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Keys to successful summit with Xi

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South Korean President Park Geun-hye is due to make her first state visit to China in mid-June. Over 60 people are said to be involved with the task force to prepare for her summit with Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping. Seoul will have to be meticulously and extensively prepared considering Beijing's rising influence not only on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia, but also on the global stage. Many have high expectations for the upcoming summit, since President Park has pledged to wage so-called balanced diplomacy between the two superpowers of America and China.

So what and how should Seoul prepare? We could draw lessons from the Lee Myung-bak administration. Bilateral ties have been at their worst in the previous government as underscored by Beijing's nonchalance in North Korea's deadly attacks against our warship and inhabited island of Yeongpyeong in 2010. Chinese officials were obviously displeased with South Korea's hard-line stance against North Korea on the premature belief of internal conflict and collapse of the Pyongyang regime.

The talk of reinforcing the security network among South Korea, the U.S. and Japan under the banner of a "value-based alliance" also would have irked Beijing. President Lee demoralized the China-sponsored six-party platform to denuclearize North Korea by suggesting a blanket disarmament package instead of incremental diplomatic procedure. Seoul and Beijing drifted apart further as the former cozied up with Washington while underestimating the brotherly solidarity between Beijing and Pyongyang.

It is best not to repeat past mistakes. Recent developments suggest changes in China's attitude toward North Korea. Chinese media - usually protective and neutral on North Korean affairs - carry bold comments from Chinese officials that Beijing is ready to be tolerant of a peaceful collapse of the Pyongyang regime or it wants the South to absorb the North. These reports, of course, are not credible. From a geopolitical standpoint alone, the Chinese leadership cannot attempt dramatic changes in its traditional alliance with North Korea. Beijing has turned tougher since Pyongyang went ahead with its third nuclear test despite Beijing's opposition, but we cannot expect a drastic adjustment in its basic stance toward the communist state. Like a Chinese expert said, it is the same policy packaged differently. Seoul should keep this in mind as it prepares for the summit.

The Chinese government has expressed deep interest in President Park and her government's so-called trustpolitik of building trust to ensure lasting peace and cooperation in Northeast Asia. Few would argue against the theory of first establishing confidence toward peace on the nonmilitary level to gradually build understanding and trust on the security level. But the fundamental and ultimate goal of China's regional policy is not simply maintaining an alliance, but establishing a collective defense safety framework. It is what President Xi underscored during his keynote speech at the annual conference of the Boao Forum for Asia, urging the international community to work together for comprehensive, common and cooperative security.

But President Park basically has her eyes on an alliance. She envisions elevating bilateral ties with the United States to a comprehensive strategic alliance to serve as a lynchpin of regional peace and security and reinforcing missile defense cooperation. So far, her regional envisioning could come across as having lesser significance than a stronger alliance with the U.S. Instead of vainly trying to harmonize the cacophony later, Seoul should first realize the differences in perspectives and goals with Beijing and try to seek cooperation within the ground.

Beijing welcomes President Park's trustpolitik because Seoul is offering to solve the North Korean nuclear problem through dialogue and negotiations. But during her summit in Washington, President Park and her U.S. counterpart Barack Obama emphasized deterrence and pressure to end North Korean military provocations. Her comment demanding a right choice from Pyongyang - as there cannot be rewards for bad behavior - does not bode well for her vision for trust-building.

She must reemphasize dialogue and diplomacy during the summit in Beijing. She must propose constructive suggestions for Seoul-Beijing cooperation to revive the Kaesong industrial joint venture, Mount Kumgang tourism program and six-party denuclearization talks as well as establishing lasting peace in the Asia-Pacific region. An idea like strategic three-way dialogue among South Korea, China and the U.S. to pressure North Korea would do more harm than good.

The basis of doing good business with the Chinese is relationships. Presidents Park and Xi go a long way back. They both come from elite political families. But national interests come before personal relationships. In order to make their upcoming summit fruitful, they must find middle ground on achieving the interests of their countries. Most of all, improving inter-Korean ties should be their focus.

Translation by the Korea JoongAng Daily staff.

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