

How should we resolve tension with China?

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Witnessing China's reaction to the recent decision to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) in the Korean Peninsula and its aggressiveness in the South China Sea, we cannot help but wonder whether China is really a 'comprehensive strategic cooperative partner' for South Korea. Every day in China, talks are being raised about sanctioning South Korea over the THAAD issue. It is engaging in a show of force in the South China Sea and regarding the ruling of the Arbitral Tribunal in The Hague as "nothing but a piece of paper" (Global Times 2016).

It is as if the China we have seen over the past two decades, since Korea established diplomatic relations in 1992, was an illusion, and now we are looking at their true face. Even more disturbing is that China's aggressive behavior will likely intensify as time goes by. Contrary to their five principles of peaceful coexistence, China respects physical strength rather than international norms, customs, and procedures. It has taken what it wants by targeting the weakness of others. Yet when the other state is strong and China needs them, China has staged a charm offensive. In short, China's behavior has been heavy-handed towards the weak yet more acquiescent to powerful states.

South Korea should seriously ask itself how it is going to live with this kind of China. The answer lies within. South Korea should develop its strength to become a strong partner, not one that is weak and easy to handle, in order to manage the China challenge. Some

argue that if South Korea becomes stronger as a counterpart, the bilateral relationship with China will collapse and the fallout will be ours and ours alone. However, it is not only going to be about dissolution, confrontation, and conflict in South Korea–China relations when South Korea becomes stronger vis-a-vis China. Paradoxically, there will be more opportunities for collaboration and cooperation as South Korea increases its strength, and the chances for self-restraint and coordination will increase. China is less likely to mistreat a strong counterpart.

How, then, can South Korea become a strong counterpart? First, South Korea should overcome its “fear of China.” Having experienced a trade dispute over Chinese garlic exports in 2000, South Korea still fears Chinese economic retaliation. As the saying goes, Korea is “once bitten, twice shy.” But the South Korea–China relationship is now different from the time of the garlic dispute. As much as South Korea needs China, China needs South Korea too. It is still an asymmetric relationship, but trade interdependence between the two countries has increased consistently. Most of South Korean exports to China these days are intermediary products. If these are blocked from entering China, their foreign exports will be affected as well. Moreover, China is going through a period of slow economic growth, which means it will not be easy to retaliate economically as it once did. The fact that there is not a single word of trade retaliation mentioned in current Chinese domestic arguments about pressing and sanctioning South Korea is proof to this point. Of course, China can put the pressure on South Korea in non-trade sectors, such as controlling the flow of Chinese tourists. Such measures, however, cannot last long. South Korea should realize that these current conditions allow for greater confidence when dealing with China.

South Korea should also take greater precaution against overly emphasizing China’s role in resolving the North Korea problem. The more South Korea stresses China’s role, the greater influence they will have over peninsular affairs. China will then use this influence as strategic leverage against South Korea or the United States. Instead, South Korea

should think about “China’s responsibility.” That is, South Korea should point out that North Korea was able to enhance its nuclear and missile capability because China did not do what it was supposed to do and neglected the problem for so long. North Korea brought in their transportable erector launchers (TELs) through China. China is also not applying stringent economic sanctions against North Korea that might cause them real pain, arguing that such measures could harm the lives of North Korean citizens. Thus, South Korea should refrain from having inordinate expectations for China. Rather, it should do what has to be done for its own security and national unification in a confident and timely manner. At the same time, South Korea should ask China to prove itself as a partner willing to walk the same path.

Finally, South Korea should increase its strategic importance by strengthening and expanding its role beyond the Korean Peninsula to safeguard the peace and security of East Asia. South Korea has been passive towards regional security issues, often studying China’s potential reaction before making its position clear. As a result, there have been claims that South Korea is tilting toward China. Going forward, South Korea should express its opinion based on principles with confidence in matters of international norms. South Korea should not avoid or neglect certain issues because they are not directly related to it. Also, if there are regional countries whose role is crucial to solving major security challenges but have insufficient capacities, South Korea should actively support capacity building. It should live up to its national power potential and expand its multilateral cooperation in dealing with transnational human security issues, including environmental change, public health, narcotics, human trafficking, disaster relief, and so on. Contrary to popular belief, expanding South Korea’s role in securing regional peace and security reinforces its position in South Korea–U.S. relations. When South Korea can have a greater role in its relationship with the U.S., it will have a positive influence on the way China treats South Korea and increase the chance for better cooperation, not greater pressure.

South Korea should take this current situation as an opportunity to establish a new diplomatic strategy towards China. The new strategy should be based on confidence, not fear. South Korea should build a network of cooperation by actively engaging in regional affairs and increasing its level of contribution to resolve them. Through these efforts, South Korea will be able to enhance its strategic value in the region and utilize that strengthened position when engaging with China.

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* The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.

Reference

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