Changing Times, Changing Ties for the US, China, Japan and Korea

Mark Beeson
The extensive US alliance system in East Asia looks ever more targeted at Beijing. Could that risk miscalculations and even conflict?

Thomas Fingar
China’s rise and Japan’s efforts to become a more ‘normal’ nation are an opportunity for greater multilateral co-operation.

Alain Guidetti
There are complex dynamics and lessons for the US in the quietly growing strategic partnership between China and South Korea.
South Korea and China: A Strategic Partnership in the Making
By Alain Guidetti

Perhaps nowhere in Asia is the long-term challenge to US influence more evident than in the quietly growing relationship between China and South Korea. Seoul’s trade with China now exceeds its trade with the US and Japan combined. And with Japan’s leadership taking a more nationalistic and some say militaristic tone, China and South Korea have common cause to be wary.

Most important, with the Six-Party Talks hopelessly stalled, Seoul is increasingly looking to Beijing to deliver on its dream of Korean unification. Former Swiss diplomat Alain Guidetti explores the complex dynamics of an emerging strategic partnership.

THE VISIT OF Chinese President Xi Jinping to Seoul in July 2014 showed that relations between China and South Korea have taken center stage in Northeast Asia. There is a growing strategic partnership between the two countries as a result of the emergence of shared interests in the region and robust trade relations. This dynamic underlines the dilemma Seoul faces in maintaining a strong military alliance with the United States, while turning increasingly toward China as its core partner for both its economic development and its North Korea policy.

The international media was quick to note that Xi’s visit to Seoul represented a snub to North Korea as it was the first time a new Chinese president had visited South Korea before meeting the leader of North Korea. Beijing has understandable reasons to be displeased with the behavior of its ally in Pyongyang and the continued buildup of its nuclear program, which directly affects China’s strategic interests in the region. Pyongyang’s announcement of a planned fourth nuclear test has angered Beijing as well as Seoul and Washington. However, the significance of this visit goes far beyond a mere signal of discontent.

Further developing its partnership with South Korea is of strategic importance to Beijing, both in the context of its tensions with Japan over regional leadership in Northeast Asia and the challenge represented by the US “pivot” to Asia, seen in Beijing mainly as an effort to contain China. Already confronted with a military challenge from two main regional powers, it is a core concern for Beijing to keep Seoul at a distance from Tokyo and Washington in the regional power competition.

A full-fledged trilateral alliance among the US, Japan and South Korea, as advocated by Washington, would substantially alter the balance of power in East Asia to the detriment of China. Such an alliance would put Beijing in a defensive posture at a time when the US is rebalancing in Asia and Japan is striving to re-emerge as a major regional security actor. Given Tokyo’s new collective defense policy that increasingly sees China rather than North Korea as Japan’s major security threat, Beijing calculates that a “neutral” posture toward China by South Korea would be the best option. It would preserve the one core, perhaps non-negotiable, interest of Seoul: the military alliance with the US for the deterrence of North Korea, while offsetting the threat of a potential trilateral alliance.

The red line for Beijing is if South Korea’s defense posture were to be directed at China, which it would, at least partly, in the framework of a trilateral alliance. China thus wants to ensure that Seoul’s military strategy remains geared towards deterring North Korea. The current debate on missile defense illustrates the dilemma for Seoul, which has to make a choice between developing its “own” system (the Korean Air Missile Defense, or KAMD), which, because it is a deterrent against a North Korean missile threat, would be acceptable to Beijing; or the alternative option, namely to join the US missile defense program (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense, or THAAD) and the trilateral missile defense co-operation with the US and Japan. The latter is advocated by Washington but considered by Beijing as ultimately aimed at China, and thus a direct threat to its own security. Xi’s
July 2014 visit to Seoul is thus timely — whether deliberately or not — in view of the current planning process of South Korean decision makers. The (re-)emergence of Japan as a major regional security actor, accompanied by a tough nationalist posture and the revision of its pacifist military doctrine, provides Beijing and Seoul with a strong argument for a common approach against what they decry as the “revisionism” and “militarism” of the Japanese leadership. Seoul is cautiously maneuvering in order not to provoke Washington by conspicuously partnering with Beijing, as the absence of any public reference to this issue during the Seoul summit shows. There is, however, little doubt that Tokyo’s inclination to revise parts of Japan’s historic role in the region will further Chinese efforts to consolidate the Sino-South Korean approach and indirectly complicate further military co-operation between Seoul and Tokyo.

In addition to its main concern of preventing South Korea from embarking on a full-fledged trilateral alliance with the US and Japan, Beijing has to also revamp policy elsewhere in a region that is seriously affected by tensions over maritime disputes in the South and East China Seas. While it can be argued that all of the various maritime claimants bear some degree of responsibility for increasing tensions by seeking to change the status quo, China is widely seen as the most assertive player in this dynamic. As it grows into a great power, China can hardly maintain the status quo as it becomes Beijing’s privileged partner in East Asia.

THE NUCLEAR QUAGMIRE

For Seoul, a strategic partnership with China is a priority. This is in part because of its booming trade relations with China, which are greater than its trade with the US and Japan combined. More important, however, is its North Korean policy and its deep longing for the reunification of the Korean Peninsula. The nuclear quagmire is the first obstacle. In the absence of any military alternative, the framework of the Six-Party Talks offers the only option to break the deadlock. A resumption of the talks would not provide an easy solution, but it would open new avenues for dialogue, which in turn would also facilitate advancement of the North-South dialogue.

The problem is that neither Washington nor Pyongyang is enthusiastic about resuming the Six-Party Talks, for various reasons. The US has more important strategic priorities in the region and no consensus at home for an alternative to the “strategic patience” that imposes conditions to the resumption of negotiations; furthermore, it currently lacks the appetite for risk and initiative that would be necessary to engage again with what it considers to be an unreliable interlocutor. For its part, North Korea benefits from US strategic patience, which provides room to further develop its nuclear deterrent without the limitations that a negotiation process would impose. Thus, there remain just two parties truly ready to engage: South Korea and China.

Although Seoul’s position on the need to impose conditions for the resumption of dialogue with North Korea is not clear, South Korea has little alternative but to turn to Beijing in search of possible support to resume the negotiations. South Korean diplomacy calculates that China, as the sole guarantor of North Korean security and Pyongyang’s paramount economic partner (accounting for 80 percent of North Korean external trade), is the best lever to move Pyongyang towards a more conciliatory stance, be it a political gesture that would help to bring the US back to the negotiating table or a more amenable attitude towards bilateral dialogue with the South.

Over decades, the constant priority of China has been to secure stability and the status quo in its neighborhood and to oppose harsh sanctions that would destabilize the government in Pyongyang. Against this backdrop, forcing the resumption of the Six-Party Talks by severely pressuring Pyongyang is what Beijing calls a “mission impossible.” Yet China has not given up and is cautiously pursuing various diplomatic initiatives to this end, perhaps partly out of a sense that China has to be at the center of things in case new momentum emerges. Even if the status quo has prevailed for decades, the dynamic could change rapidly. Such would be the case with a fourth nuclear test, a development that Pyongyang has already announced and which is likely to trigger strong international reactions, espe-

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cally since a new nuclear test might decisively advance North Korea’s capability to develop a deliverable nuclear device. New international sanctions will also be requested that will bring more pressure on Beijing.

NORTHERN-SOUTH DIALOGUE

Despite its limited ability to move North Korea back to nuclear negotiations under the terms imposed by Washington, Beijing is expected to play a constructive role in easing Pyongyang’s stance on the North-South dialogue. Seoul calculates that Chinese influence over Pyongyang might make it more responsive to its own diplomatic initiatives towards North Korea and help create a climate more hospitable to inter-Korean cooperation and the development of various confidence-building measures aimed at improving bilateral relations.

Indeed, since 2011, President Park Geun-hye’s North Korean strategy has been in sharp contrast to that of her predecessor. She introduced the concept of “trustpolitik” aimed at engaging North Korea by developing dialogue and co-operation through a step-by-step confidence-building process. This strategy is designed to incrementally rebuild relations and positively develop inter-Korean relations. The policy is being carried out in parallel with the buildup of a strong deterrent against the North Korean military.

The problem is that trustpolitik has so far borne barely any fruit. The beginning of Park’s presidency in the spring of 2013 witnessed one of the most confrontational periods between Pyongyang and Seoul, against the backdrop of the third North Korean nuclear test and US-South Korean military maneuvers involving nuclear capabilities. At that time, efforts aimed at resuming dialogue between the two parties saw little progress until the end of the year. This year started under better auspices, with an overture from North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in a New Year speech. It was followed by the resumption of high-level dialogue designed to set the conditions for improved bilateral relations, and the first North-South family reunions in four years. But the momentum did not last, and by mid-spring, the atmosphere had returned to unpleasant verbal exchanges.

These developments have led observers to question the sustainability of trustpolitik. One of the basic principles in any attempt to build trust is to pay particular attention to the messages one delivers to the other side, presuming that the latter will genuinely test the resolve of its interlocutor. A telling example is the very sensitive issue of reunification of the Korean Peninsula, which has been at the core of long-term strategies for both parties since the Korean War. It also features as a goal of the trustpolitik that Park outlined in a paper in 2011. The irony is that the reunification narrative has evolved dramatically over time and circumstances, and has been delivered via very different messages. A prominent example is Park’s Dresden Speech delivered in March 2014, which refers to the German model of reunification. In the South Korean context, this model, however, translates problematically into reunification through absorption of the North by the South. This kind of unfortunate message certainly does not help the North-South dialogue. Nor does the absence of further understanding on other important issues for both sides such as: new family reunions, restarting co-operation at the Mount Kumgang resort, developing humanitarian co-operation and further economic projects.

However complex the dialectic of the North-South dialogue, Seoul believes that its course passes through Beijing, at least to some extent. Park already expressed her strong conviction in this regard in her 2011 essay, saying “China can play a critical part in prompting Pyongyang to change.” The situation on the Korean Peninsula figured at the top of the agenda of the Seoul Summit between Xi and Park, and it is unlikely that the Chinese president encouraged Park to revise her judgment. Furthermore, the various diplomatic efforts undertaken by Beijing despite tense relations with Pyongyang highlight its commitments, even without tangible outcomes.

There is ample space to further consolidate the strategic partnership between Beijing and Seoul, as witnessed by the Seoul Summit. The pace of its development will be, in part, defined by the room for maneuver that Seoul can manage between its need for US security guarantees, on the one hand, and its expectations of Beijing in terms of North Korea-related policy prospects and economic potential, on the other. The first variable is Beijing and its capacity to persuade Pyongyang to follow a more co-operative path with Seoul. The more China can do in this respect, the more it will be able to influence Seoul in its security choices toward Washington. Another variable is Japan, whose regional power policy will impact both Chinese and Korean strategies. The more nationalistic and militarist its posture, the more it will advance the Sino-South Korean partnership.

Clearly, there are substantial limitations in the capacity of Beijing to influence North Korea. Positive incentives, such as economic assistance, have proved to be of limited effectiveness in restraining missile and nuclear programs or improving the North-South dialogue. Negative incentives, such as economic pressures, face strong North Korean resilience, and Beijing does not want to risk instability with even tougher measures. Yet there is still room for action, as Seoul is obviously convinced.

At the same time, part of the South Korean electorate is wary of China’s growing power. Threat perception is a very fluid notion, and there is little doubt that this perception is partly based on the current tensions over maritime disputes in the East and South China Seas, in addition to the support that Beijing continues to provide North Korea. If China further strengthened its partnership with South Korea and could persuade Pyongyang to engage more consistently with Seoul — for example, by sponsoring North-South rapprochement and other initiatives enhancing co-operation — this threat perception might substantially change. In this area too, there is much room to maneuver. Close economic ties also help to enhance a positive perception of China, and the series of economic and financial agreements signed during the Seoul Summit can only contribute to this.

In conclusion, as experience shows in Asia, strategic shifts do not necessarily translate into abrupt changes. They rather grow through gradual, although sometimes rapid, transformation. The building of the strategic partnership between China and South Korea is certainly part of the current transformation of the East Asian order, in which China is playing the biggest part.

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