

The Yoon Suk-yeol administration has made the formation of future Korea-China relations based on 'mutual respect' as a major foreign policy task. In order for China to truly respect South Korea’s position, South Korea needs to properly respond to China’s incorrect understandings embedded in its ‘Five Points.’

It has been pointed out that China's attitude and policies seeking to change the status quo by force to create an international order centered on itself is arousing international concern given her similarity to Germany before World War I. China needs to reflect on what neighboring countries think about her and consider that over 70% of South Koreans have a negative view towards China.