

The ROK-PRC Joint Statement of the Future Vision and Its Implications for South Korean Policy Regarding China

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Since the establishment of diplomatic ties between the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) in August 1992, relations between the two countries have improved and advanced dramatically in all domains. Trade between the two countries, for example, grew from United States dollars (USD) 6.4 billion in 1992 to USD 215.1 billion in 2012, while the number of visitors and tourists grew from 130,000 to 6,910,000 over the same period. In response to the rapid expansion of economic and social exchange, policymakers of the two countries have similarly consolidated and deepened their political and institutional relations. What started out as a relationship of friendly cooperation in 1992 evolved into “a partnership for a common vision of the 21st century,” as remarked by former South Korean President Kim, Dae-jung on his visit to China in 1998 and later affirmed as “a comprehensive partnership for cooperation” in the remarks of another former South Korean president, Roh, Moo-hyun, on his visit to China in 2003. During former South Korean President Lee, Myung-bak’s term, he described the relationship as “a partnership for strategic cooperation” while visiting China in 2008.

Incumbent South Korean President Park, Geun-hye’s visit to China in June 2013 yet again confirmed the evolving status of South Korea-China relations, with the two countries’ leaders reaching an agreement on consolidating the current partnership for strategic cooperation.

The commitment to this goal is apparent in the Korea-China Joint Statement of the Future Vision and subsidiary agreements. Although the two countries' governments officially endorsed the statement and its attachments, South Korea actively led the drafting of the statement. The statement thus provides a key indicator on how South Korean policy toward China will change in the coming years.

South Korea-China Joint Statement of the Future Vision: Key Points and Implications

The chief feature of the joint statement is that it expresses South Korea's resolve to reinforce and consolidate its partnership with China for strategic cooperation. South Korea, in other words, made explicit its intent to expand the scope of its cooperation with China over and beyond the current bilateral level to include regional and global concerns. This involves establishing partnerships in all areas of cooperation, including the economy, society, politics, and security. Accordingly, South Korea agreed to strengthen the mechanisms for strategic dialogue with China on matters of foreign affairs and security. More specifically, these mechanisms will include a dialogue system between the two countries' deputy prime ministers, a new hotline between the foreign ministers, strategic dialogues between the deputy foreign ministers (held since 2008), a greater scope for the foreign and security dialogues (since 2002), and broader dialogues among national research organizations on common security concerns. After agreeing to systematize security strategy dialogues between the deputy defense ministers in 2011 and endorsing the joint statement this year, South Korea and China now share a far-reaching structure of dialogue on strategies for foreign relations, security, and defense. Organizing these official channels of communication on strategic interests and issues has served to reinforce mutual trust between the two countries and enabled them to manage common risks more effectively. The two countries, furthermore, have also agreed to enhance their cooperation on efforts to fight and prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, global terrorism, cybercrime, piracy, and financial crime. Through these agreements, South Korea has significantly widened the scope of its cooperation with China over and beyond the traditional and non-traditional issues of security.

The joint statement, which marked the height of the ROK-PRC summit in 2013, first and foremost affirms that South Korea is altering its policy toward China in recognition of China's growing influence on the international stage. More importantly, however, South Korea has also begun to note the importance and inevitability of cooperation with China on a wide range of issues, including those that arise as economic and social exchanges between the two countries increase the North Korean (and nuclear) problem, and a series of security issues reflecting the geographical proximity of the Korean peninsula and China. Another significant aspect of the joint statement is that South Korea has now actively endorsed the comprehensive concept of security

that encompasses traditional and non-traditional security concerns alike. As South Korea is evolving into a pluralistic democracy, it remains difficult to predict how the priorities of its security policy will change as new presidents are elected. Nevertheless, as the comprehensive concept of security grows in importance as part of the overall South Korean national strategy, and as China's influence will likely increase in the future, the current direction and basis of South Korea's policy toward China will remain more or less the same.

Specific Policy Issues Concerning China

The joint statement of 2013 covers a series of key security issues, including the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, the Plan for Cooperation for Peace in Northeast Asia, and various marine issues. Considering the importance of these issues, South Korea is likely to pursue the following policy goals with respect to China. First, South Korea will request China's cooperation on neutralizing the most significant threat facing Northeast Asia now: the denuclearization of North Korea. The Park administration, in particular, is keen on mobilizing all diplomatic resources to bring about China's active support of the administration's "Trust-Building Process for the Korean Peninsula," which involves deterring nuclear developments in North Korea and increasing dialogue between the two Koreas simultaneously. As South Korea perceives China exerts a significant influence over North Korea, it hopes that China will play a crucial role in this process.

Second, other priorities discussed during the 2013 summit were various marine issues with economic and security implications. The two countries affirmed their shared determination to expedite negotiations for a bilateral maritime boundary delimitation agreement and cooperate on research in marine science, marine economy, the polar regions, oceanic exploration and development, and the enforcement of maritime law. These marine issues deserve due attention, as the oceans and seas play an increasingly important role in the international economy and security in the 21st century. Dialogue and cooperation on marine issues is especially relevant to both China and South Korea, as the two countries share the West Sea and common interests regarding the exploration of the polar regions. Of the diverse marine issues, however, South Korea is most likely to prioritize the enforcement of maritime law (specifically, stopping illegal fishing by Chinese fishing boats in Korean waters, as it is the marine issue about which the Korean public is most passionate). South Korea is also likely to make efforts to define an exclusive economic zone in the Yellow Sea as a measure to prevent armed struggles with China at sea.

Lastly, it is important to note that "the Initiative for Cooperation and Peace in Northeast Asia" is mentioned in the joint statement. The Park administration originally devised the plan as part of its effort to shift the focus of attention, with regionwide cooperation, from the economy to

politics and security in order to reinforce stability, peace, and friendship in Northeast Asia. Critics point out that the plan is unlikely to materialize, especially now that strategic competition among all Northeast Asian states is growing fiercer. Yet the Park administration insists upon the plan as a way of communicating that the only way to prevent open conflicts and tragic wars in Northeast Asia by China's and other states' commitment to maintaining peace and order through bilateral and multilateral dialogues. By insisting on the plan, the Park administration also seems to cast Korea as an honest broker in the process of resolving tension and conflicts in the region.

As suggested before, the South Korean policy toward China has been (and will be) influenced by various factors, such as the "comprehensive security" concept, the economic and social exchange between the two countries, their geographical proximity, the structure of global politics, and the security environment of Northeast Asia. Of the factors shaping and influencing South Korea's policy toward China, all remain more or less constant, except for the strategic and security changes in Northeast Asia. As the rivalry among the superpowers heightens in Northeast Asia and South Korea faces increasing threats from one in particular, Korea's policy toward China will inevitably change, against its own wish to serve as a sincere agent of peace in the region. Therefore, South Korea's hope today is that major political players in Northeast Asia will favor means that conform to the international norms and values of the 21st century as they pursue the interests of their respective states.

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