



# POINTS OF VIEW

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## **Managing ROK-China Ties: The Next 30 Years**

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When China and South Korea established diplomatic relations in 1992, it was considered a renaissance, a point where their dark days could be left behind. For the past three decades, their friendship and economic cooperation have been in overdrive mode. Increased interdependence and mutual economic interest have created common prosperity and shaped their all-around bilateral ties until the present day.

While there have been some prickly issues regarding different threat perceptions emanating from the US presence, North Korea's nuclearisation, and Seoul's obsession with national sovereignty as well as commitment to the security treaty, the two neighbors have been able to manage their ties efficiently in ways that avoided disruption of their burgeoning trade and investment drive. As Beijing and Seoul are now looking ahead, they have to work extremely hard

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as past goodwill and fraternity are no longer sufficient to sustain their growing multifaceted and more complex relationship.

Last month during the commemoration of their 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of diplomatic ties, President Yoon Suk-yeol reiterated that both must seek a new direction for cooperation for the next 30 years based on the spirit of mutual respect and reciprocity. For the future trajectory, Seoul is hoping to focus on strengthening supply chains, economic security, the environment, and climate change. Yoon emphasised that these priorities would bring tangible benefits to the people.

In Beijing, similar messages were echoed. Marking the anniversary, President Xi Jinping said that it could serve as a new starting point that could forge a “solid friendship”. As neighboring countries, both countries should develop relations in all directions, “upholding openness and inclusiveness through a mutually beneficial cooperation”.

Putting aside the diplomatic pleasantries, ROK and China agree that their relations should develop into an “even more mature and fruitful cooperation.” Now their respective foreign policy makers and think tanks must work out what comprises “mature and fruitful” from their national perspectives. Both sides have to get it right as their sovereignty and national interests are at stake.

One important factor on which ROK and China have to dwell is how the US-China rivalry will play out in the future. For the time being, it is hard to forecast the direction as Beijing and Washington have yet to display their genuine desire for reconciliation. In November, three summits have been scheduled in Phnom Penh (ASEAN-related summits), Bali (G-20) and Bangkok (APEC leaders meeting), which both the US and China leaders have been invited. If their leaders would like to hold bilateral summits, they can pick any location.

Indeed, no other country would be as directly impacted by the US-China row as Korea because of its ancient historical and cultural ties, close proximity, and economic dependency.

Therefore, in assessing their future evolving relations, one has to grapple with new challenges that have recently emerged in Korea.

According to the latest poll by JoongAng Ilbo ahead of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of ROK-China ties, 90.2 per cent of respondents do not consider China a reliable partner. The poll showed that the US received the highest mark of 85.1 per cent followed by Canada at 65.5 percent, Australia at 63.8 per cent, and Japan at 13.9 per cent.

As democracy deepens in Korea, public opinion plays an important role in shaping the contour of future China-ROK ties. For instance, the young generation's negative attitude towards China has largely been influenced by the local media's intensive news coverage of the current situation in the Taiwan Straits and China's military maneuvers. Economic sanctions against Korea five years ago which remains intact today also caused resentment among the young Korean.

Even though the Korean War has long ended, the fact that China helped North Korea during those three years is still problematic and stuck in the southerners' collective memory. While the bilateral relations were still strong, Koreans tended to look on the brighter side. The majority of the older Korean generation still want China to show some atonement for its involvement in the Inter-Korean war. After all, one of the significant outcomes of the war has been the US security presence in the Korean Peninsula since the armistice agreement was reached. Therefore, it would be difficult for Seoul to give in to national security and its alliance's commitment and ignore the continued North Korean threats.

Unlike previous governments since the Kim Dae-jung administration, or for that matter any Asian government, the Yoon administration has been very bold in positioning itself as a "Global Pivotal State" in the age of uncertainty amid a fast-shifting strategic landscape. Seoul's growing confidence stems from its ever-economic strength which has now reached the world's top 10.

Korea's embracing liberal values of democracy, human rights and rules-based government could be a double-edged sword. If Korea overplays this powerful mantra, it can backfire as its neighbors in the south have yet to reach the appropriate developmental stage, which Korea has successfully overcome, to be Seoul's new partnership.

In a final analysis, the future ROK-China ties will continue to depend on continued huge mutual economic benefits. Any disruption on economic progress would easily jeopardise Korea's liberal diplomatic approaches. To prepare for the future, their young generation must increase their awareness and appreciation of the mutual tie-in benefits from cordial and stable ties. Furthermore, Korea has yet to translate its widely popular soft power, epitomised by the K-culture, into some more concrete diplomatic weight. To do so, Seoul requires more diversified public diplomacy focusing on the Southern Hemisphere.

As such, reducing tensions between the US and China should be high on the Yoon Administration's diplomatic agenda. It will yield broader benefits for peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific, fitting its desired profile as a global game changer. In drafting Korea's version of the Indo-Pacific framework, one important task would be to create a regional environment that is conducive to the superpower's rapprochement to bolster regional security.

As Korea ramps up its international profile and enhances its overall cooperation with neighboring countries both within the frameworks of ASEAN and Indo-Pacific, stable ROK-China relations are prerequisite for the long-term economic security in the post pandemic.