

Xi Jinping's Visit to South Korea: Implications for the two Koreas

PRANAMITA BARUAH

Researcher, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi

Chinese President Xi Jinping's recent two-day state visit to South Korea in July attracted a lot of attention. The world closely monitored the developments, as the visit took place at a time when tensions in the Korean Peninsula are growing due to North Korea's relentless pursuit of missile and nuclear weapons programme. Geostategic rivalries and territorial antagonisms have turned the security environment in northeast Asia all the more volatile. Nevertheless, it was Xi's first visit to South Korea after assuming office, even though he and his South Korean counterpart Park Geun-hye have held four bilateral summits since last year. During the recent summit, the two countries signed a number of documents to boost economic and political ties. However, the joint statement issued after the summit seemed to highlight agreement over resumption of the Six Party Talks (SPT), and commitment towards finalizing the bilateral free trade agreement (FTA) by the end of this year.

Merely Symbolic?

Many analysts have argued that Xi Jinping's visit was heavier on symbolism than substance, as the joint statement did not yield any significant breakthroughs. According to these accounts, South Korean President Park Geun-hye's visit to China in June last year was more fruitful. The Joint Statement for Future Vision signed by the two countries at that time received highly favorable response not only at home but also abroad, especially in the US.¹ How-

ever, a similar kind of response was not possible from the recent summit. This time, the rest of the regional states, as well as the US, seemed apprehensive about the summit outcome and they monitored events with caution.

Xi Jinping's visit to South Korea was still significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, since the normalization of China-South Korea relations in 1992, Xi Jinping was the first Chinese president to visit Seoul before visiting Beijing's long-time ally North Korea.² Secondly, excluding the visit to Russia in February this year to attend the Winter Olympics, Xi Jinping's South Korea visit was his first single-nation overseas trip since assuming office.³ Thirdly, even though the recent visit did not indicate any significant departure from established policies of the two countries vis-à-vis North Korea, the very fact that both emphasized denuclearization in the joint statement released at Seoul sent a strong signal to Pyongyang. Last but not the least, in recent years China has been relentlessly pursuing South Korea to strengthen bilateral ties as the former hopes to acquire the latter's assistance in shaping a new security architecture and financial order in the region. Xi Jinping's visit to South Korea came at a time when President Park is striving to deepen and broaden bilateral relations with China. Under the circumstances, the visit cannot be treated merely as a sym-

1 Richard Weitz, "Xi's Seoul Summit Sustains Seoul Ties" (*China-US Focus*, 15 July 2014).

2 "Park-Xi summit draws regional powers' attention" (*The Korea Herald*, 3 July 2014).

3 "Beijing eyes closer ties with Seoul, increased clout" (*The Korea Herald*, 2 July 2014).



bolic gesture on the part of China towards South Korea. It seemed to have a number of implications for the regional states, as well as the US.

Bonhomie between China and South Korea: A Reality Check

China and South Korea are not natural allies. Recently though, their shared frustration with North Korea's provocative behavior, as well as their historical disputes with Japan, seem to have brought the two countries closer. Since assuming office, President Park has been particularly keen on strengthening economic ties with China, and in denuclearizing North Korea. During the July summit, both leaders vowed to work toward a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula. They also expressed their resolve to adhere to the UN Security Resolutions against Pyongyang for its involvement in nuclear and missile development programme.⁴ These are significant steps in strengthening China-South Korean relations.

However, the recent summit did not indicate any dramatic shift in China's policy towards North Korea. That seems to concern the South Koreans. For years, South Korea has been seeking China's support in denuclearizing North Korea. This time, South Korea reportedly tried to single out North Korea for denuclearization in the joint statement. Even though China expressed its intention to deal with the Korean Peninsula issue in a balanced manner, and emphasized denuclearization, it abstained from specifying 'North Korea'. Also, the joint statement did not contain anything that could antagonize North Korea or harm relations between Beijing and Pyongyang.⁵

During the recent summit, while South Korea called for North Korea's commitment towards its own denuclear-

ization, China emphasized the necessity of the state parties of the SPT to lower the threshold for North Korea to relinquish its nuclear aspirations. Such divergence in North Korea policy pushed the Chinese and South Korean leadership to reconcile by simply incorporating wording that the concerned states would try to resolve disputes through "meaningful dialogues in various forums".⁶ It also bears mention that South Korea has been seeking Chinese support for a South Korea-led reunification of the Korean Peninsula. However, as long as South Korea continues to remain allied with the US, it will be extremely difficult to convince China of this logic.⁷

Economic cooperation remains one of the key components of China-South Korean relations. The fact that 250 Chinese business executives accompanied Xi on his visit supports that point.⁸ During Xi's visit, both countries talked about accelerating the negotiation for the conclusion of the bilateral FTA. The trade volume between the two countries stood at US\$220 billion last year.⁹ That is larger than South Korea's trade with the US and Japan combined.¹⁰ The proposed FTA will undoubtedly boost China-South Korea economic cooperation further. During the recent summit, both countries also

explored the possibility of launching a direct transaction market of their currencies. As South Korea's trade with China constitutes more than 20% of its total trade, the proposed market seemed to prove particularly beneficial

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4 "Leaders send message to North Korea" (*The Korea Herald*, 3 July 2014).

5 Richard Weitz, "Xi's Seoul Summit Sustains Seoul Ties" (*China-US Focus*, 15 July 2014).

6 *Ibid.*

7 Scott Snyder, "China snubs North Korea with leader's visit to South Korea" (*The Guardian*, 3 July 2014).

8 "China and South Korea oppose North Korea Nuclear tests" (*BBC News*, 3 July 2014).

9 Scott Snyder, "China snubs North Korea with leader's visit to South Korea" (*The Guardian*, 3 July 2014).

10 "With Seoul visit, China leader sends message north" (*Associated Press/CBS News*, 2 July 2014).



to South Korea, and the deal could also reduce South Korea's dependence on the dollar in international trade.¹¹ However, Seoul's opposition to Beijing's proposed multi-lateral bank – the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank – to finance development projects in Asia could prove a barrier to boosting their bilateral economic ties further. Seoul has opposed joining any regional financial order that excludes the US. Given the divergence between Seoul and Beijing, the recent joint statement expressed only agreement on the “need to expand investment on infrastructure for Asia's economic growth”.¹²

In the wake of China's declaration of the Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in November 2013, as both China and South Korea succeeded in resolving their spat over the issue, many analysts argued that the two countries could explore the possibility of strengthening security ties. Their argument seemed justified, to some extent, as China did not pressurize the South to reduce its joint military drills with the U.S. during the recent summit. Beijing also abstained from taking an extremely critical stance on South Korea's US-led missile defense system. South Korea seemed to appreciate that gesture by expressing its intention not to adopt the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD).¹³ The US wants to bring the missile system to South Korea to deal with North Korean nuclear threat. Although Seoul's decision might have assuaged Beijing's concerns, it could put Washington in an uncomfortable position.

However, although South Korea does not treat China as a direct security threat, it seems apprehensive about the possibility of China's growing military assertiveness leading to regional arms race and heightening of regional tensions.¹⁴ For its part, China continues to be suspicious of the US-South Korean security alliance and treat it as part of the US strategy to contain China. Such apprehension and mutual suspicion have emerged as major challenges in expanding security ties between China and South Korea.

The divergent approaches towards regional security became evident when South Korea rejected China's proposal to create a new Asian security order based on the notion that “Asian security should rely on Asians”.¹⁵ Given its long-standing security alliance with the US, South Korea did not seem to find that proposal quite appealing. Although Xi and Park expressed concern about Japan's move to reinterpret its pacifist constitution and exercise

the right to collective self-defense, Seoul abstained from condemning Tokyo's comeback as global military power during the July summit. By doing so, South Korea might be sending a message to the US that it was not trying to alienate itself from the US-South Korea-Japan trilateral alliance. In fact, there was hardly any mention of Japan in the joint statement between China and South Korea. Instead the two countries agreed to carry out joint study on Japan's involvement in the comfort women issue.¹⁶

A Rift Between Beijing and Pyongyang?

Xi Jinping's visit to Seoul before Pyongyang certainly irked North Korea. Interestingly though, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un has yet to receive an invitation to visit China. Moreover, in the last three years China has not held a bilateral summit with North Korea. So, in an apparent attempt to express displeasure with Xi's trip, North Korea fired several short-range missiles and rockets into the sea off its eastern coast in the weeks ahead of the Xi visit.¹⁷

In recent years, North Korea's belligerency and relentless pursuit for nuclear weapons has raised questions in various quarters regarding China's continued leverage over its wayward ally. North Korea could jeopardize China's plan to emerge as a major player in the international order in the near future. That is why these days China has become much more vocal in criticizing North Korea for its nuclear programme, especially at the UN. Xi expressed displeasure in February 2013, after Pyongyang carried out its third nuclear test in defiance of China's warning. Frustrated with North Korea's behavior, Xi broke away from the long-standing tradition and visited Seoul first before visiting Pyongyang.

However, the current bonhomie between China and South Korea does not signify that the China's relationship with North Korea is in jeopardy. China wants to deal with the two Koreas while keeping in mind its relations with the other neighboring states as well as the US. It would like to continue maintaining its leverage over North Korea in order to have a say in the issues such as the North's denuclearization, and the reunification of the two Koreas. China's growing efforts towards resuming the SPT and its avoidance of specifying North Korea in the joint statement this July, clearly indicates that Beijing is not about to sacrifice its alliance with Pyongyang at the cost of Beijing-Seoul relationship.

As for North Korea, it cannot take China for granted much longer. Given the North's economic dependence on China, defying Beijing could hurt Pyongyang's own national interest. In the wake of the UN's condemnation of North Korea's ballistic missile launches and nuclear tests, Pyongyang has threatened to carry out a “new

11 “Chinese leader Xi arrives in S. Korea for summit with Park” (*Yonhap/The Korea Herald*, 3 July 2014).

12 Hee Ok Lee, “South Korea-China Relations, What has Changed and What will be Sustained?” (*East Asia Foundation, EAF Policy Debates*, No. 6, 16 July 2014).

13 *Ibid.*

14 Richard Weitz, “Xi's Seoul Summit Sustains Seoul Ties” (*China-US Focus*, 15 July 2014).

15 Hee Ok Lee, “South Korea-China Relations, What has Changed and What will be Sustained?” (*East Asia Foundation, EAF Policy Debates*, No. 6, 16 July 2014).

16 “North Korea Newsletter 321” (*Yonhap*, 10 July 2014).

17 “With Seoul visit, China leader sends message north” (*Associated Press/CBS News*, 2 July 2014).



form” of nuclear test.¹⁸ Such a step could rupture the Beijing-Pyongyang relationship. Moreover, it could provoke South Korea and Japan, not to mention the US, to take strong measures against North Korea.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that China and South Korea share economic interests. But China has become increasingly aware of Seoul’s strategic value amid the ongoing great power rivalries. It would be very much in Beijing’s interest to keep Seoul distant from Washington’s “pivot” toward Asia. However, South Korea’s interest in the region could get hurt to some extent as other regional powers, including the US, pressure it to take sides. At this point, Seoul needs a more prudent and creative foreign policy strategy, one that could help South Korea maintain constructive partnerships with rest of the regional powers while maintaining its security alliance with the US.

North Korea also needs to restrain itself from taking further provocative action against neighboring states, as this could alienate China. At present, a heavily sanctioned North Korea cannot afford to lose Chinese patronage. Moreover, if Pyongyang keeps up its belligerent attitude, the resumption of the SPT will be in jeopardy. Even though China has been pushing for the resumption of the talks, North Korea’s provocations could compel China to stand against the former to reiterate Beijing’s claim as a responsible regional leader. Under the circumstances, North Korea needs to strengthen ties with China further. In order to recover its depleting economy, North Korea should focus on making some

sincere efforts in resuming the SPT. Improving relations with neighboring states would benefit North Korea both economically and strategically.

18 “North Korea Newsletter 321” (*Yonhap*, 10 July 2014).

EDITOR | Paulo Gorjão
ASSISTANT EDITOR | Sean Goforth
DESIGN | Atelier Teresa Cardoso Bastos

Portuguese Institute of International Relations and Security (IPRIS)
Rua da Junqueira, 188 - 1349-001 Lisboa
PORTUGAL

<http://www.ipris.org>
email: ipris@ipris.org

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