

Enemy, Homager or Equal Partner?: Evolving Korea-China Relations

Heungkyu Kim

Since the formal establishment of South Korea (hereafter, Korea)-the People's Republic of China (hereafter, China) relations in 1992, the bilateral relationship has recorded tremendous success in terms of trade volume, cooperation on the North Korean nuclear crisis, and the magnitude of exchanges in various areas. However, it is also true that the bilateral relations still remain far from satisfaction in terms of depth and degree of communication, crisis management, and a shared vision. Given Korean's psychological alertness and apprehension formed over a long history of contacts with China, differences in political system, mutual misperceptions, and degree of understanding, these problems cast serious challenges for future relations between the two countries. In the future, Korea-China relations could be sour and bumpy if the Korean government relies excessively on security-oriented approaches, centering on its alliance with the U.S.

Korea needs to exercise a "creative middle power-pragmatic diplomacy" in dealing with China. The objective is to establish a positive-sum game in the Korea-China strategic cooperative partnership, extending consultation and cooperation beyond security issues on the Korean Peninsula. Both the Korea-U.S. alliance and the Korea-China strategic cooperative partnership should be the foundation of Korea's diplomatic assets, under which Korea would try to persuade North Korea to abandon its nuclear program.

The substance of Korea-China relations will be determined by the policies of each government to consolidate the "cooperative strategic partnership." Sound communication, political will, and strategic management matter. The future relationship of Korea with China is at the crossroad among the ranges of being enemy, homager, or equal partner. Korea obviously favors the establishment of an equal partnership with China, based upon the common principles of mutual respect, cooperation, and co-prosperity.

Keywords: *Korea-China Relations, Strategic Cooperative Partnership, North Korea, the U.S.-China Relations, Strategic Thinking*

1. INTRODUCTION

Formal state relationship between Korea and China was established on August 24, 1992. Since then, the relationship between the two countries has developed very rapidly in various areas (Snyder, 2009). In economy area, China has been the most important trading partner since 2004 and is likely to maintain the status for the next decade. Korea also became the third-largest trading partner to China. As of 2011, the trade volume between the two countries exceeded 240 billion U.S. Dollars and is likely to reach 300 billion U.S. Dollars by 2015 as both countries set the target. Such a breathtakingly rapid development of the Korea-China relationship can be described as a "miracle of bilateral diplomacy" (Wang, 2007).

In terms of formal relationship, Korea and China have steadfastly upgraded their relationship from a "friendly cooperative relationship" in 1992, "cooperative partnership toward 21st century" in 1998, "comprehensive cooperative partnership" in 2003, to a

“strategic cooperative partnership” in 2008, which is one of the highest forms of bilateral relationship in Chinese foreign policy.¹ Due to the establishment of such strategic relationship, Korea and China have been able to discuss North Korea issues in their bilateral meetings.

During the most of the Cold War period, Korea regarded China as an enemy, only accepting Taiwan as the legitimate government. China also recognized only North Korea as a legitimate state on the Korean Peninsula. However, Korea had gradually expanded its contacts with China since China adopted a policy of reform and opening up in 1978. During the period of 1980s, Korea had two China policies in practice although it had a one-China policy supporting Taiwan in principle. China also maintained its former one-Korea policy but in practice recognized Korea as a political entity.

China officially adopted two Korea policies when it supported both Koreas as UN members in 1991 although China was still in favor of North Korea in its psychology and strategic interests (Kim, 2003:12). The normalization in 1992 between Korea and China meant that Korea accepted China as the only legitimate government representing the whole China in principle as well as in practice.

Under Hu Jintao’s leadership after 2002, China made a very strategic decision adopting a balanced policy between the two Koreas in principle. In the process of reevaluating Chinese foreign policy, Hu and his foreign policy aids made a decision to transform China-North Korea relationship into a normal state-to-state relationship. Although there is no obvious evidence to connect North Korea’s pursuit of its nuclear program with the Chinese decision, growing isolation of North Korea even from China is likely to be related to North Korea’s efforts for nuclear armament. In Chinese perspective, the second nuclear crisis brought North Korea to the fore of Chinese foreign policy and strategic concerns. However, it was not necessary for North Korea to be its strategic assets but to be a troublemaker. The overall trends of relationship between Korea and China have certainly evolved in favor of Korea in comparison to North Korea.

However, it is ironic that China watchers in Korea as well as Korea observers in China agree that the level of political trust between the two countries has been at the lowest under President Lee Myoung-bak of Korea ever since the establishment of their formal relationship. China perceived Lee’s foreign policy as a potential threat to China’s as well as regional stability.² China perceived Lee’s policy to heavily lean towards the U.S. It also viewed Lee’s North Korea policy to be based upon the presumption of North Korea’s incoming collapse, which threatens China’s strategic interests. The levels of public trust in both countries have recently been at the downfalls as well.³

Given the dramatic increases in trade volume, personnel, social, and cultural exchanges, and active cooperation on the North Korean nuclear issue, the current atmosphere of tension between the two countries is difficult to explain. Such increasing economic and personnel exchanges, cooperation, and communication didn’t promote better political relationship between the two countries. Why are the bilateral relations more complicated than it appears

¹ Regarding details of the forms of Chinese foreign policy, see (Kim, 2009:287-305).

² For example, see (Kim, 2008a); (Zhang, 2008). Also author’s various interviews in China.

³ Northeast Asian History Foundation, *Public Opinion Poll on Korea-China Relations* (2007-2010). Regarding a Survey-based analysis on Korea-China relations, for example, see (Lee, 2012). However, it is also noteworthy that due to the difficulties in conducting surveys in China, statistics and data may not well reflect realities. Thus, deciphering may be more important than reading the data themselves.

to be? And is the relationship at the crossroads? As explained, the rise of a conservative party in the 2008 Presidential election in Korea might be the source of the problem; however, it has much more complex roots, both historically and structurally. This short paper seeks to explain the following questions: what factors have affected relationship between the two countries? What strategic values do Chinese policy-makers perceive on Korea? And what factors may determine the future relationship between the two countries?

2. AMBIVALENCE OF KOREA-CHINA RELATIONS

2.1. Changing Perceptions in between Historical Legacy and Current Experiences

Korean views and emotions towards the Chinese are quite complicated and ambivalent. Korean views over China have been formed throughout thousands of years of mutual exchanges. Koreans acknowledge that it is their fate to live with China. China is a geographical power to Korea; meanwhile, the United States is a geopolitical power. Throughout Korean history, China has been responsible for nearly a half of over 930 foreign invasions. Therefore, Koreans share a deep sense of apprehension and fear of a strong China. Whenever instability rises in China, it has negatively affected lives of Koreans. Koreans inevitably apprehend overflowing political influence of China on the Korean peninsula as well. It is not difficult to find out that they dared to run the risks of fighting back militarily for survival and independence in the past if China excessively sought to extend its influence.

Before the normalization, Korea obviously regarded China as an ally to North Korea and hostile country. However, due to the rapid growth of economic cooperation and personnel exchanges, just before the Northeast project emerged as a political-diplomatic problem, according to a Dong-a Daily News survey (May 4, 2004), China was considered the most popular country with an approval rating of 61% (26% for the United States) (Chung, 2007a:6-12). During the period, the volume of the trades between the two countries dramatically increased from 6.37 billion U.S. dollars in 1992 to 57.0 billion U.S. dollars in 2003. According to a liberalist axiom that more economic and human exchanges likely promote peace, such a development must have strengthened the bilateral relationship between Korea and China.

However, such an optimistic view on Korea-China relations cannot explain why Koreans were so alarmed by China's so-called "Northeast (history) Project (*dongbei gongcheng*)," which dramatically damaged China's image within Korea. In the immediate aftermath of the dispute, Koreans who disapproved of China climbed to 58.2% in an opinion poll by the Korean Broadcasting System. Despite considerable efforts by the Chinese government to quell the issue, as of 2010, 45.8% of Koreans still held views which were unfavorable to or alarmed by China.⁴

Recent seemingly-aggressive foreign policy of China toward neighboring countries, illustrated in the *Cheonan battleship* incident and the *Senkaku (Diaoyu)* islands dispute in 2010, quickly brought a historical image of Chinese arrogance and apprehension incised among Koreans. Accordingly, its disapproval rate quickly increased from 34.5% in 2007 to 45.8% in 2010.⁵ According to the survey outcome of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies,

⁴ Korea Northeast Asian History Foundation, p. 21.

⁵ Data from Surveys of Korea Northeast Asian History Foundation (2007-2010).

China's favorability rate also dropped from 4.5 in 2010 to 4.0 in 2012 in the 0~7.0 scales (7.0: Full Satisfaction) although the change was not as drastic as in the disapproval rate. The results are quite behind to that of the U.S from 5.9 in 2010 to 5.5 in 2012.⁶

Korea may be the nation most knowledgeable about and accustomed to China. Let alone the experiences of contacts for thousands of years as a geographical neighbor, about 60% of HSK examinees in the world are currently Koreans (White Paper of the MOFAT, 2010:294). Between Korea-China, there are 830 flights every week, compared to 550 times between China-Japan. Public views of Korea on China had dramatically improved since the normalization in 1992 until the moment just before the "Northeast (history) Project incident, reflecting that Korean economy must have been one of the most beneficiaries of the rapid rise of China in the world. However, recent experiences illustrate that views on China are not stagnant in Korea and are likely to dramatically change if any conflict incurs.

Therefore, it is shortsighted to assume that Korea has positive—even unconditionally favorable—views towards China.⁷ Such a view may unconsciously lead to the impetuous impression that Korea would eventually fall into the orbit of Chinese empire in the future. Recent studies on Sino-North Korea relations also told us that distrust has been deeply rooted in the bilateral relations due to lessons from history (Lee, 2000:206-215; Chung and Im, 2003:235-39).⁸ Constructivist theory of international relations told us the importance of perception socially constructed. Koreans' views on China have been constructed historically as much as socially during a long period of time. Therefore, Korean's views on China must be a mixture of historical memories and experiences and current needs and experiences, which are much more complex than appeared on the surface.

2.2. Strengthening Relations in Diplomacy and Security after the Cold War

A Korean China expert, Jae ho Chung, argues that a honeymoon period between Korea and China ended with the "garlic dispute" in 2000 (Chung, 2011:262). From the Chinese perspective, the financial crisis during the years of 1997~98 disillusioned the myth of Korean economic miracles. The bilateral relationship gradually transformed into a normal relationship in which both countries placed their priority on economic interests rather than special and political consideration. More disputes such as "Garlic battle" in 2000, the Northeast Project issues in 2004 and 2007, and the "Kimchi" incident in 2006 occurred. Public opinions on China fluctuated over time in Korea, with the recent trends of downgrading.

However, steadfast institutionalization and upgrades reached an unprecedented scope in the areas of Summit level of exchanges, formal diplomatic relationship, and governmental dialogues in economy, diplomacy, and even security during the period of 2000s. Recently, the exchange of top-level visits has been brisk. Beginning with Roh Tae-woo in 1992, successive Korean presidents have made official visits to China; Kim Young-sam in 1994, Kim Dae-jung in 1998, Roh Moo-hyun in 2003 and 2006. In particular, under Lee's government, there has been 10 summit meetings, and if it includes the meetings with Chinese

⁶ According to the poll, favorability rate for Japan significantly declined from 4.2 in 2010 to 2.9 in 2012. See the AIPS monthly poll at http://www.asaninst.org/03_publications/report_detail.php?seq=1598&ipage=1&nums=0&ca=1 (2012. 10. 8).

⁷ For example, see the argument of (Chung, 2007).

⁸ Kim Jung Il's unfriendly attitude and apprehension of China is also been well-known.

Table 1. Statistics of Korea-China Relations

Period	Classification	Evaluation	Statistics	
			Trade Volume (100 Mil.)	Personal Exchanges (10 Thous.)
YS (1993-1997)	Friendly Cooperative Relations (1992) ^a	Rapid Development in Economy, Trade, Personal Exchanges	63.7 (1992)	13 (1992)
DJ (1998-2002)	Cooperative Partnership toward 21 st Century (1998)	High-level of Personal Exchanges and Further Cooperation in Diplomacy	411.5 (2002)	226 (2002)
MH (2003-2007)	Comprehensive Cooperative Partnership (2003)	Comprehensive Cooperation in Various Areas	1,450 (2007)	585 (2007)
MB (2008-2012)	Strategic Cooperative Partnership (2008)	Complex Relations	2,400 (2011)	640 (2011)

Premier Wen Jiabao, both countries held almost four summit level of meetings annually. From China, President Jiang Zemin visited Korea in 1995, President Hu Jintao in 2005 and in 2012 and Prime Minister Wen Jiabao in 2007.

Favorable atmospheres in bilateral relations reached at the zenith during the Roh Moo-hyun government. Close consultations between Seoul and Beijing were held concerning the North Korean nuclear question and security conditions on the Korean Peninsula and in the East Asia region. China closely cooperated with Korea in the six-party talks with recognition that Seoul's "Peace and Prosperity Policy" toward North Korea coincided with its own objective of peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula under the Roh administration of Korea. It was also during these years that a hot line was established between the two governments, a rare action in their bilateral security and military relationship given the legacy of the Korean War and the strategic importance of North Korea from the Chinese side.

However, the bilateral relations cooled down under the Lee government. With China focusing on stability on the Korean peninsula, Lee government of Korea placed its policy priority on denuclearization of North Korea policy, being away from South-North rapprochement policy of previous governments. Korea regards the threat of North Korea as the most imminent and realistic one as well illustrated in the *Yeonpyung* incident, North Korea bombarding civilian area.

China's North Korea experts are inclined to believe that denuclearization is connected to the survival of North Korea's regime after the second nuclear test of North Korea in 2009. This kind of perspective understands that even a small yield or diplomatic failure on the North Korean side could bring crisis to Kim's regime.

China seemed to believe that Seoul's policies to North Korea aimed at overthrowing North Korean regime, which is against its strategic interests. Furthermore, Korea is willing to invite the US forces to control China and be a variable in the relationship between the US and China as well illustrated in the *Cheonan battleship* incident. As a result, Chinese unease towards the Lee's government has risen.

It would be a long and difficult (maybe almost impossible under the current security environments) process for North Korea to give up its nuclear capabilities. Once, most

Chinese experts believed that nuclear devices of North Korea would be a bargaining chip to the US until the second nuclear test in 2009. North Korea would slowly advance through the phases of nuclear resolution in order to maximize the amount of compensation. Moreover, many Chinese experts thought that the North Korean nuclear resolution had much to do with international society's capability to support North Korea. However, Beijing's former assessment has proven wrong, given North Korean behavior.

While developing and consolidating its nuclear capabilities, North Korea hopes to receive international economic assistance to stabilize its economy and regime. Given the current situation, whether North Korea is able to adopt a pacifist way is uncertain and not likely. It is more likely to continue and intensify troubles in the future. The only way for them to achieve its objectives is to cultivate schism of interests of each member of the other five-parties.

Surprisingly, China adopted much more active engagement policies toward North Korea and has promoted personal exchanges immediately after the second North Korean nuclear test. When the *Cheonan battleship* incident in March, 2010 and the *Yeonpyung* bombardment in November, 2010, occurred, no matter how North Korea behaved, China rigidly stuck to its Korea policy priority of stability. This built up an image of China as an irresponsible pro-North Korea country to the public of Korean public.

Such different policy priorities naturally lead to frictions and tension between Korea and China. In this respect, North Korea has been successful of cultivating priority differences of Korea-China, engulfing the schism, forming a new Cold war-like security environment in Northeast Asia under which North Korea can harvest fruits most. In the near future, however, little hope for policy coordination between Korea and China exists in dealing with North Korea problem although coordinated actions among five-parties are the most important in resolving the issue.

The strategic value of Korea to China, with their economic cooperation, may continue to be high for a while due to the changing international security environment, in spite of their low level of trust and bumpy relations in the recent years. At the regional level, power shift between China and Japan is in process, and between the US and China at the global level. Such strategic shifts increase Korea's strategic value to China. Korea can be a "swing state" in the eyes of China. If Korea were sided with Japan and the US, China would be likely beleaguered and forced to live in a Cold War-like-environment. Korea's role in maintaining stability on the Korean peninsula and Korea's strategic value in the geopolitics of Northeast Asia can't be neglected.

At the institutional level, Korea and China elevated their formal relationship from the comprehensive cooperative partnership to the strategic cooperative partnership in 2008, which is one of the highest levels of relations in Chinese foreign policy. Both countries hold strategic dialogues in the areas of foreign affairs and security at the vice-minister level respectively as well. Both also enjoy dialogues at various levels quite extensively.

Both countries agreed in 2012 that they would establish a hot line between Ministries of National Defense and also hold a strategic dialogue in security area. In the security area, both countries are certainly crossing over the initial level of military cooperation passing over military exchanges.⁹ They have increased exchanges in military personnel as well as organizations at various levels. However, such developments are not likely going beyond the initial level of military cooperation unless getting over several obstacles. Crucial variables in

⁹ For the status of Korea-China military cooperation, see (Kim, 2003b:72-77); (Hwang, 2007); (Kim, 2012b).

the relationship in the future are Korea-China relations, development of Sino-North Korea relations, uncertainty of future orientation of Chinese military development, unhealthy development of Sino-U.S. relations, orientation of Korea-U.S. alliance toward China, and overall security environments in East Asia. Throughout recent experiences, it became obvious that North Korea as well as the U.S. factor would be crucial for Korea-China relations in diplomacy and security area in spite of various positive factors between them. Both countries are not independent from these variables in developing their relationship.

3. CHINA'S KOREA POLICY

3.1. Relative Importance of Variables

Over time, relative importance of variables in the making of China's Korea policies has changed. During the Jiang Zemin era (1989-2002), factors that once positively affected Sino-North Korean relations have turned into liabilities.¹⁰ The modifications of China's own development strategy gave rise to changes in China's understanding and evaluation of North Korea. China's international isolation due to the *Tiananmen* incident in 1989 facilitated the formalization of diplomatic relations with Korea in 1992, despite North Korea's opposition.¹¹ China's policy priority in foreign affairs was overcoming international isolation and receiving aid for economic development.¹² Korea's strategic value came to outweigh that of North Korea for the first time in the trilateral relations.

The North Korean leader, Kim Il sung's sudden death in 1994 also meant the end of old comradeship based upon personal affinity among China-North Korean leaders. From the Chinese perspective, North Korea became a forgotten kingdom, and China didn't provide any help to North Korea in spite of the formidable famine and economic troubles occurred during the late 1990s.

During the first term of Hu's era, all variables ameliorating Korea-China relationship continues to be positive. Korea-China still enjoyed a honeymoon period in spite of a short clash over the "Garlic trade" in 2000. After the second North Korea nuclear crisis erupted in 2002, Roh government of Korea helped China prevent from facing international isolation because both Korea and China had similar policy priorities on the Korean peninsula to keep peace and stability, while surviving Kim Jung Il's regime. The second nuclear crisis certainly influenced Sino-North Korean relations, facilitating the adjustment of China's North Korean policy orientation from the traditional alliance-like relations to a normal state-to-state relation. Ironically, North Korea became the most important agenda for Chinese foreign policy.

During the second term of Hu's era, China's Korea policies have rather changed in a negative way to Korea. Although the pillar of China's Korea policy has maintained the previous equidistance policy, China gradually adopted more positive and active engagement policy toward North Korea. A considerable distrust against Lee government of Korea has also strained Korea-China relations although they established a "strategic cooperative

¹⁰ See more details on variables (Kim, 2008b).

¹¹ See (Lee, 2000:206-215); (Chung and Im, 2003:235-39).

¹² Regarding the priority of Hu's foreign policy, see (Jin, 2006:35-48).

Table 2. Variables in China's Making Korea Policy

Cold War Era (~1978)	Post-Cold War			
	1 st term Jiang Era (1992~1997)	2 nd term Jiang Era (1997~2002)	1 st term Hu's Era (2002~2007)	2 nd term Hu's Era (2007-2012)
	Kim Young-sam (1993~1997)	Kim Dae-joong (1998~2002)	Roh Moo-hyun (2003~2007)	Lee Myoung-bak (2008~2012)
Economic Dev. Strategy	-	+	+	+
Security in Northeast	-	+	-	+→-
Foreign Policy Orientation	-	+	+	-
China's Economic Conditions	-	+	+	+
Relations with North Korea	-	-→+	+	+
Personal Affinity	-	-→+	+	+

Note: The symbol “+” means that the variable affected Korea-China relations toward a positive direction; the symbol “-” means the negative.

partnership” in 2008. China seemed to believe that Lee's North Korea policies were based upon the belief that North Korea would collapse, which is against the strategic interests of China. Furthermore, growing frictions and disputes between China and the U.S after the U.S declaring the “pivot to Asia” policies increased the strategic value of North Korea and brought more tension in the bilateral relations between Lee's Korea and China. Upon the new challenges, China is in search of its new foreign policies with a scent of turbulence.¹³ In the meantime, ambivalent attitudes on the Korean peninsula in the Chinese foreign policy complicated the Chinese objectives laid out in a mixture of strategic and short-term interests.

3.2. Diversified Chinese Strategic Thinking

According to various surveys, writings, and interviews in China, changing perceptions and diversified strategic ideas on the two Koreas have been observed. Along with its economic rise, strategic ideas in China have also evolved and become diversified. Therefore, it is misleading if one believes that Chinese strategic thinking on the Korean peninsula is monolithic. Furthermore, a top-down approach to Chinese decision-making is likely to cause a misunderstanding of Chinese foreign policy. Chinese strategic thinking has become diversified, according to how they perceive China's international status. Three groups of Chinese thinkers can be identified depending on their perceptions on China's status in the world. These three schools are identified as the ‘traditional geopolitical school’ which include chauvinistic nationalists, the ‘developing country school,’ and the ‘newly rising great power school.’

The characteristic of China's foreign policy during the Jiang Zemin era (1989-2002) is

¹³ Regarding the turbulence of China's foreign policy, see (Kim, 2012a:33-50).

best described by the “hide capacities and bide time (*taoguangyanghui*: 韜光養晦)” principle, the core idea of the ‘developing country diplomacy school.’ However, reflecting China’s growing national capacity, the strategic policy during the Hu Jintao era (2002-present) has gradually changed into the attitude of “being able to accomplish something (*yousuo zuowei*: 有所作為),” the main idea of the ‘newly rising to great power school.’ China under Hu Jintao took a more active foreign policy in pursuit of international status of a ‘great power’. When the second North Korean nuclear crisis occurred at the early stage of Hu’s succession to power, Hu’s China rejected the previous position of ‘hesitant intervention policy’ to external affairs. Instead, it took up a more active role as a mediator and established a solid international image as a ‘responsible great power’ by successfully launching the Six-party talks. Furthermore, growing confidence of China after the financial crisis during the period of 2008~09 allowed Chinese foreign policy to cross the *Rubicon*. The principle of “*taoguangyanghui*” would no longer be a guide line of Chinese foreign policy in the future.

Traditionalists regard North Korea as a buffer zone and a strategic asset to counter the bilateral alliance mechanism in Northeast Asia. Traditionalist hawks argue that China must consider North Korea one of its important allies to prevent U.S. hegemony; hence, China will

Table 3. Policy Orientations of China’s Strategic Schools

	Traditional Geopolitics School	Developing Country School	Rising Great Power School
International Status	(Old) Great Power	Developing Country	Rising Great Power
Status in NEA	Competing with the US for Dominance	Cooperating with the US, but Competing with Japan for Regional Hegemony	Competing with the US for Right Status in the Region/World
Relationship with the US	Competitive	Cooperative	Hedging
Policy Direction	Challenging	Bandwagoning →Hedging	Mixture of Hedging and Soft-balancing
Key Word	Geopolitics/Buffer Zone	Hide capacities and Bide time	Taking necessary measures
Policy on the Korean Peninsula in general	Recovery of Influence	Status-quo	Status-quo with a potential of Change
Policy on Korea	Not Friendly	Subject for Diplomatic Inclusiveness and Management	Opportunistic: both Inclusion as well as Exclusion
Perception on North Korea	Buffer Zone	Trouble-Maker	Trouble-Maker /Strategic Card
Policy Means on North Korean Issues	Political Support and Economic Aid	Economic Aid and Diplomatic Persuasion	Complex Means including Coercion

Source: Revised version of the [Table 1] in Kim, Heungkyu. 2010. “From a Buffer Zone to a Strategic Burden: Evolving Sino-North Korea Relations during Hu Jintao Era.” *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 22(1)

take measures to strengthen its “special ties” with the reclusive regime. Accordingly, this group regards Korea as a hostile state allied with the U.S. to counter China.

Although the contexts are a bit different, a summary titled “Keeping an Eye on an Unruly Neighbor,” written by Bonnie Glaser, Scott Snyder, and John Park, was influenced by such thoughts, regarding Chinese intervention in North Korean territory:

“If the international community did not react in a timely manner as internal order in North Korea deteriorated rapidly, China would seek to take the initiative in restoring stability.”¹⁴

Developing country school holds that despite some differences between China and the U.S., they favor sound relations with the U.S., looking at the relationship with Korea in the context of constructing sound Sino-U.S. relations. They have created a major line of Chinese foreign policy during *Jiang Zemin*’s and still in *Hu Jintao*’s eras, taking the pragmatic approach mainly featured in the “hide capacities and bide time” principle. Based upon such recognition, they support affirming China’s foreign policy goal to establish peaceful relations with neighboring states including Korea as well as great powers for the purpose of continued economic development (at least) until 2020, when a “medium-level of well-being society (小康社會)” will be reached. In this line of ideas, they sought to transform the relationship with North Korea into a normal state-to-state relationship.

The “newly rising great power school” regards China as a rising great power, second to the U.S., and feels that Chinese may collide head-on with the U.S. The ideas of this group are gradually gaining popularity among the Chinese populace and elites in the 17th party Congress even before the financial crisis. On the Korean peninsula, they are likely to favor playing a more active role as a great power in the region in dealing with the issue, as well as in preserving its interests on the Korean peninsula. They are likely to oppose unilateral intervention in North Korea either by the U.S. or Korea.

The evolving strategic thinking of China will certainly influence their Korea policies and the future relations between Korea and China. Given the circumstance, China is likely to maintain its current equidistance policy to the two Koreas during the first term of Xi Jinping’s era. However, Korea-China relationship is not necessarily rosy and may face serious challenges. There is flaring nationalism with the rise of the “great power school”. China may face difficulties in controlling domestic pressures over its foreign policies.

In the middle of intensifying US-China competitions, China may find a strategic value of North Korea. Unsettled power configuration in Northeast Asia as a result of recent China’s rapid rise is likely to increase the strategic value of North Korea. The first major foreign policy adjustment of *Xi Jinping*, Chinese leader of the 5th generation, is likely to recover its relationship with North Korea. China also needs to have better relationship with North Korea to manage its disruptive behaviors and prevent the North Korea from being a variable in the US-China relations.

Domestic factors such as more actors in foreign policy-making with uncoordinated behaviors, unclear foreign policy vision, power transition, China’s decision-making style contributed to a conservative policy on Korea policies. Increasing influence of Chinese nationalism on foreign policy might have a negative impact upon a sound Korea policy. China may enter a period of turbulence in its foreign policy orientation during the last half of 2010s. Accordingly, predicting Chinese responses to North Korea issues will become more

¹⁴ See the Summary part of (Glaser, Snyder, and Park, 2008).

difficult. In reality, such conditions above mentioned may reduce the scope of flexibility and creativity, and deter constructive visions in Chinese foreign policy, which may be detrimental to Korea's interests. As a result, we may face North Korea with nuclear weapons. Consequences that follow would be increasing mutual distrust, arms race, and more chaotic security situation in this region for a long, long time to settle down.

3.3. Recognition of Korea's Strategic Importance

In 2004, China became Korea's largest trading partner, while Korea ranked as China's third largest. This increase of mutual interdependence and the collaboration on North Korean nuclear issues meant the emergence of the "Korea factor" as an important element in China's foreign policy toward the Korean Peninsula. Even if this variable may not be a decisive one, it will increasingly influence China's policy toward North Korea.

The North Korean nuclear crisis enhanced Korea's strategic importance. If Korea had not supported China's policy, Beijing would have faced a difficult situation in the international process to resolve the North Korean question. Throughout the nuclear crisis, Korea has continued to provide aid to the North along with China, and sided with China in dissuading other countries from taking military action against North Korea as its policy priority focuses on maintaining peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. If China had been the only country to provide aid to the North, the country might have faced international censure for abandoning the global norm and resorting to Cold War behavior of socialist solidarity. Apprehension about China would have spread in the international community.

Korea did not accept the "security cooperation" concept for East Asia and the "value diplomacy" proposed by the conservative Japanese government, intended to link the United States, Japan, Australia, and India based on their common democratic values. Korea's non-interest helped foil the move which, if materialized, could have isolated China. During Hu Jintao's visit in 2006, Seoul recognized China's market status to successfully becoming one of a few of the world's industrialized nations to do so.

The report to the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in October 2007 noted that "the international situation has entered a stage of great upheavals and readjustments, and the world is in a very unstable condition." Such a statement must be applicable to the situation in Northeast Asia. Under these circumstances, China continues to recognize Korea's strategic importance in view of the instability caused by North Korea. President Hu said, in a congratulatory message to President Lee Myung-bak, that "the Chinese government highly regards relations with Korea and gives high priority to diplomacy with Korea."

In the future, several factors such as increasing signs of instability in the North Korean government, an increasingly unreliable North Korean attitude toward China, the necessity to cooperate with Korea in the event of Korean unification, and the realignment of Northeast Asian security architecture following Korean unification may keep the strategic importance of Korea a high priority in China's Foreign Policy.

However, China is not likely to take any initiative on Korean Peninsula issues, including North Korea's nuclear issues, given the historical backgrounds, strategic interests, and power configuration between the U.S. and China, and the evolving schools of thought in China's foreign policy. China will probably pay attention most to changing regional security situations, placing the fate of Korean peninsula on a lengthy cycle of power transition; in particular, China will pay special attention to US policies. Neither the US nor China is likely

to back down although they certainly do not want overall crashes at all.

4. KOREA'S CHINA POLICY OPTIONS

Korea's foreign policy will be influenced by the regional configuration of international relations; most importantly by power transition between the U.S. and China. Korea would be left with no alternative but to work closely with both the United States and China as illustrated in the table 4. Both the U.S. and China have respective roles, capacities and the will to intervene in Korean issues, including the North Korean nuclear crisis.¹⁵ Given the circumstances, Korea's China policy orientations vary according to the power transition in East Asia as well as in the world: from "Allying with the U.S & Communicating with China well (聯美通中)", to "Allying with the U.S & Harmonizing with China (聯美和中)," to "Allying with the U.S & Cooperating with China (聯美協中)," and to "Concerting with the U.S. and China (聯美聯中)." The policy orientations are not necessarily linear, which will be influenced by changing the U.S-China relations.

Under the threat of North Korean nuclear weapons and military provocations, the Korea-US alliance must be the pillar for Korea's security architecture for the next coming decades. However, given the rise of China, Korea's foreign policy should be more complicated and multi-dimensional, seeking co-operation from neighboring countries. Korea must work with China to harvest fruits from China's economic development, to promote further cooperation on North Korea and to maintain peace and stability on the Korean peninsula.¹⁶

The subtlety and complexity of evolving the US-China relations would be a great challenge for Korea. Korea must constantly prepare for the future transformation of regional politics. Then Korea should be able to respond to it accordingly. Without such dynamic policy preparation, Korea is likely to fail to draw a positive outcome from kaleidoscopic changes in this region.

In the next decade, the U.S.-China relationship becomes much more complex, hard to read the subtlety of such relations. Korea needs to analyze carefully the situation from multiple and strategic standpoints. It needs to formulate measures to avoid alienation from Korean peninsula issues as a result of US-China strategic cooperation or consortium. It also needs to issue a strong message that it would be the failure of the US/China foreign policy if it forces Korea to choose either.

As a middle power, Korea cannot play a balancing role in this regional power configuration. However, Korea may have a bridging role by promoting further cooperation, initiating a new cooperative mechanism, and seeking to mitigate tension between/among great powers in this region. However, we are fully aware that it will be difficult to achieve stability, prosperity, and peace alone. Establishing a middle-power cooperative mechanism is required. Middle powers in this region face a similar international milieu and can promote common interests through establishing such a middle-power cooperative mechanism.

With strong economic interdependence as a foundation, Korea would work to broaden the scope of its political, social, cultural and military relations with China in order to

¹⁵ Although Korea's mediating role between the two great powers is not an easy task, should more positive circumstances arise, such a role should not be excluded. See (Wang, 2005:39-48).

¹⁶ For the need for a framework to maintain stability in the Korean peninsula, see (Goodby, 2006); (Sigal, 2006:30-52); (Yeo, 2006:53-65).

Table 4. Korea's Policy Options¹⁷

	Allying with the U.S & Communicating with China well (聯美通中)	Allying with the U.S & Harmonizing with China (聯美和中)	Allying with the U.S & Cooperating with China (聯美協中)	Concerting with the U.S. and China (聯美聯中)
Temporal Domain	Lee Administration	Next 5 Years	Next 5~15 Years	Next 15~25 Years
Power Balance	U.S. Superiority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U.S Superiority in Military • Balance in Economy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U.S Superiority in Military • China Superiority in Economy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balance in Military • China Superiority in Economy
The US-China Relations	Competition	Complex Relations of Competition, Coordination, and Cooperation	Strategic Cooperation	Strategic Balance and Consortium
South-North Korea Relations	Competition	Searching for Mutual Trust	Strengthening Coordination & Cooperation	Unification
Rise of China and Uncertainty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthening Alliance with the U.S • Promotion of Regional Cooperation • Common Interests First Policy with China 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No Sided Diplomacy with China • Building Regional & Multilateral Security Mechanism • Searching for Middle-Power Cooperation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthening Cooperation with China • Institutionalizing Regional & Multilateral Security Mechanism • Institutionalization of Middle-Power Cooperation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dissolution of Alliance System • Regional & Multilateral Security Mechanism • Active roles of Middle Power Mechanism

cultivate mutual trust between the two countries. Bilateral relations must be enhanced on all fronts so as significantly to weaken the causal link between the aforementioned issues of potential discord and mutual animosity.

A careful review of the evolution of China's intention and capabilities regarding Korea is also necessary. This would involve an accurate understanding of China's strategic objectives, degree of military readiness, sustainability of its economic growth, domestic challenges and, finally, China's strategic thinking vis-a-vis the changing political-security climate on the Korean peninsula and East Asia region as a whole. In achieving this understanding, Korea should neither exaggerate nor underestimate China's goals, capabilities and possible roles in the region. In this process, it is critical to keep in mind that Korea should cooperate with regional middle powers as much as possible.

¹⁷ Regarding the other version of scenarios (Kim, 2008: 13).

V. CONCLUSION

Since the formal establishment of Korea-China relations in 1992, the bilateral relationship has recorded tremendous successes in terms of trade volume, cooperation on the North Korean nuclear crisis, and the number of exchanges in various areas. However, it is also true that the bilateral relations still remain far from satisfaction in terms of depth and degree of communication, crisis management, and a shared vision. Given Korea's psychological alertness and apprehension formed over a long history of contacts with China, differences in political system, mutual misperceptions and lack of understanding, these problems cast serious challenges for improved future relations between the two countries.

Korea needs to exercise a "creative middle power-pragmatic diplomacy" in dealing with China. The objective is to establish a positive-sum game in the Korea-China strategic partnership, extending beyond security issues on the Korean Peninsula. Both the Korea-U.S. alliance and the Korea-China strategic cooperative partnership should be the foundation of Korea's diplomatic assets, under which Korea would try to persuade North Korea to abandon its nuclear program.

Pragmatic policy focuses on results without adhering to moral absolutism, the so-called "value diplomacy." The aim should be the establishment of cooperative and mutually prosperous relations. Creative diplomacy avoids confining China in a fixed concept and takes an imaginative approach considering the trajectories and uncertainties of Chinese diplomacy. In this approach, strategic management capabilities are more emphasized than strategic planning.

Conflicts and competition between China and Japan as well as the US and China, resulting from the "pivot to Asia" policy and Chinese aggression, may prove to be continuously destabilizing factors in the region despite their tremendous level of economic interdependence and globalization.¹⁸ However, China is a state in the process of transformation. Predicting the future of China according to a fixed standard risks losing sight of reality. It is necessary to maintain a strategic alertness so that Korea can adjust its policies to the changes taking place in this region. China is already a neighbor that cannot be rejected or avoided on the basis of good or bad. Korea should try to establish complex, multifaceted, and full-fledged cooperative relations with China through close communication and mutual understanding.

The substance of Korea's relations with China will be determined by the policies of each government to consolidate the "cooperative strategic partnership." Sound communication, political will, and strategic management matter. The future relationship of Korea with China is at the crossroad among the ranges of being enemy, homager, or equal partner. Korea obviously favors the establishment of an equal partnership with China, based upon the common principles of mutual respect, cooperation, and co-prosperity as others probably do so.

Article Received: 10-18-2012 Revised: 12-12-2012 Accepted: 12-25-2012

¹⁸ Regarding the analysis of such rapprochement, see (Kim, 2008).

REFERENCE

- Chung Jae ho. 2007a. "Living Dangerously?: Korea's Complex Cohabitation with a Rising China." Paper presented on a conference organized by S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies. March 8-9.
- Chung, Jae ho. 2007b. *Between Ally and Partner*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Chung, Jae ho. 2011. *Zonggukewi busanggwa hanbandoeui mirae (The Rise of China and the Future of Korean Peninsula)*. Seoul: Seoul National University Press.
- Chung, Sung jang and Jae hyung, Im. 2003. "Foreign Policy Strategy of North Korea." In *National Strategy of North Korea*. Seoul: Hanwool Academy.
- Glaser, Bonnie, Scott Snyder, and John S. Park. 2008. "Keeping an Eye on an Unruly Neighbor." Washington D.C: Center for Strategic and International Studies and United States Institute of Peace. Accessed December 8. http://csis.org/files/media/csispubs/pubs/071227_wp_china_northkorea.pdf.
- Goodby, James E. 2006. "Creating a Peace Regime in Korea." *PacNet No. 23*. Honolulu: Pacific Forum CSIS. Accessed June 30. <http://csis.org/files/media/csispubs/pac0623.pdf>.
- Hwang, Jaeho. 2007. "Korea's Military Diplomacy to China." *Study of National Security Policy*.
- Jin, Canrong. 2006. "China's New Diplomacy and Regional Security Cooperation in East Asia." Paper presented at ACIS International Meeting, Multilateral Cooperation in East Asia. Austrian Center for International Studies, December.
- Kim, Heungkyu. 2008a. "Northeast Asia Faces Turbulence. Korea Times, May 28. Accessed May 28. http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2008/05/116_24849.
- Kim, Heungkyu. 2008b. "The Sino-North Korean Relationship at the Crossroads." In *North Korean in Distress*, edited by Hak soon Paik and Seong chang Cheong, 172-184. Seoul: The Sejong Institute.
- Kim, Heungkyu. 2008c. "Hu Jintao's visit to Japan and the Sino-Japan Relationship." *Jungse wa Jungchak (Circumstances and Policies)*. Seoul: Sejong Institute. Accessed June 30. http://www.sejong.org/Pub_ci/pub_ci_view.php?in_ser=146.
- Kim, Heungkyu. 2008d. "The Formation of Korea-China Strategic Cooperative Partnership and the Prospects for Korea-China Relationship." Seoul: Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security.
- Kim, Heungkyu. 2009. "China's Partnership Diplomacy: Concept, Process, and Implication." *Korean Political Science Review* 43(2):287-305.
- Kim, Heungkyu. 2010. "From a Buffer Zone to a Strategic Burden: Evolving Sino-North Korea Relations during Hu Jintao Era." *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 22(1).
- Kim, Heungkyu. 2012a. "Principles and Practices in Chinese Foreign Policymaking: Implications for its Korea Policies." *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 24(1):33-50.
- Kim, Samuel S. 2003a. "China and North Korea in a Changing World." *Asia Program Special Report No.115*. Woodrow Wilson International Center.
- Kim, Jiyeon, Karl Friedhoff, and Chungku Kang. 2012. The Asan Public Opinion Report August 2012. The Asan Institute for Policy Studies (AIPS). Accessed October 8. http://www.asaninst.org/03_publications/report_detail.php?seq=1598&ipage=1&nu

- ms=0&ca=1.
- Kim, Taeho. 2003b. "Korea-China Relations: Eleven Years and the Future." *Quarterly Sasang*. Seoul: Institute of Social Sciences.
- Kim, Taeho. 2012b. "Korea-China Security Cooperation for Stability on the Korean Peninsula.' 20th Anniversary of Korea-China Normalization and Korea-China Security Cooperation." Paper submitted at the seminar at the Korean National Defense University, Seoul, May 2.
- Northeast Asian History Foundation. 2008. Accessed November 18, 2011. <http://www.historyfoundation.or.kr/>.
- Lee, Jongseok. 2000. *Sino-North Korea Relationship, 1945-2000*. Seoul: Joongsim Press.
- Lee, Jung-nam. 2012. "Faltering Korea-China Relations with the Emergence of the G2 Era." *EAI Asia Security Initiative Working Paper* (26). Seoul: The East Asia Institute.
- Northeast Asian History Foundation. *Public Opinion Poll on Korea-China Relations (2007-2010)*. (Unpublished materials)
- Sigal, Leon V. 2006. "Building a Peace Regime in Korea: An American View." *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies* 15(1):30-52.
- Snyder, Scott. 2009. *China's Rise and the Two Koreas*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publisher.
- Surveys of Korea Northeast Asian History Foundation (2007-2010) (Unpublished materials).
- Wang, Jisi. 2005. "China's Search for Stability with America." *Foreign Affairs* 84(5):39-48.
- Wang, Sheng. 2007. "Zhonghanjianjiao 15nian (Fifteen Years since Normalization of Sino-Korea Relationship)." *Zhongguo Wujiao (China's Diplomacy)* (11):52.
- Wei, Zhijiang. 2009. *Lengzhanhou Zhonghanguanxi Yanjiu (Study on China-Korea Relations after the Cold War)*. Guangzhou: Zhongshan University Press.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. 2010. *White Paper for Korea-China Expert Committee on Korea-China Relations*. Seoul: Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade.
- Yeo, In-Gon. 2006. "Search for Peaceful Resolution of the North Korean Nuclear Issue." *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies* 15(1):53-65.
- Zhang, Sejung. 2008. "New Chosun stratagem on a go board." Joongang Daily News, March 13.