



Political and Diplomatic Implications of China's Two Sessions 2021

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Lee Dong Gyu

Associate Research Fellow
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Background to the Two Sessions 2021

In early March 2021, the People's Republic of China (PRC) held the annual meetings for the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and the National People's Congress (NPC), known together as the 'Two Sessions.' The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) celebrates its centenary this year, which means that the Chinese government has to complete the first of its 'Two Centennial Goals (两个一百年)' of successfully building a 'moderately prosperous society (小康社会)' and also embark on the second goal of turning China into a 'great modern socialist country (社会主义现代化强国)' by 2049 when the PRC will celebrate its centenary. China's 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) also begins this year. In that sense, the Two Sessions in 2021 are particularly important for China which is at a turning point. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, left China in a difficult situation. Facing economic recession, the US's containment policy, and anti-China sentiment, at the Two Sessions 2021 the Chinese government not only tried to reinforce domestic cohesion and secure the CCP's legitimacy, but also expressed its will to actively respond to the US by reconfirming the 'One China' policy and emphasizing the development of high technologies and multilateral economic cooperation.

Implications of the Two Sessions 2021

1. Securing momentum for a restart by showcasing results

At the NPC on March 5, Premier Li Keqiang emphasized China's quarantine and economic performance last year under the leadership of the CCP. As stated above, 2021 is a turning point for China. To secure momentum for the new objective of a 'great modern socialist country', the people's support and cohesion are necessary for the Chinese government. The pandemic, however, shook some of the foundations of the CCP's legitimacy, such as economic growth and social stability. In addition, its initial pandemic response and strong social controls exposed the closed and violent characteristics of the CCP's governing system. Therefore, the Chinese government actively promoted its effectiveness and social mobilization capability. This is expected to be useful to consolidate the people's trust and support

for the CCP by indoctrinating the people with the idea that the CCP's governing system is superior than democracies and that the 'Chinese Dream (中国梦)' is achievable.

2. Strengthening political ideas by emphasizing national unity and cultural identity

President Xi Jinping emphasized national unity, cultural identity, and studying the CCP's history at the group discussion with NPC deputies from the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region and Qinghai Province during the Two Sessions. Also, he called for strengthening political education to teach a sense of community based on Chinese nationalism. Considering the situation in which China is conflicting with western democratic countries about some issues such as Hong Kong, Tibet, and Xinjiang Uyghur, Xi's statement seems intended to prevent secessionism among ethnic minorities and domestic disorder. Accordingly, it is expected that political education will be strengthened, especially toward minority groups and younger generations. Although this would play a positive role in seeking national unity in China, it will consolidate national sentiment among young generations, and may cause nationalist and cultural conflict with neighboring countries.

3. Increasing possibility of extending Xi's tenure

During the Two Sessions, the leadership and personal achievements of Xi Jinping were repeatedly emphasized, with his name being mentioned in Premier Li Keqiang and Foreign Minister Wang Yi's reports 12 and 15 times, respectively. Given the CCP's post-Xi leadership succession plans are unclear, it implies that his political authority is still unwavering and that Xi's rule is likely to be prolonged. Because this political conservatization can seem like a regression to authoritarianism, it would be unfavorable to China which seeks to transition into a market economy as well as for the CCP which has promoted the institutionalization of political power through intra-party democracy and rule by law. Nevertheless, the CCP seems intent on dealing with challenges facing China by concentrating political power in Xi and inducing the people's support, since the realization of the 'China Dream' is directly connected to the maintenance of the CCP's rule.

4. Reconfirming the 'One China' policy by revising Hong Kong's electoral system

One of the issues that received significant attention during this year's Two Sessions was Hong Kong's electoral system. On March 11, the NPC adopted the 'Decision on Improving the Electoral System of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.' According to the decision, a newly established candidate qualification review committee will evaluate the qualification of candidates for the Chief Executive, the Election Committee, and the Legislative Council. That is, the Chinese government will prevent in advance pro-democratic or anti-CCP individuals from participating in political activities in Hong Kong.

Like the Hong Kong national security law passed last year, the new decision will aggravate US-China relations. Despite this, by adopting the decision, China clearly expressed its commitment to maintaining the 'One China' policy. Considering the historical significance of Hong Kong, this decision aims to

garner domestic support based on nationalist sentiment. At the same time, China sent a clear message to Taiwan and the United States, since the ‘One China’ policy is also targeted at Cross-Strait relations. In this situation, it is of great concern that China has pushed military modernization to protect its core interests. This is likely to be a factor to increase the risks of potential armed conflict in line with China’s active foreign policy and US-China strategic competition.

5. Preparing for prolonged technology competition with the US by strengthening technological capabilities

In his government work report, Premier Li emphasized strategic science and technology capabilities and mentioned that the Chinese government will implement the Science & Technology Innovation 2030 project “just as a blacksmith in the past would spend years forging the perfect sword (以十年磨一剑精神).” China’s 14th Five-Year Plan also includes a plan to develop nine strategic emerging industries in priority areas such as information technology, energy, biotechnology, aerospace equipment and others. With the conspicuous US containment policy against China in science and technology, China seems prepared for a long war by developing its own innovative technologies. It is notable that the nine emerging industries are almost the same as those of the ‘Made In China 2025 (中国制造 2025)’ national strategic manufacturing plan. The problem is that China has at times subverted the market economy and clashed with other economies through its support for, and protection of, domestic manufacturing. This poses a risk that US-China technological competition and economic conflict are likely to deepen and expand.

6. Emphasizing multilateral and regional economic cooperation to respond to the US-led anti-China coalition

During the Two Sessions, the Chinese government not only stressed multilateral economic cooperation such as Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), economic cooperation with the European Union and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the South Korea-China-Japan Free Trade Agreement, but also mentioned China would join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). Given the Biden administration’s current moves to repair alliance relations and build an anti-China coalition, China appears to be expanding its regional influence by strengthening multilateral economic cooperation based on its economic strength. Through expanding multilateral cooperation, China can minimize US interference and expand its reach. Also, in the pandemic, China has extended its influence in the global community through ‘mask diplomacy’ and ‘vaccine diplomacy.’ In that sense, China will continue to deepen relations with developing countries and secure more partner countries in the current international order through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Implications for South Korea-China relations

It is notable that none of the issues related to the Korean Peninsula were mentioned at Foreign Minister Wang Yi's news conference, even though this year is the 60th anniversary of the North Korea-China Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty. This shows that China's foreign policy is focused on the US, and issues related to the Korean Peninsula are not a priority of China's diplomacy. That is, China is likely to plan and implement policy toward the Korean Peninsula through its relations with the US.

The South Korean government needs to recognize that the basis of China's diplomacy and approach to South Korea-China relations sits within the structure of US-China strategic competition. Firstly, the South Korean government should not expect that the improvement of South Korea-China relations will lead to the improvement of inter-Korean relations. China will approach Korean Peninsula issues, such as the denuclearization and inter-Korean relations, through the prism of US-China relations rather than to develop South Korea-China relations. In that sense, it may use North Korea as leverage to pressure South Korea's alliance with the US. It is time to stop rushing to improve inter-Korean relations and think dispassionately about the right direction of South Korean diplomacy amid US-China competition.

Secondly, the South Korean government needs to raise its voice about human rights in China at a time when US-China strategic competition is expanding into a values-based conflict and China is increasingly critical of democracies. This may aggravate South Korea-China relations in the short term, but in the long term it will be helpful for South Korea to protect values it has pursued and promoted, and to expand its diplomatic space in relations with China by strengthening solidarity with other democratic countries.

Thirdly, the South Korean government needs to expand its role in the region through multilateral economic cooperation. Multilateral economic cooperation in the region, such as RCEP, the South Korea-China-Japan FTA, and CPTPP, will give South Korea an opportunity to communicate and shape a consensus with countries in the region, as well as economic interests. If the South Korean government promotes cooperation with China based on consensus and solidarity with countries in the region, it will be able to secure diplomatic space even within the structure of US-China competition.

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(‘2021 년 중국 양회 분석: 정치·외교적 함의를 중심으로’, <http://www.asaninst.org/?p=79779>)