

This column by PCI Board Member, Dr. Chung-in Moon, appeared in the Hankyoreh on Monday, June 17, 2024.

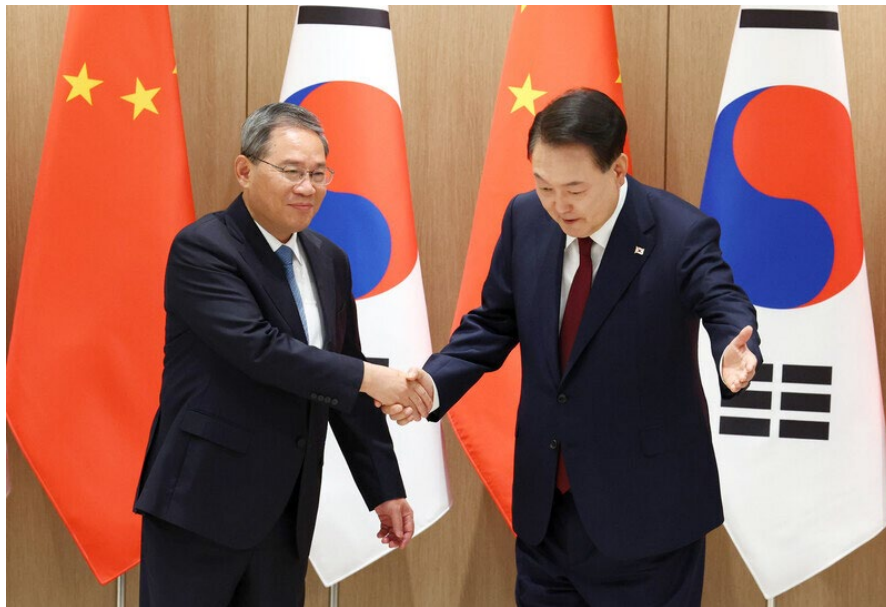
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[Column] S. Korea-China cooperation still has a long way to go

Posted on : 2024-06-17 16:28 KST Modified on : 2024-06-17 16:28 KST

There's a critical need to fundamentally rethink Korea-China relations from a pragmatic perspective



President Yoon Suk-yeol shakes hands with Chinese Premier Li Qiang during a summit held at the presidential office in Seoul on May 26, 2024. (Yonhap)



By Chung-in Moon, James Laney Distinguished Professor at Yonsei University

The Chinese seemed to be expecting a lot from their trilateral summit with South Korea and Japan on May 26, which ended a hiatus of four and a half years. Along with the hope that the meeting would motivate the three leaders to boost cooperation and improve relations between their countries, Beijing was betting it would also create an opportunity for slowing South Korea and Japan's cooperation with America's campaign to contain China.

Indeed, several hopeful comments about improving ties between China and South Korea appeared in the Chinese press around the summit. Chinese commentators were unanimous in highlighting (1) the flexible attitude that South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul demonstrated during his visit to China, (2) Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol and Chinese Premier Li Qiang's agreement to speed up the second

phase of the free trade agreement during the summit, (3) the reopening of a Korea-China investment cooperation committee that had been defunct for 13 years, (4) the establishment of a body for deliberating and coordinating supply chain issues between the two countries, and (5) an agreement to set up regular “two plus two” meetings between Korea and China’s vice foreign ministers and defense ministry bureau chiefs. In short, it was the kind of praise rarely seen in the Chinese press.

But I came away with a very different impression when I spoke with Chinese officials and Korean Peninsula experts on the ground in Beijing last week. Their view can be summed up as follows: We still have a long way to go. They backed up that position by bringing up the following four points.

First and foremost, my Chinese friends said that Seoul shouldn’t expect any meaningful cooperation with Beijing as long as it’s impinging on China’s core interests.

Shortly after the Korea-China-Japan summit, South Korean Minister of National Defense Shin Won-sik attended the Shangri-La Dialogue, in Singapore, where he met with his counterparts from the US and Japan. The three defense officials released a joint statement in which they “reaffirmed that they strongly oppose any unilateral attempts to change the status quo in the waters of the Indo-Pacific” and criticized China’s “unlawful maritime claims [. . .] in the South China Sea.” The three officials also “called for the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues.”

In addition, Korea, the US and Japan agreed to hold joint military exercises beginning this summer.

The Chinese government responded testily. A Chinese official criticized the comments about Taiwan as “a violation of the ‘one China’ principle, reckless interference in China’s internal affairs, and a malicious attack.” The official also stated that “Korea, the US and Japan are not in the South China Sea and should not meddle in maritime issues between countries in that region.”

China’s response strongly suggests that if Korea undermines China’s core interests of sovereignty and territorial integrity, it could make cooperation in other areas impossible and wreck bilateral relations overall. Those are certainly troubling prospects for South Korea.

Chinese officials all agreed that South Korea’s alliance with the US is a matter of Korean sovereignty and that China is in no position to tell it what to do. But they made a point of adding that China would not tolerate any attempts to use the North Korean threat as a pretext for justifying military curbs or blockades of China.

There was also a veiled warning that if Korea allows the US to deploy more THAAD missile defense batteries or to forward-deploy intermediate-range ballistic missiles on the Korean Peninsula, or if it takes part in any military actions against China in the Taiwan Strait or the South China Sea, Beijing will regard that as a hostile act and will take corresponding measures. While those “corresponding measures” were not specified, my contacts hinted that they might be more tangible than the economic retaliation that followed the THAAD controversy.

My Chinese contacts were also quite critical of the argument made by some South Korean conservatives that Korea can gain leverage in negotiations with China if it strengthens its alliance with the US to secure more support from the American government. The Chinese response was that overreliance on the US could end up being not an asset, but a liability for Korea.

My contacts also said that Koreans shouldn't confuse the China of today with the China of the 1990s. Considering that not even the US can bend China to its will, it would be anachronistic for South Korea to assume it could borrow American strength to exert indirect pressure on China.

China has traditionally advocated peace and stability and the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and called for resolving issues through dialogue and diplomacy. But it has taken a hands-off approach to the recent rise of military tensions on the peninsula.

When I criticized China's passivity, my contacts in Beijing responded much as they have in the past. They said that the Chinese government has already presented a solution that should be acceptable to South Korea, North Korea and the US: namely, simultaneously halting South Korea-US joint military exercises and North Korean nuclear weapon and missile tests and simultaneously moving toward the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and the establishment of a peace regime there. But since South Korea and the US have rejected that proposal and barged ahead with a hard-line stance toward North Korea, there's nothing else for China to do.

Coming after China's trilateral summit with South Korea and Japan and its resumption of dialogue with South Korea, my Chinese contacts' attitudes are likely to disappoint observers both in South Korea and other countries. That's why the future of Seoul-Beijing relations looks so bleak.

Emphasizing principles, strengthening the ROK-US alliance, and augmenting trilateral cooperation with the US and Japan may be necessary, but they're unlikely to resolve South Korea's outstanding issues with China. There's a critical need to fundamentally rethink Korea-China relations from a pragmatic perspective, and from the perspective of the national interest.

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