

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

## How China Can Craft a Better Relationship with South Korea

*Beijing needs to revise its approach if it wants to ease tensions and avoid pushing Seoul closer to Washington.*

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Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi recently visited Seoul hoping to repair strained relations. He predictably urged resolution of inter-Korean disputes through “dialogue.” He suggested “a phased and synchronized” process to foreclose “war and chaos.”

In return, South Korean President Moon Jae-in expressed “gratitude” for China’s “constructive role and cooperation.” Moon added that “Our government will not stop efforts to put an end to war on the Korean Peninsula and achieve complete denuclearization and permanent peace together with the international community, including China.”

It was all harmless boilerplate, but serious issues are at stake. How to achieve denuclearization and peace? And how will the People’s Republic of China, which has displayed hostility toward both the Republic of Korea and the United States, contribute?

If Beijing is serious about reducing peninsular tensions, it needs to encourage North Korea to exercise restraint and to respect the ROK’s separate but not-so-equal status with Washington. The PRC would advance both these objectives by spelling out its fundamental interests to Seoul and Washington, while reducing its not entirely veiled threats to both Koreas.

Although China’s influence over the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea is limited, of late Beijing has relaxed sanctions enforcement and provided energy and food aid. The first is of minimal effect while the North has essentially blockaded itself because of coronavirus fears. However, the second is thought to help keep the Kim regime afloat, which should at least give President Xi Jinping a hearing in Pyongyang.

The PRC’s point should be simple: a missile launch or nuclear test to get Washington’s attention would give ammunition to American critics of continued engagement. Such conduct also would complicate efforts to deescalate relations between the United States and China. The more hostile and confrontational those ties, the more militarized they will become. Which will naturally generate additional domestic demands that Washington adopt a tougher approach toward the

North Korea. The sanctions relief so desired by Kim will be possible, if at all, only in a more positive environment with easing tensions.

Moreover, just as the North and China are not one, South Korea and America are not one. After Seoul deployed the THAAD missile defense system under U.S. pressure, Beijing hit the ROK hard with commercial penalties. The economic losses for both sides were substantial. However, the price paid by Beijing went beyond money. South Koreans, who had been generally friendly to the PRC, turned sharply against their large neighbor.

Beijing managed to simultaneously underestimate U.S. pressure on Seoul, exaggerate the risk posed by THAAD to the PRC, and impose a disproportionate penalty on the South. China also failed to convince the ROK to reverse the offending policy and instead convinced many South Koreans that American support was required to confront China. Antagonism toward Beijing in the South will not soon ebb: a repeat episode would be disastrous.

The Xi government might achieve more if it explained its reluctance to apply “maximum pressure” on the North. PRC critics in the United States assume that China controls the DPRK and intends to use the latter against Washington. However, there is plenty of historical evidence that the relationship between Beijing and Pyongyang is difficult at best. Nevertheless, the Xi government has good reason not to risk crashing the North Korean economy.

A collapse could result in civil war, loose nuclear weapons, mass refugee flows, and instability on its border. The adjoining Chinese provinces have many ethnic Koreans, creating enduring but potentially destabilizing ethnic attractions both ways. Thus, the PRC has good reason not to push too hard too fast. In comparison, Americans could look at their southern border and consider the potential impact of Mexico’s similar collapse, exacerbated by possession of nuclear weapons.

Even worse from Beijing’s standpoint is what might follow a collapse. Reunification could create a unified Korea allied with the United States and hosting American troops on China’s border. This possibility triggered the PRC’s entry into the Korean War in October 1953. Circumstances have changed, but the toxic mix of ideological and emotional impulses is similar. If Washington and Seoul understand why Beijing is so touchy about the issue, they might be able to find effective workarounds to satisfy both sides. In this case, for instance, America could promise to withdraw its forces and the South could pledge neutrality upon reunification.

Finally, Beijing has threatened, at least indirectly, both the South and North. Irredentist sentiments continue to bubble north and south of the Yalu, based on ancient, irrelevant, but nevertheless attractive historical events. Sanctions tied to THAAD demonstrated to Seoul China’s ruthless approach to smaller powers, demand for obedience by what Beijing views as modern tributary states, and ability to do harm. PRC behavior in the South China Sea, Hong Kong, and Taiwan also unsettled the ROK, even though the Moon government prefers to say nothing publicly about such disquieting events.

Xi’s starting point should be to acknowledge that the economic penalties against THAAD were excessive, unhelpful, and ignored South Korea’s dependence on America. Indeed, using its

economic clout to browbeat other states mimics a U.S. tactic, promiscuously targeting friends as well as foes with economic sanctions. Beijing could privately repent if not publicly apologize.

China also could initiate conversations with the ROK over how to handle North Korea in the future if collapse seems likely and reunification becomes possible, emphasizing China's commitment to an enduring peaceful settlement. Respecting its international commitment toward Hong Kong and the general requirements of peace and stability regarding Taiwan also would help calm the South.

North Korea's fear of Beijing has a negative impact as well. The North has steadfastly guarded its independence since its creation, playing the PRC against the Soviet Union throughout the Cold War. One reason Pyongyang wants a relationship with the United States is to give it another potential partner. Moreover, becoming a nuclear power enables the DPRK to better push back against China.

This puts a premium on the Xi government finding the right strategy to push the Kim dynasty without threatening its existence and demanding too much in return for commercial relations or emergency assistance. Ironically, Pyongyang might be more responsive if pressed less, perhaps easing if not eliminating its conviction that only an independent nuclear arsenal ensures that it can withstand future demands from Beijing as well as the West.

Such an approach contradicts Xi's ever-more confrontational international policies. However, the latter has transformed possible friends, such as South Korea, into skeptical and even hostile reluctant partners. It doesn't matter how many times Wang visits the peninsula. Without a more productive strategy future trips are unlikely to achieve much.

Washington's coterie of hawks likely would look at a better ROK-China relationship with suspicion. However, the United States is less likely to be called on to rescue allies and others if the region is peaceful and individual relationships with Beijing are civil. Indeed, America also should pursue a better relationship with the PRC. For two decades the bipartisan War Party has run riot in Washington. With a new administration it would be foolish not to try a different policy in a different world.

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