

Policy Forum 08-029: Lee Myung-bak and the Future of Sino-South Korean Relations

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By Scott Snyder

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I. Introduction

Scott Snyder, Senior Associate with The Asia Foundation and Pacific Forum CSIS, writes, "One key test of whether or not this is a new starting point will be whether China can meet its diplomatic

objectives by influencing South Korean government policies not only in the context of the Sino-South Korean bilateral relationship, but also whether China can cast its shadow to the east sufficiently that South Korean administrations are required to take into account China's preferences in formulating not only inter-Korean policy, but also South Korea's management of relations with Japan and the United States."

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II. Article by Scott Snyder

- "Lee Myung-bak and the Future of Sino-South Korean Relations"

By Scott Snyder

World leaders, including PRC President Hu Jintao, offered congratulations to Lee Myung-bak following his election as South Korea's next president on December 19, 2007. Hu's message stressed his desire to expand "good neighborly and friendly relations" with South Korea and his hope that "strengthen[ed] coordination and cooperation on regional and international affairs" might "upgrade the all-round partnership of cooperation to a higher level and bring more benefits to both peoples and countries" (Xinhua, December 20, 2007). However, when Lee met with PRC Ambassador to the ROK Ning Fukui days after his electoral win, his statement that he wanted to "upgrade Korea-China economic relations as China is a critical trade partner for Korea" did not suggest that Sino-South Korean cooperation might be expanded beyond the economic area to include an enhanced political and security relationship, in contrast to groundwork laid by his predecessor, outgoing president Roh Moo-hyun (Korea Times, December 21, 2007).

Under Roh, economic relations continued to boom and progress had been made in promoting high-level security exchanges and confidence-building, including a decision to establish a military hotline last year during the fifteenth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations. Agreed upon early in 2007, the establishment of the hotlines was delayed until December 20 by a disagreement over the appropriate points of contact and level at which to establish naval and air force hotlines. The Chinese side insisted that the link be handled via the ROK Navy's 2nd fleet at Pyongtaek on South Korea's west coast rather than at the naval operations command at Jinhae, a port near Busan on South Korea's southeastern coast.

Lee Myung-bak's foreign policy priorities as expressed during the transition period prior to his February 25 inauguration suggest significant changes in the approach of the ROK government on some issues that are worrisome to Chinese foreign policy analysts, including Lee's approach to North Korea and his emphasis on strategic cooperation with the United States and Japan. On these issues, China's positions have been more compatible with Roh Moo-hyun's conciliatory approach to the North, his desire for less dependence on the United States and his relative distance from Japan. An intensive exchange of envoys between Lee and Hu in February suggests the importance that both sides place on communicating their concerns and understanding each other's positions and their regional implications at this early stage.

Hu took an uncharacteristically early opportunity to send Vice Foreign Minister Wang Yi to Seoul for consultations on the six party talks on January 14, only three weeks following Lee's electoral victory. The first Chinese special envoy to meet a South Korean president-elect, Wang carried Hu's invitation to Lee Myung-bak to "strengthen strategic communications ... and expand mutually beneficial cooperation" through an early summit meeting in Beijing (Xinhua, January 14). Four days later, Grand National Party (GNP) party leader Park Geun-hye and her delegation traveled to Beijing as

Lee Myung-bak's special envoy, at which time Hu Jintao reiterated his support for progress in Six-Party Talks and reiterated his commitment to "developing bilateral relations to a higher level" (Korea Times, January 17). The selection of Park as Lee's special envoy to China itself might be viewed as a mixed message: although Park, daughter of former South Korean President Park Chung-hee, is the GNP leader who has been closest to China and North Korea and was recognized by some Chinese analysts as the highest-ranking of Lee's special envoys to major countries, she is a political competitor with Lee Myung-bak within the party and certainly carries less influence with Lee than his elder brother, who served as his special envoy to Japan.

The intensity and nature of this exchange suggests Chinese concerns about how South Korean foreign policy may develop under the Lee Myung-bak administration. One apparent Chinese concern is that Lee's tougher policy approach toward the North might have a negative impact on North Korea's willingness to cooperate in implementing the agreements made at the Six-Party Talks on North Korea's disablement and eventual denuclearization in return for energy assistance and improved political relations with the United States and Japan. This concern had already been signaled last November during a visit by CPC International Liaison Department Head Wang Jiarui to Seoul, at which time he stated during a luncheon meeting with Park Geun-hye that "[w]hat North Korea is afraid of is not the GNP's takeover of power, but rather of a rapid shift of policy towards North Korea if the GNP takes power" (Yonhap News Agency, November 27, 2007). Although North Korea has not yet made any official response to Lee Myung-bak's election, the DPRK leadership must have concerns about Lee's more conditional approach, which calls on North Korea's denuclearization as a precondition to offering a massive development aid program. Early in 2007, the DPRK had targeted Lee by name in public criticisms of the GNP, but the North shifted those criticisms away from Lee and toward his more conservative opponent, Lee Hoi-chang, in the days immediately leading up to South Korea's election campaign.

Lee's willingness to speak publicly about North Korean human rights shortcomings suggests that Lee is less likely to go out of his way to avoid offending North Korea's leaders-and for that matter raise themes that his Chinese counterpart may not find helpful. For instance, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman was pressed to respond to Lee's comments on North Korean human rights in a press conference the day after Lee Myung-bak's election [1]. Another sensitive factor that may influence the pace and direction of developments in inter-Korean relations is that Lee's Grand National Party has never participated in inter-Korean dialogue activities organized by previous South Korean governments and was even excluded from some "non-governmental" exchanges by the North, so the official inter-Korean relationship itself will be under new management. These factors suggest the possibility that a downturn in inter-Korean relations might sidetrack progress in implementing the Six-Party Agreements, resulting in renewed tensions and renewed pressure on China to exert pressure on North Korea. Based on these concerns, China has pursued an intensive dialogue in an apparent effort to keep the new South Korean president from making a rapid shift away from the current track of engagement efforts with North Korea.

Secondly, Lee Myung-bak has clearly indicated that his top priority in foreign policy is to improve strategic relations with the United States, while efforts to improve Sino-South Korean relations will focus primarily on upgrading economic cooperation. Although Chinese Party School specialist Zhang Liangui argues that "the development of economic ties is bound to bring closer Sino-ROK political, cultural, and even military exchanges and cooperation," Lee's top priority remains the reinvigoration of U.S.-ROK security ties (Shanghai Dongfang Zaobao, December 20, 2007).

South Koreans have no interest in seeing a Sino-U.S. confrontation, but perceptions of China as an economic threat to South Korea are growing as China catches up with South Korean technology in critical sectors such as information technology and electronics. A December 2007 Pew Research

Center survey on attitudes toward China around the world shows a downward trend in China's favorability in South Korea during the past five years, from 66 percent favorable in 2002 to 52 percent favorable views of China in 2007 [2]. One South Korean political scientist suggests that the following evolution in perceptions of China is likely to take place in South Korea: "China will be transformed into a kind of gradually competitive [country] and then a China problem and then a China threat as time goes by" [3]. In this context, a renewed South Korean focus on the security alliance with the United States serves both as a hedge and as a platform for more intensive economic and political engagement with China by providing South Korea leverage that it would not have on its own in dealings with China, while strategic over-dependence on China without the ROK-U.S. alliance would be accompanied by a loss of political leverage (JoongAng Ilbo, January 31). These concerns were a primary motivation behind South Korea's pursuit of a free trade agreement (FTA) with the United States under the Roh Moo-hyun administration-Lee Myung-bak will want to see the KORUS FTA ratified prior to opening FTA negotiations with China. A preliminary study of the effects of a China-South Korea FTA has already been completed and Premier Wen Jiabao publicly called for the start of FTA negotiations shortly following the completion of KORUS FTA negotiations in April of 2007.

Third, Lee Myung-bak's visible efforts to improve relations with Japan have caught Chinese attention, especially since an improved South Korea-Japan relationship may lead to strengthened trilateral coordination among the United States, Japan and South Korea (South China Morning Post, January 30). Although this sort of coordination was promoted in the late 1990s as a response to ongoing concerns about North Korea, the resurgence of bilateral textbook, territorial, and historical and political disputes between South Korea and Japan made continuation of such trilateral coordination both unstable and perhaps unsustainable. Now that the Beijing-led Six-Party Talks have been established, Chinese analysts may consider renewed U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral coordination efforts as incompatible with those talks since it may be perceived by North Korea as threatening. Such security coordination also invites concerns in China that it might be used to encircle China or to strengthen coordination in response to any potential cross-Strait crisis. Chinese scholars have unofficially discouraged South Korean counterparts from renewing such coordination even though a purely North Korea-focused precedent exists from the late 1990s. South Korea's outgoing Foreign Minister Song Min-soon has also warned that re-establishment of trilateral policy coordination might have unanticipated negative effects.

China has completed this round of sensitive shuttle diplomacy focused on the Korean peninsula with a visit by the Communist Party of China's (CPC) International Liaison Department Head Wang Jiarui, sent as a special envoy of Hu Jintao to Pyongyang to meet with Kim Jong Il on January 30. Wang conveyed a verbal message from Hu Jintao, invited Kim to attend the Olympic opening ceremonies, and no doubt provided his own assessment of Lee Myung-bak's foreign policy based on Chinese exchanges with the new leaders in Seoul. Notably, Wang toured the Kaesong Industrial Complex the day after his meeting with Kim Jong Il, a signal to both North and South Korean leaders of China's desire to see continuity and progress in inter-Korean relations (Asia Pulse, January 30).

With Lee Myung-bak's inauguration less than two weeks away, China's Ambassador to South Korea Ning Fukui has argued that Sino-South Korean relations are at a "new starting point," stating that "the neighboring countries have become vital partners not only economically, but also on the international stage of diplomacy, security, and culture ... China has the will to improve relations with the Lee Myung-bak government" (Yonhap News Agency, February 9). One key test of whether or not this is a new starting point will be whether China can meet its diplomatic objectives by influencing South Korean government policies not only in the context of the Sino-South Korean bilateral relationship, but also whether China can cast its shadow to the east sufficiently that South Korean administrations are required to take into account China's preferences in formulating not only inter-

Korean policy, but also South Korea's management of relations with Japan and the United States.

Notes

1. China's foreign ministry spokesman was asked to respond to Lee's comments on human rights a day following his election. See transcript of PRC foreign ministry spokesman press conference, December 20, 2007, as referenced in Open Source Center Doc#: CPP20071220075001.
2. Andrew Kohut, "How the World Sees China," December 11, 2007. See <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/656/how-the-world-sees-china>
3. Author interview in Seoul, October 2007.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@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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