
Day 2 Session VI: Korea between US and China

Moderator: Hahm Chaibong, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

Speakers: Choi Kang, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies
Thomas Christensen, Princeton University
Bonnie Glaser, Center for Strategic and International Studies
Gilbert Rozman, Princeton University
Zhao Quansheng, American University

This panel was about the complex diplomatic relationship between Korea, the United States and China. One of the central themes of the discussion was how Korea is walking a fine line as it increasingly faces simultaneous pressure from both the United States and China on how it should be conducting its approach to foreign policy initiatives. A possible outcome of this precarious situation is for Korea to shift alliances to only one of the superpowers and isolate the other. Given Korea's geographic proximity to China as well its economic dependence on China, there is concern that Korea will in the future move closer towards China, while distancing itself from the United States. The talks between South Korea and each of the major super powers was a main point discussed in this panel as the panelists explored the importance of these relations and how each superpower could use its relations with South Korea to influence North Korea as well as the other superpower. Ideally, a consensus among the panelists is that if China and the United States can cooperate on the topic of South Korea, they would be able to keep North Korea from isolating itself from the international community and taking drastic measures involving nuclear weapons.

Choi Kang talked about bilateral relations between China and Korea; China and the United States; and Korea and the United States. He then discussed how each of these sets of bilateral relations have an impact on multilateral relations between the three countries. Furthermore, the US' diplomatic alliances with other countries, especially those in the Middle East will also affect its respective relations with China and Korea.

Thomas Christensen from Princeton University emphasized the importance of US-Korea relations when talking about US-China relations. He said that the way with which the United States deals with Korea can be greatly destructive or constructive for its alliance with China. This can also be looked at through another angle. For example, in 2006, when China started putting pressure on North Korea, there were positive externalities on US-China relations. China's influence in the region is extremely important and thus the United States has to be on China's good side if it wants to preserve itself as a strategic global player in Asia. One example of a bad year for US diplomacy with China was 2010 as China was seemingly enabling North Korean belligerence and there were public critiques of China trying to colonize South Korea. Christenson noted that we tend to perceive South Korea as passive in both the US and Chinese approach to North Korea, but the reality is that if we would like to advance on talks with North Korea, it is crucial that we consider South Korea as well.

Another way to pressure North Korea could be to isolate North Korea completely. We often forget that while we are apprehensive of North Korea isolating itself from the United States and China, North Korea also is cautious of this happening and is reluctant to do so as it would do more harm than good. China is also reluctant to isolate North Korea. Thus, while China would ideally like to pressure North Korea when the time seems right, it is walking a tight rope because it does not want to pressure it too much as it risks losing North Korea's support altogether.

Bonnie Glaser from the Center for Strategic and International Studies discussed how she understands why Korea, especially South Korea feels dependent on China and looks towards it as a regional ally. In fact, she notes that many countries have China as their primary trading partner, but experience conflicts of interest because they maintain the United States as their close security ally. The premise to this dilemma is that the United States and China have a zero-sum relationship and thus a positive relationship with one (the US or China) automatically means a negative relationship with the other. In fact, Glaser argues that when it comes to the topic of the Korean Peninsula, there is a great deal of overlap in Chinese and US interests and their relationship in this regard is not at all zero-sum. Furthermore, it is important for the United States to sustain its good relations with China as this will be key to the US approach to appeasing North Korea. South Korea should thus not feel as if it has to choose between China and the United States but rather look at its relations with both countries as important in different contexts. While China maintains itself as South Korea's main trading partner and has a lot of leverage on South Korea for this reason, US investment in South Korea is still substantially larger than that of China. It is evident that both of these relationships should be equally important to South Korea.

Gilbert Rozman emphasized in his summary of the issue that Chinese relations with South Korea can be used as leverage for Chinese relations with North Korea and the United States. He also said that he is not fearful that China will improve its relations with South Korea and isolate the United States. This is primarily because if China improves relations with South Korea, it means that it is also improving constructive relations with North Korea, which closely aligns with US interests as well. Rozman also touched upon Japan's role in all of this and stated that it will be interesting to see if China can use Japan strategically in these talks. A strategy for China is to isolate South Korea from both the United States and Japan, thus placing pressure on the United States and Japan to change their strategies towards North Korea. Japan is perhaps more vulnerable to this approach due to its regional interests, however it is still questionable how long China would be able to sustain such an approach.

Zhao Quansheng from American University believes that South Korea needs to divide its foreign policy approach into four dimensions: strategic, political, economic and cultural. It should think about its bilateral relations with the United States and China in each of these dimensions but it should also consider the implications they will have on multilateral relations. Zhao reiterated the point made by most of the panelists that the United States needs to put itself in the shoes of South Korea and cannot expect it to isolate China because it is a strategic regional ally and an extremely close trading partner. Rather, South Korea has to act according to the strategy that best reflects its own national interests.

Another issue that was touched upon in this panel is the topic of trust, or lack thereof, between Beijing and Seoul in the matter of communication strategy. The panelists agreed that in order to improve overall relations, there needs to be better communications between the

two countries so that they can learn to trust each other and start working towards a strategy that is mutually beneficial.

An interesting question that was posed by a member of the audience after each of the panelists had concluded their presentations was whether China's strategy towards Korea is currently changing or if it will change in the foreseeable future. The panelists all felt cautious about a change in China's position towards Korea. One panelist mentioned that over the past couple of months, there has been a significant shift in the Chinese domestic debate regarding Korea, however whether or not this will influence the Chinese government's policy is yet to be determined.

As one can see from the overview of this panel discussion, the topic of how the United States, Korea and China each act bilaterally and trilaterally with one another is beyond complex. An important takeaway from this talk is that while it may seem that the three countries have misaligned interests at times, it is crucial that they consider each of their foreign policy initiatives carefully before drastically making a decision that could potentially isolate a close ally.

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

*The views expressed herein are panel overviews of the Asan Washington Forum 2013. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the author or the institutions they are affiliated with.