

Policy Forum 11-001: It is Time for a ‘Change of Thinking’ in Our Rough-And-Ready China Policy



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It is Time for a ‘Change of Thinking’ in Our Rough-And-Ready China Policy

by Moon Chung-in

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Fred Carrie of Syracuse University translated it into English.

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I. Introduction

Moon Chung-in, Professor of Political Science at Yonsei University, writes, “We have to have good relations with China. To do that we need to develop a more balanced practical diplomacy. A triangular alliance that is ‘Anti-China’ made up of South Korea, Japan and the U.S. cannot be an alternative. Relations between the U.S. and China as well as relations between Japan and China must be good to ensure the peace, stability and prosperity of the Korean peninsula. In particular, it also is necessary to put emphasis on the improvement of North-South relations.”

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II. Article by Moon Chung-in

-“It is Time for a ‘Change of Thinking’ in Our Rough-And-Ready China Policy”

By Moon Chung-in

There is flashing red light in our China diplomacy. Turning a blind eye toward us, China adopted a neutral stance in the Ch’ōnan incident, and in the case of the Yōnp’yōng Island incident, China even gave the impression it was taking North Korea’s side by its use of terms such as ‘cross-fire’ to refer to the shelling. Similarly, regarding North Korea’s uranium enrichment program, China has taken an essentially passive stance by not only stressing the importance of ‘verifying the facts’ in reference to the reported enrichment facility, but also recognizing North Korea’s right to peaceful use of atomic energy. As a further example, the visit to Seoul by State Councilor Dai Bingguo on which great hopes had been pinned came to an end without producing any fruit. Or rather, South Korea-China relations actually became more strained after his visit to Seoul. The reason for this outcome was that State Councilor Dai once again called for a reconvening of the Six Party Talks, and strongly urged both the North and the South to exercise restraint, without making any mention whatsoever of the Yōnp’yōng Island shelling incident.

How have South Korea-China relation deteriorated to this state after having been upgraded through a great effort to the level of a ‘strategic partnership’ as they were characterized in the declaration issued following the South Korea-China summit meeting in May 2008? Before we place the blame on China’s diplomatic behavior, we need to engage in a meticulous self examination of our China diplomacy.

Above all else, aren't perhaps these shortcomings of our China diplomacy the result of the bad move we've made in the game of diplomacy of underestimating China? Lacking a cool-headed understanding and analysis of "rising China" we now are seeing that problems are arising as we approach China simply from the perspective of the situation in the 1990s when diplomatic relations between South Korea and China were inaugurated. Whether it is nuclear issue or something else, we believe China can be convinced to follow our lead provided we are sufficiently persuasive. Yet, is there any reason to expect China to have warm and fuzzy feelings toward the South Korean government when it is taking a position that implies there is no need for the Six Party Talks, in direct opposition to China's assessment of the talks as the core diplomatic legacy of Chinese President Hu Jintao, or by putting forth proposals such as 'Denuclearization Opening 3,000' and 'Grand Bargain' in an effort to claim for itself the leading role in resolving the North Korean nuclear issue? Furthermore, in light of the longstanding, close ties between China and North Korea, there certainly is no reason for China to look favorably on South Korea when it is proposing a three-party strategic dialogue (South Korea-U.S.-China) on ways to deal with a contingency in North Korea.

As the background for disconnects of this kind, it is quite clear that the problem is the excessive expectations the South Korean government has of the United States. Due to a belief that the U.S. is the only country uniquely able to control or influence China, it is thought that South Korea will be able to resolve its problems with China naturally simply by strengthening its alliance with the United States. In the end, it is a valid assessment to say that the cause of the failure of South Korea's China diplomacy is the Lee Myung-bak administration's deeply rooted perception of the U.S. as a 'panacea' for South Korean diplomacy.

South Korea must actively promote the resumption of the Six Party Talks

Although jumping on the bandwagon with the U.S. is a position that is beyond reproach when viewed purely from the perspective of the traditional alliance relationship, it is apparent that there is a problem with this way of thinking. In the course of promoting a strategic alliance with the U.S., the Lee Myung-bak administration has placed great emphasis on the shared values of a market economy and liberal democracy. This emphasis seems entirely natural from our point of view. From the perspective of China, however, these moves by South Korea are interpreted to mean that South Korea is playing an active role in the efforts of the U.S. to enlarge its sphere of influence as a way of containing or encircling China. It is difficult for China to countenance behavior that looks as though it is intended to bring pressure to bear on China by building an alliance based on new values that have no regard for the combination of democracy and socialism that is a distinctive feature of contemporary China.

Another problem is the self-centered approach taken in South Korea's China diplomacy. These days, isn't China a great power? It is necessary to take China's perspective into consideration and to understand the country in an emphatic manner appropriate to its status as a great power. As an alliance partner of North Korea, for China it is very difficult to take South Korea's side on the Ch'ŏnan incident while North Korea is strongly disavowing any role in the vessel's sinking. Just as it was natural for the U.S. to take South Korea's side, China tilted toward North Korea's side. In the case of the Yŏnp'yŏng Island incident as well, you have to understand the context of China's reaction.

Given the circumstances at the time of the shelling incident, it certainly would not be warranted to give China low marks as a country in terms of rejecting international norms. After all, it was China that took the position of calling on both North Korea and South Korea to exercise mutual restraint while also urging them to seek a resolution of their issues through dialogue. As for putting national

interest being ahead of international norms, in reality, moralistically competing with China in terms of accountability, reputation, credibility, etc. rather than being helpful would have a negative effect on South Korea-China relations.

Why do these kinds of problems arise? Above all, the core of the problem is the lack of professional expertise on China. Take the lineup of the Lee Myung-bak administration in the diplomatic and national security areas. For the most part, U.S. and Japan experts have a monopoly on positions in these areas predominate in these area as well as in the top posts in the executive branch and the National Intelligence Service. For them, it is easy to view issues from the American and Japanese perspectives not the perspective of China. The more serious problem is that the point of view taken by the core officials in the current administration is that there is no need for China experts. It seems they think it is better not to have China experts because of their clientelistic attitude advocating the Chinese perspective rather than the South Korean one.

Just as fatal as this lack of expertise are the flaws in the construction of the network of human resources. What's known as 'connection (guanxi)' is a critical asset for improving relations with China. However, the current administration has completely eliminated all the key personnel dealing with China that were part of a network of experts that past governments had gradually assembled over a period of years. China relations are being spearheaded these days by conservative officials that are focused on protecting the points of view of the current administration. The way things are going, never mind building 'connections' and promoting constructive dialogue, you just have to hope that there are no heated debates with Chinese counterparts, and meetings are being held to hear mutual differences rather than to enhance mutual understandings and improving relations.

The president's misperceptions and lack of knowledge also are a serious matter. While I was residing in China over a six month period last year, I personally witnessed a sharp cooling of South Korea-China relations. However, up until the moment the Ch'ōnan incident arose, the majority of government officials took the position that there was nothing unusual about the state of South Korea-China relations. President Lee Myung-bak also took the position in a statement that there were a few problems in the private sector but there were no problems on the government-t-government level. Well, but was it so? Looking back from the present, it has to be one of two possibilities: either the president was deceived by receiving an incorrect report or the president misrepresented the facts even though he had received an accurate report from his subordinates.

Henceforth we have to change our way of thinking. Our future is with China. We have to have good relations with China. To do that we need to develop a more balanced practical diplomacy. A triangular alliance that is 'Anti-China' made up of South Korea, Japan and the U.S. cannot be alternative. Relations between the U.S. and China as well as relations between Japan and China must be good to ensure the peace, stability and prosperity of the Korean peninsula. In particular, it also is necessary to put emphasis on the improvement of North-South relations. After all, ultimately, isn't the North Korean problem the major reason for the deterioration of South Korea-China relations?

Going forward, the government has to take a forward-leaning stance on the resumption of the Six Party Talks. North Korea's acquisition of a uranium enrichment facility proves that the sanctions that have been in place are not effective. Even so, we have to acknowledge that there is no military option. We have to engage in dialogue. If bilateral talks are difficult then we have to make every effort to return to the suspended Six Party Talks. This is the best choice available that holds out a new prospect for South Korea-China relations.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: bscott@nautilus.org. Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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