

[Column] Saying ‘xie xie’ doesn’t make Lee Jae-myung a pro-China toady

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The whole misguided kerfuffle about Lee’s “pro-Chinese toadyism” is a welcome reminder about foreign policy basics as we move toward the presidential election



Democratic presidential candidate Lee Jae-myung bows to the crowd after a stump speech in Daegu on May 13, 2025. (pool photo)

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Here’s a sample of what Lee Jae-myung, the presidential candidate for the Democratic Party, has said about China during his campaign.

“I said we should say ‘xie xie’ both to Taiwan and to China. What’s so wrong about that?”

“I was going to say ‘xie xie’ to the Japanese ambassador, but I figured he might not understand, so I said ‘gamsa hamunida’ instead.”

“We don’t need to get deeply involved in the dispute between Taiwan and China. We should respect the status quo and keep our distance.”

[Editor’s note: “Xie xie” is how the Chinese say “thank you.” “Gamsa hamunida” is the Korean for “thank you” (“gamsa hamnida”) in a faux Japanese accent.]

These remarks have gotten Lee in some hot water. Members of the People Power Party have described the remarks as “obsequious” and a classic example of “a foreign policy of pro-Chinese toadyism.”

The People Power Party's presidential candidate, Kim Moon-soo, took direct aim at Lee: "The Chinese Communist Party is the enemy that invaded our country in the Korean War, and the US is the country that helped us. How could the US and China be on the same level?"

Lee Jun-seok, the presidential candidate for the minor conservative Reform Party, offered a sarcastic take on Lee Jae-myung's "xie xie" comments about China and Taiwan. "We'd be in serious trouble if President Trump said that South Korea can deal with North Korea on its own and the US will wash its hands of both sides," the Reform Party candidate said.

But such criticism isn't very persuasive for three reasons.

First, Lee's remarks are not examples of obsequious pro-Chinese toadyism. It would be one thing to kowtow to China while finding fault with other countries. But we'd do well to remember that Lee was offering to say "gamsa hamunida" to Japan and "xie xie" to Taiwan as well.

Lee was expressing his intention to employ a foreign policy of empathy for other countries, a policy of respecting our neighbors and walking a mile in their shoes. I don't see anything to find fault with there.

That's also consistent with Lee's pragmatic approach to foreign policy. "Our alliance with the US is important, and we need to work with the US and Japan. But that's no reason to pick fights with other countries. [. . .] Shouldn't we also be working to maintain our relationship with Russia and China and keep selling them stuff?" the candidate has said.

Second, what Lee said in regard to cross-strait relations is that Seoul ought to respect the status quo, refrain from interfering and maintain its distance. I'd describe that proposal as being highly reasonable.

When our government established diplomatic relations with mainland China on Aug. 24, 1992, it agreed to the "one China" principle. In effect, Seoul recognized that the People's Republic of China is the only legal government of China and that Taiwan is part of Chinese territory.

For the same reason, Seoul severed diplomatic relations with Taiwan while maintaining unofficial relations through its mission in Taipei. Such actions clarify that cross-strait relations are fundamentally an internal issue for China and not an international issue in which Korea can interfere.

In that respect, Lee's remarks are consistent with the government's basic stance toward China.

Third, it doesn't seem appropriate to criticize Lee's strategic ambiguity on whether South Korea would fight alongside the US or provide other military assistance in a putative cross-strait conflict. For one thing, that's not such an urgent issue that a decision needs to be reached right away.

Admittedly, some Pentagon officials have raised the possibility of China launching a military invasion of Taiwan in 2027. And it's true that the increasing frequency of China's blockade drills around Taiwan have raised concerns that China could invade within six months.

Nevertheless, cross-strait relations, at least for the moment, do not constitute the kind of crisis that requires an immediate decision from South Korea about whether to intervene militarily.

In addition, Trump is maintaining a stance of remarkable restraint on the Taiwan issue compared with his first term in office. Along with avoiding any direct contact with the Taiwanese leadership, he's been pressuring Taiwan to bolster its own defensive capabilities and buy more American weapons.

There are reports that China hawks were recently removed from the White House National Security Council. That's evidence that Trump is more interested in a practical solution on Taiwan than a military confrontation.

Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te's recent shift away from a hard-line position on China and expression of a desire for dialogue with China appears to be a result not only of domestic political pressure, but also of shifting winds in the Trump administration.

When even the Trump administration is taking such a position, it would not be appropriate for a South Korean presidential candidate to preemptively stake out a position on our military involvement; indeed, doing so would go against our national interest. All that makes Lee Jae-myung's strategic prudence even more appealing.

Ultimately, the whole misguided kerfuffle about Lee's "pro-Chinese toadyism" is a welcome reminder about foreign policy basics as we move toward the presidential election.

It's a sharp lesson in the kind of foreign policy we so desperately need: not a belligerent penchant for choosing sides and dividing the world into blocs, but an empirical foreign policy that arrives at practical solutions through coolheaded analysis that's unswayed by hypothetical debates, an empathetic foreign policy that strengthens friendly relationships with our neighbors through expressions of respect and gratitude, and an inclusive foreign policy that's open to working with everybody.

Aren't those the diplomatic virtues we should desire from our president?

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