

Tuesday, May 5, 2009

BOOKS: 'China's Rise and the Two Koreas'

[Doug Bandow](#)

CHINA'S RISE AND THE TWO KOREAS: POLITICS, ECONOMICS, SECURITY

By Scott Snyder

Lynne Reinner Publishers, \$22.50, 239 pages

REVIEWED BY DOUG BANDOW

In "China's Rise and the Two Koreas," Scott Snyder argues increased ties between China and the Republic of Korea have had only limited impact on Seoul's security relationship with Washington. However, eventually "South Korea may be forced to come to terms with this fundamental contradiction between its economic dependence on China and its security dependence on the United States," writes Mr. Snyder.

Mr. Snyder, an associate with both the Asia Foundation and Pacific Forum CSIS, has written a highly useful book about the complicated Chinese relationship with both North and South Korea, and how those ties affect America's role in East Asia. Rapid growth has turned the People's Republic of China into the region's dominant economic player. East Asia's political and security arrangements have changed more slowly, but they are changing. For example, Australia's Labor government just announced a significant increase in military outlays, backed by an extensive white paper citing Beijing's ongoing military build-up.

Although the Democratic People's Republic of Korea originally was a Soviet project, China became the DPRK's chief patron when it intervened in the Korean War in late 1950 to save Kim

Il-sung from certain defeat. Yet relations between the two communist states were never easy. Mr. Snyder neatly summarizes the contentious relationship: On his way to securing absolute power, "Great Leader" Kim suppressed the so-called Yenan faction, made up of North Koreans who had spent time in China.

Moreover, Beijing's military rescue was a profound embarrassment to a dictator who claimed infallibility. Explains Mr. Snyder: "Kim minimized Chinese cultural influences in North Korean life by emphasizing 'pure' Korean products and cultural practices." Moreover, Pyongyang dismissed the PRC's wartime contribution, "going so far as to virtually eliminate recognition of China's sacrifices in Korean museums that covered the history of the war period." Beijing's 1971 near-normalization of relations with the United States did not go over well with the DPRK. Worse was China's recognition of South Korea, which followed Moscow's opening of relations with Seoul.

Nevertheless, over the last nearly two decades, Pyongyang has grown even more dependent on China. And, paradoxically, Beijing's clout with its difficult neighbor seems to have declined. Mr. Snyder explains:

"North Korean policymakers assume that China's increasing aid, trade, and investment derive from its own economic and political self-interest. This perception has mitigated the ability of China to use economic instruments as leverage against North Korea. In fact, the greater North Korea's economic dependency on China, the greater China's fears that withdrawal of assistance may have negative consequences for North Korea's economic and political stability, which by extension may have negative ramifications for China itself.

"Thus, China's increased use of aid, trade, and investment as vehicles for enhancing political influence on North Korea has thus far worked in precisely the opposite manner, making China a hostage to and enabler of North Korean provocations."

Mr. Snyder tracks the ups and downs of China's relationship with South Korea as well. The opening with the ROK came as a result of President Roh Tae-woo's so-called Nordpolitik. Economic reform in the PRC led to carefully controlled but steadily expanding economic relations between the two nations. Equally important was the ebbing of the Cold War. Writes Mr. Snyder: "As Sino-Soviet tensions subsided, the strategic value to Beijing of China's relationship with Pyongyang also declined, reducing the cost to China of political distancing from North Korea that might occur as a result of diplomatic normalization with South Korea."

The PRC became Seoul's largest trading partner in 2004. Yet the obviously profitable relationship

caused the South growing disquiet. Notes Mr. Snyder: "The impact of increasing competitiveness of Chinese products, which were even making inroads to South Korean customers ... called into question South Korea's long-term competitiveness and stimulated strategic thinking among South Korean government and business leaders regarding how to respond."

Nervousness over potential Chinese economic domination, coupled with political disputes — including a seemingly esoteric historical argument over whether the ancient Koguryo kingdom more properly categorized as Chinese or Korean — reduced popular affection for close links with Beijing. As a result, Seoul continues to diversify its economic options, inking free-trade agreements with the U.S. (currently before Congress) and the European Union (preliminary negotiations have just finished). The South also shows no signs of yielding up the security guarantee and troop deployments from Washington.

However, the current geopolitical order could be transformed by any number of unpredictable events, such as a North Korean collapse, Korean reunification or normalization of relations between Washington and the DPRK. Moreover, notes Mr. Snyder, "In the event of a downturn in the US-Chinese relationship, or if China's aggregate power continues to grow," South Korea's continuing security dependence on America may prove to be untenable.

Mr. Snyder views a ROK realignment towards Beijing as unlikely, but East Asia continues to evolve rapidly. Washington may not be able to maintain its dominant military position in East Asia whatever its preferences. Also, as Snyder allows, it is by no means certain that America's allies will want it to do so. All the more reason to strengthen economic ties by ratifying the U.S.-South Korean FTA.

China's dramatic entry onto the world stage will make the 21st century look very different than the 20th century. Nowhere will the impact be greater than in East Asia. "China's Rise and the Two Koreas" offers important insights as to where the PRC, its neighbors and, ultimately, the United States may be heading.

- *Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of "Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World" (Cato) and co-author of "The Korean Conundrum: America's Troubled Relations with North and South Korea" (Macmillan/Palgrave).*