

Panel: China and the Two Koreas (Orchid Room)

Date/Time: Tuesday, December 11, 2012 / 15:45-17:00

Talking Points for: Chung Chong Wook, Distinguished Professor, Dong-A University

With the election only 8 days away, the situation still seems to be so murky that any attempt to predict the outcome may run a great risk of being on the wrong side when the winner is announced on the night of December 19th.

Fortunately, however, we have only two major candidates and their positions on the ROK-PRC relations do not seem to be starkly different, at least as much as those on domestic policies. With this disclaimer, following observations may be made regarding the Seoul-Beijing relations under the new South Korean government.

Firstly, the two candidates strongly agree on the significance of the relations. They seem to share the view that China is the most important trading and investment partner for South Korea and that the continuing smooth growth of the bilateral ties will constitute a top priority goal for the coming administration. Both concur that the bilateral FTA for which formal negotiations have started just a few weeks ago will greatly boost the economic cooperation between the two neighbors. This concurrence is in sharp contrast to the controversy over the ROK-US FTA.

Also, both candidates seem to entertain warm feelings and high expectations for bilateral relations. Ms. Park Geun-hye, the candidate for the Saenuri party, is known for her long association with the PRC including her role as a special envoy for Mr. Lee MB, the president-elect, to Beijing in January 2008 when she met many of the high-ranking leaders of Chinese Communist Party and the State Council, including Hu Jintao. In the past, and during the campaign, she often made remarks on the bilateral relations stressing their significance for the region and the Korean peninsula; the remarks seem to reflect her favorable views of the rising China and the positive roles it can and must play for peace and stability of the peninsula. Besides, she is known to be able to speak some Chinese.

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As to the other candidate, Mr. Moon Jae-in, he served as the chief of the staff to President Roh Moo-hyun whose administration had maintained warm relationship with Beijing, better than the one with the US. The majority of the officials serving in the Roh administration perceived Beijing in a term much friendlier and more benign than Washington. Many high-ranking officials in the Roh administration, including the president himself, regarded Beijing as a facilitator for reconciliation and unification of two Koreas much as Washington was largely viewed in the role of an obstructionist. Many in the current Moon campaign trail have served in the Roh government and are known for being ‘liberal’ to Beijing and ‘critical’ to Washington.

The Beijing-Seoul relationship, officially depicted as a strategic cooperative partnership, had to suffer a special setback in their cooperation over North Korea. The incidents involving the Chonan naval ship sinking and the shelling of the Yonpyong island two years ago demonstrate the degree to which North Korea has become an impediment in the bilateral strategic cooperation. The last five years of the current Lee Myungbak administration saw a strained relationship between the two Koreas. Meaningful inter-Korean cooperation and exchanges did not take place, limiting the strategic cooperation between Seoul and Beijing over North Korea. China, concerned with North Korea’s political stability at a time of power transition in Pyongyang, opposed Seoul’s efforts to penalize Pyongyang for its bad behavior.

Now, whoever wins the election in Seoul, it would be a fair prediction that the new government might pursue a policy toward Pyongyang more attuned to China’s preference. Despite of the subtle differences between the two candidates over the conditions for resuming dialogue and cooperation with the North, the new Seoul government would certainly be more forthcoming in taking initiatives for an improved relationship with Pyongyang, a policy of reconciliation and cooperation toward the new leadership in Pyongyang. This could have a virtual effect of removing an important obstacle from the Seoul-Beijing cooperation over the issues of peace and stability in the Korean peninsula.

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Certainly, one should not be too optimistic. The challenges awaiting the new administration in Seoul are multiple and no less serious. Beside the basically bilateral issues such as the disputes over history and overlapping claims over EEZ, the problems involving the third parties like North Korea and the United States will challenge the diplomatic ingenuity of the new leadership both in Seoul and Beijing. These include the nuclear and missile development of North Korea and the changing role of the US-ROK alliance, particularly after the transfer of wartime operational control and the subsequent restructuring of the alliance. But most significant of all will be how Seoul and Beijing join their forces and persuade Pyongyang to discard its military-first policy in return for the economy-first policy, if not a more realistic strategy of reform and opening. With the new third generation ruler firmly in place in Pyongyang and the more pragmatic and liberal governments both in Beijing and Seoul a historic window of opportunity may gradually emerge on the horizon to remove the architecture of the cold-war legacy from the Korean peninsula and put the bilateral ties between China and South Korea on a solid strategic cooperative plane.

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