South Korea’s China Play: Facing a Great Wall

JAE HO CHUNG

Whether China will rise is no longer a question, but the question of when and how China’s rising power will reshape the international order remains to be explored. In the meantime, the essential task for most nations is to determine how to respond to the ascent of China as a key independent variable in international politics. This challenge is particularly daunting for South Korea, which is poised between its strategic ally the United States and its strategic cooperative partner China.

South Korea’s engagement with China has long been lauded as a model for cultivating interdependence between former adversaries. What was unknown during this period of expanding bilateral cooperation, however, was that interdependence might result in asymmetric dependency. The “economic” rise of China and its rapid transformation into a great power over the years has increased South Korea’s vulnerability. Despite the surplus-generating structure of the bilateral trade relationship, South Korea’s trade dependence on China (21%) was much higher than China’s on South Korea (6.3%) in 2010. Reportedly, a 1 percent drop in China’s GDP would reduce Korea’s GDP by 0.2 percent, and a 1 percent rise in China’s consumer goods price would lead to a 0.1 percent increase in South Korea’s.

South Korea has long refrained from discussing negatively the military implications of China’s ascent. Seoul has maintained strategic ambiguity as to whether and under what circumstances China might become a security concern. With the inauguration of the Lee Myung-Bak administration in 2008, Seoul’s top priority in its foreign relations and policy has been strengthening the Republic of Korea (ROK)-U.S. alliance relationship. While both Seoul and Washington have repeatedly stated that the alliance is not directed against China, Beijing suspects that a primary function of the alliance may be to constrain or contain China.

Beijing has also become an essential diplomatic player, on par with the G-2, not only for regional issues but also, increasingly, to address global problems. What matters most to South Korea is China’s position on North Korea – often referred to as a “great wall.” Due to North Korea’s importance in China’s geo-strategic matrix, Beijing has not been able to think outside the North Korean box regarding the March 2010 Cheonan sinking and the November 2010 shelling of Yeonpyong Island. China’s stance on the latter incident, in which the perpetrator was clearly identifiable and which resulted in civilian casualties caused many South Koreans to question whether China could truly be a fair and honest broker in mediating Korean affairs. For example, some analysts have criticized China’s qualifications to host the Six-Party Talks or have the forum’s Secretariat be located in China.

South Korea and China established a “strategic cooperative partnership” in May 2008. Seoul and Beijing declared that this new partnership would enable the two countries to expand cooperation from the bilateral to the regional and even to the global domain. However, little evidence is available to date to suggest that Seoul and Beijing have been cooperating on regional issues, much less global ones.

As the level of interdependence rises, sources of friction between South Korea and China are bound to amplify. As many as seven issue areas may constitute key sources of conflict between South Korea and China. They include trade/commer-
cial frictions, historical disputes, clashes of values and norms, policy cacophony over the North Korean (nuclear) problem, the ROK-U.S. alliance, territorial disputes, and differing approaches toward Korean reunification.

The ROK-U.S. alliance is going to be a particularly thorny issue in Sino-South Korean relations in the years to come. Washington may often be tempted to contain or constrain Beijing by utilizing its system of alliances in the region. Given that China’s intentions toward the Peninsula have yet to be clarified, South Korea may also regard the alliance with the U.S. as a valuable insurance policy and useful strategic counterweight to a rising China. While the ROK-U.S. alliance was not considered an obstacle to Sino-South Korea relations during the 1990s (i.e., China made no mention of it in formal negotiations over normalization of relations with South Korea in 1992), it has become an issue on which China has increasingly voiced concern in recent years. China has already expressed its concern that the alliance might be used against China’s interests. Although the question of how to position oneself between Washington and Beijing is a daunting question for all nations in East Asia, it is all the more troublesome to South Korea.

With the global ascent of China – and with the ever-widening differential in power between the two countries – the future of ROK-China relations does not warrant blind optimism. As the Chinese refer to it, “the Seoul-Beijing relationship is healthy in general terms but carries some ‘dark currents’ under it.” These “dark currents” can, in a worst-case scenario, lead to a situation where the two countries come to lose mutual trust. If power disparity is still a crucial factor in the *modus operandi* of international politics, such a situation is bound to result in discomfort and distrust.

China’s rise – a vector of China’s rapid development and the relative growth of the rest of the world – is the result of China’s hard-won effort, and should not become a subject of derision or complaint. South Korea needs to borrow from China the principle of “taoguang yanghui” (i.e., saying little and working hard) to maintain its own economic, diplomatic, and military competitiveness so as not to be taken lightly by its bigger neighbors. In short, prudence is precisely what Seoul badly needs in managing the “Great Wall” in front of it.

Jae Ho CHUNG is a professor of international relations at Seoul National University, Korea. He is the author of *Between Ally and Partner: Korea–China Relations and the United States* (Columbia University Press 2007) and *China’s Crisis Management* (Routledge 2011). He can be reached at cjh@snu.ac.kr.

**ANNOUNCEMENT**

The Center for U.S.-Korea Policy at The Asia Foundation is moving to the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), where it will be known as the Program on U.S.-Korea Policy, under the direction of Scott Snyder. This will be the last newsletter issued by the Center at The Asia Foundation; however, we will continue to contribute to dialogue and analysis of developments in U.S.-Korea relations from our new home at CFR. We look forward to your continued interest and support for these activities as they transition to our new institutional home at the Council on Foreign Relations.

**NEWS & EVENTS**

**SEPTEMBER 8, 2011 — FOREIGN SERVICE INSTITUTE (FSI) — ARLINGTON, VA**

**EAST ASIA & NORTH KOREA**

Scott Snyder will give a lecture on “Coping with North Korea” for an East Asia class at the U.S. Foreign Service Institute.

**SEPTEMBER 13, 2011 — THE KOREA SOCIETY — NEW YORK, NY**

**CHINA-NORTH KOREA RELATIONS**

The Korea Society in New York will host Scott Snyder, Center for U.S.-Korea Policy Director, as part of its third session in its series on China-Korea relations.

**SEPTEMBER 15-16, 2011 — CENTER FOR U.S.-KOREA POLICY AND UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA**

**NORTH KOREAN TRANSITION**

The Center for U.S.-Korea Policy will hold a closed-door workshop on North Korea’s transition as part of a joint project led by Scott Snyder, Center for U.S.-Korea Policy Director, and Kyung-Ae Park, Director of the Center for Korean Research at the University of British Columbia.

**SEPTEMBER 19-20, 2011 — EAST-WEST CENTER, WASHINGTON, DC**

**BEYOND AMERICAN DOMINANCE: ASIA-PACIFIC ASSESSMENTS OF THE EMERGING ORDER**

The East-West Center will hold a workshop on a project entitled Beyond American Dominance: Asia-Pacific Assessments of the Emerging Order. The workshop will convene a group of American and Asian experts to explore evolving debates on the changes in the balance of power. Scott Snyder will participate as a discussant on Korea.

**OCTOBER 17-18, 2011 — THE ASIA FOUNDATION**

**KOREA**

**U.S.-KOREA DIALOGUE ON STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION**

The Asia Foundation will hold a U.S.-ROK workshop in Seoul on strategies for bilateral cooperation in the area of international development assistance.
PUBLICATIONS

Scott Snyder (September 6, 2011), “South Korea’s Contradictory Approach to Economic Engagement with the North,” Asia Unbound, Council on Foreign Relations.

See-Won Byun (September 2, 2011), “Sino-South Korea Ties Warming?,” The Diplomat.


For a complete list of publications, please visit: www.centerforuskoreapolicy.org

VIEWS ON THE U.S.-ROK ALLIANCE

“Our economic relationship with Korea is one of the world’s most important.”


“The Republic of Korea and the United States have not relaxed, and together we have nurtured a relationship forged in bitter combat into something much, much more: a living alliance between two thriving democracies.”

—Mike Mullen, Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff / Admiral, Remarks during the UNC/CFC/USFK Change of Command Ceremony, Seoul, South Korea, July 14, 2011.