

This column by PCI Board Member, Chung-in Moon, appeared in the ChinaDaily on Tuesday, August 30, 2022.

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Opinion

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By CHUNG-IN MOON | China Daily Global | Updated: 2022-08-30 09:18



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China and the ROK should avoid sacrificing their long-term, common interests for short-term, parochial ones

The Republic of Korea and China are celebrating the 30th anniversary of their diplomatic relations this year. The relations between the two countries have witnessed a sea change over the past three decades. People-to-people exchanges rose from 130,000 persons in 1992 to over 10 million in 2020. China-ROK trade soared from about \$5 billion in 1992 to about \$360 billion in 2021. Bilateral investments have also grown impressively.

Human and cultural exchanges, including high-level elite contacts, have expanded exponentially. The maturing bilateral relationship is manifest in the evolutionary changes in diplomatic engagement. At the time of their diplomatic normalization in 1992, "a good friendly neighbor" relationship

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characterized their diplomatic ties. This upgraded into a "cooperative partnership" in 1998, a "full cooperative partnership" in 2003, and a "strategic cooperative partnership" in 2008.

On the occasion of the 30th anniversary, leaders of the two countries have committed to deepening and widening their bilateral relationship on the basis of mutual respect and reciprocity. Nevertheless, the challenges ahead seem daunting, casting a cloud over future relations between the two sides.

The most formidable challenge comes from the geopolitical dynamics. Facing acute nuclear and conventional military threats, the new ROK government has been strengthening its alliance with the United States, while upgrading trilateral diplomatic and military cooperation with the US and Japan. Allowing the deployment of additional US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system, seeking to join the Quad, and broadening cooperation with NATO are the hallmarks of the new government's security posture. This underscores a sharp departure from the previous government's position of strategic ambiguity that attempted to maintain the alliance with the US without necessarily undermining the ROK's strategic cooperative partnership with China.

China sees these moves as unfavorable and has warned the ROK that it risks the critical damage of its ties with Beijing. Aware of Beijing's concerns, the government of President Yoon Suk-yeol has been adjusting its earlier position by delaying the deployment of the additional THAAD units and not joining the Quad. And on Aug 9, 2022, the Chinese and ROK foreign ministers had in-depth exchange of views on THAAD. The two sides underlined the need to take seriously each other's security concerns and to strive to properly handle the issue so that it will not become a stumbling block to China-ROK relations. But the geopolitical dynamics are putting Seoul in a delicate position, shaking the foundation of China-ROK relations.

Geoeconomic conflicts pose another barrier to the robust China-ROK relations. Since the Donald Trump administration, the ROK has been under constant US pressure to realign its economic ties with China by supporting the US' "decoupling" strategy to isolate China from the global value chains. At the request of the US, the ROK formally joined the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity in May 2022. It is also expected to participate in the US' semiconductor chip alliance aimed at excluding China from the global production chain. Beijing has openly expressed its concern at such moves. At present, China, which is the ROK's largest trading partner, accounts for about 25 percent of the ROK's exports and about 23 percent of its imports. Thus, Seoul's overt economic tilt toward the US is likely to jeopardize its economic relations with China.

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Finally, clashes of national identity and the subsequent deteriorating mutual perceptions among the public are sources of grave concern. According to an opinion survey made by the Pew Research Center, about 80 percent of the ROK respondents had a negative perception of China, and Chinese perceptions of the ROK are not favorable either. Most worrisome is the fact that young people are the major drivers of such sentiments. They wage fierce battles in cyber space. Their grievances are diverse, ranging from the issue of historical sovereignty over the Goguryo dynasty, cultural identity feuds over kimchi and Korean costumes, to the economic retaliation that followed the dispute over the deployment of THAAD in 2017. Such mutually negative perceptions are critical factors to improving healthy bilateral relations.

Notwithstanding the impressive developments over the last three decades, prospects for future relations seem uncertain. What should be done to strengthen the bilateral relationship, while minimizing the chances of further deterioration?

The bilateral relationship should be neither zero-sum (win-lose) nor negative sum (lose-lose). Both countries should strive for a positive sum (win-win) relationship. They should make every effort to avoid being trapped in a Faustian bargain that sacrifices long-term, common interests for short-term, parochial ones.

China and the ROK should adhere to the principles of mutual respect and reciprocity. Neither unilateral pressures nor opportunistic tinkering are beneficial for the two countries. In this regard, enhancing and sharing a strategic empathy should be a common goal of the leaders in Beijing and Seoul.

Political, intellectual and opinion leaders of both countries should work together to prevent and eradicate chronic fake news, xenophobic sensationalism and excessive politicization. Those who want to maximize private gains through anti-Korean and anti-Chinese sentiments should be condemned.

Finally, there should be an awareness that healthy and mutually beneficial bilateral relations are essential for peace and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia.

The author is chairman of the Sejong Institute in the Republic of Korea. The author contributed this article to China Watch, a think tank powered by China Daily.

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Contact the editor at editor@chinawatch.cn