

South Korean Debates on China's North Korea Policy: Is President Park Listening? by Sukjoon Yoon

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Ren Xiao (China Debates DPRK Policy, *PacNet* #55) provides insightful and informative analysis of the three schools of Chinese scholars and foreign policy-makers, and even the leaders of the People's Liberation Army, regarding the future of China's ties with Kim Jung-un's unstable and unpredictable regime. China's North Korea policy is at a crossroads, and Ren's assessment seems to revolve around the concept of a Middle Kingdom mentality in China. Let me give some idea of the South Korean view of these matters. As Ren points out, two issues are prompting the Chinese leaders to seriously review their special relationship with Pyongyang: Kim's regime has undermined China's policy for a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula by conducting nuclear tests and nuclear blackmail, and has also made rhetorical threats and real military provocations against South Korea. China is concerned that such misbehavior helps justify the US rebalance to the Korean Peninsula, despite defense budget constraints.

While the US stance is not welcomed by the Chinese leadership, the South Korean military is renegotiating its burden-sharing with the US and has been debating whether the scheduled OPCON transfer from the Combined Forces Command to the ROK armed forces -- a step that would move the alliance away from its domination by the US military and closer to being truly binational -- should be postponed. From a South Korean perspective, there are indications that China has altered its relations with North Korea from a fraternal alliance to a normal state-to-state relationship. For example, an editor of *The Study Times*, an official newspaper of the Central Party School, published an article in *The Financial Times* questioning whether China's special relationship with North Korea, an outgrowth of the Cold War, should be abandoned after Pyongyang's erratic and arrogant behavior. He was later dismissed from his position and made a widely publicized visit to Seoul.

As in China, there are three schools of thought among diplomats, scholars and military-security practitioners from the national security circle and intelligence agencies and their analyses of China's North Korea policy tend to reflect their backgrounds. First, those South Koreans who have studied Chinese foreign policy toward neighboring countries, such as Korea, Vietnam, and Japan, from a US or Western perspective are optimistic that Beijing will make a substantial shift in its attitude toward Pyongyang, from special relations to a normal relationship. This view dominates Korean think tanks, and especially national security policy advisory committee.

Supporters point to closer recent cooperation between the US and China since North Korea's long-range missile test in December and third nuclear test in March, noting that Kim is thumbing his nose at China's policy for a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula, in which contentious issues should be resolved through peaceful dialogue to maintain peace and stability. They also see China's policies toward the US and Japan as indicative of a "revisionist" tendency, following the prevalent view among US China analysts.

Second, many younger South Korean scholars researching China's North Korea policy at universities and Institutes in China and Korea are pessimistic about China's underlying attitude toward the Kim regime. They characterize the bond between Beijing and Pyongyang as a brotherhood of shared blood, and remind us that North Korea retains its value to China as a buffer zone between the two great powers, despite the recent ruckus. They highlight the strong connections between Beijing's inner circle and the Pyongyang leadership, and interpret recent events as mere maneuvering by China to divide Western opinion. They argue that there have been no significant changes in China's strategic relations with North Korea, and that China is adhering to the "Two Koreas" principle that it has espoused since the 1953 Armistice Agreement. According to this view, the status quo persists.

Third, South Korean diplomats and academics who have studied in Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and ASEAN countries see China's North Korea policy in terms of a party-to-party special relationship, based on their analysis of back-stories and other information available primarily in Chinese-language newspapers. They emphasize the role of the Chinese Communist Party in supporting the Korean Worker's Party, the endorsement of the leadership of Kim Jung-un, promoting him as the charismatic heir to two Great Leaders. This is taken as evidence that China's most pressing concern on the Korean Peninsula is to avoid the sudden collapse of the Kim regime. It is also argued that China would like South Korea to help shore up the North Korean regime, and that it suits China for South Korea to assume greater strategic autonomy between China and the US. China's recent censure of North Korea is seen as no more than a warning to Kim to fall into line, and the surprisingly warm welcome given South Korean President Park during her visit to China by President Xi Jinping was mainly aimed at Japan, which has recently scaled back security ties with South Korea while increasing military cooperation with the US. According to this view China will not allow the rise of any independent regional power on the Korean Peninsula.

There is unfortunately no way to establish whether any of these views offers an accurate analysis of recent events, or any useful predictions about relations between China and North Korea in the immediate future. President Park has announced an autonomously defined foreign policy toward China and

North Korea, the so-called Trustpolitik. As she made clear after her first 100 days in power, her strategic goals include a “confidence-building process on the Korean Peninsula”, but her government appears not to have any well-defined plan through which they can be achieved. President Park is essentially continuing to follow a reengagement process that has been pursued by previous governments, and such policies have been generally perceived by the Chinese as in their long-term interests.

There are two striking features about the diverse and divisive views among South Koreans regarding China’s North Korea policy. First, the countries and institutions in which they have studied is the primary factor determining their opinions, and lacking any integrated organizations to parse these opinions, President Park faces an impossible task. How can she judge the relative merits of these views? How can she make the best use of them to develop a middle-power strategic framework to guide her security strategy when her advisors are drawn exclusively from just one of the three strands of opinion? Second, none of the three schools seems to have had much influence on President Park’s Trustpolitik, which is mainly driven by the need to balance bilateral relations with the US and China. Unfortunately, there is no authentic expert on Chinese affairs in her national security team, and the team has tended to focus on national defense matters, rather than national security strategy as such, because the team members are mostly retired generals, together with some diplomats from a generalized background. None of them is qualified to provide good advice on whether, how, and to what extent Beijing has changed its attitude toward Pyongyang.

In short, the South Korean outlook on China’s North Korea policy depends heavily upon who is in charge and their previous experience. President Park’s Trustpolitik faces great challenges, and should be aiming at specific goals, but her decisions are not being properly informed by the South Korean debate on these issues. As a result, China’s broader long-term strategy and political aims are not being adequately taken into account. The contrast between the far-sighted shrewdness which Ren attributes to Chinese policy-makers, and the short-sighted ignorance that prevails in South Korea will surely affect the strategic situation of both countries for many years to come.

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