

China Shouldn't Treat South Korea as an Enemy

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One of the most stunning geopolitical transformations in recent years has been the warming relationship between South Korea and the People's Republic of China. Yet Beijing is putting those ties at risk in a fit of pique over Seoul's decision to participate in the THAAD anti-missile system. American policymakers are enjoying the spectacle of the PRC pushing Seoul back toward the U.S.

Beijing's relationship with the Republic of Korea began inauspiciously. At the conclusion of World War II the U.S. and Soviet Union divided the former Japanese colony, leading to creation of two independent states. North Korea's Kim Il-sung launched his campaign to conquer the South in June 1950. But his regime teetered on defeat after American intervention, at which point China, backed by Moscow, poured its armed forces into the conflict.

Although combat was halted by an armistice in July 1953, formal peace never came. Throughout the Cold War the PRC backed the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, despite sometimes bad relations between the two governments. Only in 1992 did the PRC and Republic of Korea finally initiate diplomatic relations.

Even then, economic links long predominated. The DPRK was not happy with the rapprochement between its sole remaining ally and the South, but retained the PRC's primary political affection. Indeed, the North Korea-China relationship was managed by the Communist Party's International Department and the People's Liberation Army retained particular interest in bilateral ties, which were typically, if not always accurately, described as "close as lips and teeth."

Today China trades more with the South than do the U.S. and Japan combined. Moreover, the political relationship has shifted as well. Under Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, and now Kim Jong-un Pyongyang ignored China's advice and admonitions. All three Kims proceeded with nuclear and missile programs. The first two also refused to adopt economic reforms.

The result has been precisely the sort of instability and controversy that the PRC does not want on its border. Beijing long has been unhappy with the antics of its nominal friend and in recent years warmed its relationship with Seoul. In fact, President Xi Jinping has met repeatedly with the ROK's Park Geun-hye but not once with North Korea's Kim Jong-un.

However, Chinese officials fear that taking tougher measures, such as cutting off energy and food assistance, would promote a North Korean collapse, which could spread refugees, conflict, and nukes, to the PRC's obvious detriment. Moreover, reunification might yield a united Korea allied with America and hosting U.S. troops, precisely what Mao Zedong's China sought to forestall more than 66 years ago.

Fear of North Korean capabilities—the possibility of miniaturizing nuclear weapons and placing them on missiles—caused the ROK to agree last year to participate in America's anti-missile system known as THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense). Beijing denounced the decision, fearing that the program also would be directed against China. But the PRC's fulminations failed to change Seoul's decision.

So Beijing now is targeting commercial and cultural ties between the two countries. China has prohibited package tours to the South. Beijing also has blocked streaming of ROK television shows and K-pop music videos in China. Concerts by South Korean pop groups and fan meets by television stars have been cancelled.

Chinese consumers are organizing online to boycott cosmetics from the South. Chinese hackers have attacked websites for the Lotte Group, which sold land to the South Korean government for deployment of THAAD. Chinese publications have promoted a ban on ROK stars from Chinese TV and the ouster of Lotte from the PRC. Mobs have vandalized Hyundai cars.

No doubt, such activities have given some satisfaction to a nationalistic population. But they won't change Seoul's policy. Certainly PRC officials would not surrender to a similar campaign against Beijing. ROK politics might be in chaos, but South Koreans are equally nationalistic.

Indeed, China's aggressive response is particularly myopic given politics in the South. If President Park is ousted, early presidential elections may bring the left-wing opposition to power. Then South Korea likely would take a more accommodating position toward the North, reopening the Kaesong industrial park, for instance. A leftish president also would be more inclined to reverse Park's THAAD decision.

Moreover, by interfering with ROK cultural exports Beijing is targeting the part of the South Korean population most likely to want a closer relationship with the PRC. Older South Koreans are more likely to remember America's role in the Korean War and its aftermath; without Washington's assistance, the South would have been swallowed by Kim Il-sung's totalitarian regime.

In contrast, younger ROK generations came of age as China expanded its role in the South. They are comfortable with the change and would benefit from even closer ties. At the popular level the PRC is gaining on America.

However, by lashing out at South Koreans of all sorts—what do K-pop stars have to do with missile defense?—Beijing reminds its potential friends that it remains an authoritarian state which subjugates individual choice to political ends. Cutting off group tours imposes an economic price on the ROK, but on average South Koreans, not government officials. In contrast, flooding the South with Chinese tourists, building relationships and spreading cash, would be more likely to win hearts and minds for the PRC.

Ironically, in launching its economic campaign Beijing is effectively doing Washington's bidding. U.S. policymakers long have worried about the PRC's economic draw on the South. As China voluntarily curbs those ties, American officials couldn't be happier.

Ultimately the problem is North Korea. Beijing, Seoul, and Washington should develop a concerted approach to promote denuclearization in the North—providing the latter a greater sense of security while simultaneously applying greater pressure. It's the only strategy likely to yield positive results.

In the meantime, the PRC should rethink its self-defeating strategy of trashing its new friend. China and South Korea should cooperate to promote regional stability and peace. The sooner they start working together, the better.

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