



## **South Korea's Policy Toward China After President Lee's Visit** by Jaeho Hwang

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Last week, President Lee Myung-bak visited China as a state guest and held a summit with President Hu Jintao. They addressed the Sino-South Korean strategic cooperative partnership and how to strengthen the relationship between their countries' foreign and defense ministries. They agreed to increase trade by \$300 billion by 2015 and to initiate discussions on a bilateral free trade agreement (FTA). They also agreed to cooperate in solving the illegal fishing issue and work toward the resumption of the Six-Party Talks.

Despite both countries' satisfaction with the summit results, immediate remedies for key longstanding issues are unlikely. With only a year left in the MB administration term they lack the driving force needed to resolve several issues.

First, the outlook for formal FTA negotiations is pessimistic. From the broad perspective of each nation's national interests, there are gaps. While China wants to establish an East Asian FTA and separate FTAs with states in the region, Korea is more interested in developing separate FTAs with China and Japan. The idea of creating a Korea-Japan-China FTA also clouds the issue. Although the decision to move forward with official negotiations was announced, it is difficult to gain momentum with Korean parliamentary elections upcoming in April, followed by presidential elections in December.

Second, the agreement to work toward maintaining peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula appears to be just another statement. North Korea was only briefly in the joint press release and even if the Six-Party Talks resume, it would be difficult to achieve concrete results. During times of changing leadership in both countries more weight is being placed on containing the North Korean nuclear issue than on resolving it. Even though the North wants to guarantee food aid through the Six-Party Talks, all concerned are placing emphasis on maintenance of the current situation.

Third, the killing of the South Korean Coast Guard officer on Dec. 12 by a Chinese fisherman highlighted the continuing tension over illegal fishing. The Chinese government said that it will educate and regulate fishermen, but it is difficult to say what the ultimate effect will be. As the fishermen of China are not allowed to leave their hometown without permission, the poor people will continue to illegally fish in restricted waters for their survival.

The real purpose of the summit, however, was not a serious resolution of the issues, but an effort to restore positive

relations between South Korea and China after a string of incidents including the 2010 *Cheonan* naval ship sinking and the Yeonpyeong Island shelling. With the sudden death of the Coast Guard officer and Kim Jong Il after the visit date was set, these issues were added to the summit agenda.

The relationship between the two countries had become so strained that the death threatened to derail the visit. The stabbing incident inflamed anti-Chinese sentiment to the point where the Blue House said it was willing to call off the trip. There was a real possibility that this could have occurred—and if that happened, then the administration's foreign policy toward China could have been ruled a failure. If Seoul and Beijing are truly strategic partners, Lee should have had all the more reason to visit China and communicate the issue with Hu.

Trust is like glass in a mirror - once it breaks it is never the same. Early in its tenure, the MB administration sought to strengthen its alliance with the United States, while paying only modest attention to maintaining good relations with China by agreeing to establish a strategic cooperative partnership. However, there was no compelling vision developed, which eventually created difficulty for the relationship. China moved closer to North Korea. A strategic cooperative partnership between China and South Korea was merely a statement. In fact, the relationship was an 'economic' cooperative partnership.

Last year was one of the worst for Sino-Korean relations. Seoul never made clear China's strategic importance or its will to improve relations. The MB administration's lack of commitment to the Beijing visit made China uncomfortable until the last minute. And Seoul's decision to use weapons against illegal Chinese fishermen was like a slap in the face.

If the strategic cooperative partnership is to work, it is necessary to have mutual trust. The agreement by both countries to engage in such a partnership means that the relationship is headed in that direction – not that they have arrived. The parties need stability and to move toward a true partnership where they can jointly work out problems and ensure that every incident doesn't destabilize their relationship.

These efforts are more important than preparing for the many celebratory events to recognize the 20th anniversary of Sino-South Korea diplomatic ties and the fifth anniversary of the strategic cooperative partnership that will be going on this year. Trust is built when consideration for the other is given during difficult times when understanding is hindered. The fact that the bilateral relationship gets easily derailed whenever such an individual incident happens only proves that their relationship is not strategic. Only when the overall strategic situation is not hindered by relatively minor incidents

can we finally say that the Sino-Korea relationship has achieved the status of a strategic cooperative partnership.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.*