



2022-07(S)

## How Should the Yoon Administration Approach China?

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2022.07.29

The Yoon Suk-yeol administration has pledged to upgrade the South Korea-United States alliance into a "Global Comprehensive Strategic Alliance" and had joined the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) initiative. The Yoon administration appears to have decided that Korea's reliance on China for trade and support in resolving the North Korean nuclear issue have constrained Korea's international autonomy and is now moving towards strategic clarity in how it approaches the United States and China. China, in turn, will interpret Korea's actions as joining the US-led coalition against China. As a result, Korea-China relations are likely to chill, and a range of disputes are likely to intensify.

The Yoon administration must take steps to prevent a sharp downturn in Korea-China relations rather than a superficial improvement in the bilateral relationship. First, Korea needs to assess China's strategic value on a case-by-case basis rather than pursuing cooperative relations under all circumstances. Second, it is necessary to prepare appropriate responses to both Chinese outreach and pressure. Economic diversification must continue while reiterating that the North Korean nuclear threat undermines regional peace and stability for which China has a responsibility to act. Third, Korea needs to be aware that China's efforts to become a global cultural powerhouse through its traditional culture could trigger cross-cultural clashes with Korea over attempted appropriation of Korean heritage.

The Korean government should expand and normalize diplomatic channels with China during this transition period in which China is closely monitoring Korea's China policy. By doing this, the government can convey to China that its foreign policy is not about containing China but rather about fulfilling its role as a liberal democracy and responsible middle power seeking to resolve the North Korean nuclear threat. This will require exploring areas for cooperation with China and preventing a sharp downturn in the bilateral relationship while also reaffirming the diplomatic understandings that underpin it.

### **The Moon Jae-in Administration's China Policy**

The former Moon Jae-in administration was inaugurated just after South Korea-China relations were seriously damaged due to the Theater High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) incident. Although U.S.-China competition is intensifying, the Moon administration stressed cooperation with China in the name of 'strategic ambiguity' to repair the damaged South Korea-China relations quickly. The administration also expected the recovery of South Korea-China relations might lead to the improvement of inter-

Korean relations with consideration of China's role in improving inter-Korean relations and resolving the North Korea nuclear issue.

In that process, the Moon administration showed excessive deference to China's stance. With the intensifying U.S.-China strategic competition, it made Beijing consider that South Korea could be a weak link in the U.S.-led coalition against China. Even if it has continued to highlight cooperation with South Korea rhetorically, China has tried to manage the South Korea-China relations by using bilateral economic relations and North Korea issues as leverage to keep South Korea from aligning with the United States.

As a result, the asymmetry of South Korea-China relations, which was caused by the rise of China, has been enhanced. Although it seemed to prevent the second THAAD incident and further deterioration of South Korea-China relations, in the changing international situation due to the intensifying U.S.-China strategic competition, the COVID-19 pandemic, North Korea's breaking moratorium, the Moon administration's China policy led to the following result: Firstly, its balanced diplomacy between the U.S. and China based on strategic ambiguity caused U.S. distrust in South Korea and a rift in the South Korea-U.S. alliance; Secondly, it deepened South Korea's isolation in the international society by hesitating to support the democratic coalition which claims values of free democracy and international rules; Thirdly, it caused the people's distrust toward the administration's China policy by contrasting China's one-sided stance and South Korea's feckless behaviors.

## **Proposals for the Yoon Administration's China Policy**

The Yoon Suk-yeol administration showed its will to develop the South Korea-U.S. alliance into an economic, technology, and global alliance beyond cooperation in the military security field, and participated in IPEF launched on 23rd May. These behaviors are based on the perception that a submissive policy toward China due to South Korea's high economic dependence on China has limited South Korea's diplomatic autonomy in the international community and it is hard to expect China to play a constructive role on the North Korean nuclear issue. Under this perception the new administration tried to reinforce the South Korea-U.S. alliance and expressed the direction of its foreign policy to perform a role and responsibility as a free democracy in the international society. This, however, has a risk to worsen South Korea-China relations, since China will consider South Korea's behaviors as joining the U.S.-led anti-China coalition. Accordingly, South Korea-China relations are going to enter a chilling period and various conflicts between two countries are likely to emerge. The Yoon administration should try to prevent a sharp downturn in the South Korea-China relations and minimize damage, rather than try to improve the bilateral relations.

### **1. To re-assess China's strategic value in the changing international situation**

Since diplomatic normalization in 1992, South Korea has perceived China as an important neighboring country to cooperate with, especially for South Korea's economic growth and the improvement of inter-Korean relations. This perception has motivated and developed favorable relations with China. It, however, does not provide justification that South Korea maintain and develop the favorable relations with China in all fields in the changing international situation. In the current international situation, the spread of the Chinese governance system and political thought can undermine the universal values South Korea has pursued. Cultural conflicts between South Korea and China caused by China's growing

exclusive nationalism can be a threat to the cultural identity of South Korea. At the same time, there are still various issues to cooperate with China, such as the second phase of FTA negotiations, maritime boundary negotiations, environment problems including yellow dust and contaminated water from Fukushima, etc. It is time to change the perception of China. The new administration should closely consider what kind of strategic value China has to South Korea on a case-by-case basis. In the process, it also needs to be cautious about engaging in indiscriminate confrontation by seeing China only as a threat.

## **2. To notice the possibility of China's conciliation and pressures on South Korea and prepare appropriate measures**

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, China has taken an aggressive diplomatic line, the so called 'wolf-warrior diplomacy', to stabilize its domestic politics and weaken the U.S.-led anti-China coalition. In that sense, China is likely to use conciliation and pressure towards South Korea as the Yoon administration strengthens its relations with the U.S. and seeks East Asia diplomacy based on free democracy values. The Yoon government needs to recognize this possibility and prepare for various conciliation and pressure from China, such as diplomatic offensives, economic sanctions, collisions at sea, or public opinion warfare over cultural conflicts.

The Yoon administration needs to reduce its economic dependence on China gradually and diversify import sources of strategic materials. Next, in the event that China's role cannot be expected in resolving North Korea nuclear issues, the Yoon administration needs to try to shape the circumstance for China to participate in sanctions against North Korea with responsibility by emphasizing the North Korean nuclear issue can ruin peace and stability in the region and promote cooperation with the international society and countries in the region. In addition, the administration needs to plan to resolve the people's security concern by utilizing statements of the Ministry of National Defense and media, because China may put pressure on South Korea through the incursion into the Korea Air Defense Identification Zone (KADIZ), military drills in the West Sea, or China-Russia joint military exercises with the expansion of South Korea-U.S. joint military drills.

## **3. To actively respond to cultural conflicts between South Korea-China at the government level**

By claiming the revival of Chinese traditional culture, China has tried not only to encourage nationalism of the people domestically, but also to develop itself into a global cultural power internationally. China is using the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as an overseas expansion platform of its culture to expand its cultural influence by hosting various cultural festivals all over the world. In that sense, cultural conflicts over traditional culture ownership between South Korea-China could expand around the world. The Yoon administration needs to respond actively to cultural conflicts at the government level, rather than consider them as non-governmental issues. South Korea should send a clear message to China's efforts to deprive Korean traditional cultures. In cases that Korean traditional cultures are expropriated at Chinese cultural festivals held in a certain country, the government should make a diplomatic endeavor to prevent a false perception from shaping in that country.

## Tasks in 2022

Despite the Yoon administration's recent diplomatic behaviors to enhance relations with the United States, China is highlighting that South Korea is an important partnership to China, while criticizing the U.S. and NATO for their policies toward China. It seems that China tries to maintain momentum for the bilateral cooperation to keep South Korea from rapidly aligning with the United States. Given this situation, the Yoon administration needs to focus on the following in 2022.

Firstly, the Yoon administration should expand and regularize diplomatic channels with China. Although these diplomatic channels are hard to expect to be useful in adjusting opinions between two countries, or resolving certain problems, they can give China a perception that South Korea is conscious of relations with China and restrain the rapid deterioration of South Korea-China relations.

Secondly, the Yoon administration should continue to insist that its foreign policy aims are to perform a role and responsibility as a free democracy in the international society rather than to contain China. For the expansion of the South Korea-U.S. alliance and security cooperation among South Korea, the U.S., and Japan, the administration needs to highlight the cooperation against North Korea nuclear problem and demand China's responsibility. This may not fully dispel China's concern and opposition, but help South Korea obtain a diplomatic cause and establish a foundation for a joint response against China's pressures.

Thirdly, the Yoon administration needs to keep seeking cooperative measures, because China seems to seek cooperation with South Korea in the short term to avoid the situation that dynamics of the region becomes unfavorable to China. This endeavor can help South Korea secure time to relieve economic damage caused by the U.S.-China global supply chain competition and the worsening South Korea-China relations.

This article is an English Summary of Asan Issue Brief (2022-20).

(‘신정부의 대중정책 어떻게 할 것인가?’, <https://www.asaninst.org/?p=84044>)



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