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Executive Summary

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The Significance and Challenges of the 2025 South Korea-China Summit

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The Significance of Xi Jinping's State Visit and the South Korea-China Summit

On October 30, Chinese President Xi Jinping made a state visit to South Korea on the occasion of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit held in Gyeongju in late October. Subsequently, on November 1, a Korea-China summit was held. At the summit, South Korea and China reaffirmed their "Strategic Cooperative Partnership" and signed seven Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) related to the economy and public welfare. This has raised expectations both domestically and internationally for the expansion of economic cooperation and exchanges between the two countries, creating a positive environment for the recovery and development of South Korea-China relations going forward.

Challenges Regarding Korea-China Relations

This summit, the first under the Lee Jae Myung administration, carried a strong declarative nature centered on "restoring South Korea-China relations." While both countries demonstrated their willingness to cooperate by signing seven MOUs, most focused on economic and livelihood sectors and remained at a general level. Furthermore, although discussions covered various diplomatic and security issues, no specific agreements or outcomes were produced. This indicates persistent differences and divergent positions between South Korea and China on these matters. While South Korea emphasized bilateral cooperation, China stressed cooperation beyond the bilateral level, highlighting multilateralism, free trade and the Asia-Pacific Community. This suggests China is approaching its relationship with South Korea through the lens of its global strategy and U.S.-China relations. In this regard, the summit presented South Korea with the following challenges:

1. China's Ambiguous Stance on Key Issues

During the summit, the South Korean government raised bilateral issues such as North Korea's denuclearization, China's West Sea maritime structures, Hallyu Ban in China, and China's export

controls. However, the Chinese government stuck to general principles, maintaining an ambiguous stance. Instead of focusing on bilateral issues, China emphasized macro-level discourse such as multilateralism, the multilateral trading system, and the Asia-Pacific community. Amid the Trump administration indiscriminately pursuing unilateral tariff policies under the “Make America Great Again (MAGA)” slogan, China has sought to distinguish itself from the United States in the international community by stressing the defense of multilateralism, free trade, and supply chain stability. Through this, China criticizes the Trump administration’s MAGA policies and tariff measures while strengthening ties with the Global South and even with U.S. allies and partners, aiming to counterbalance U.S. pressure.

In this context, Xi Jinping’s emphasis on multilateralism and the multilateral trading system over bilateral issues can be seen as an indirect expression that South Korea and China must cooperate to counter the Trump administration’s protectionist policies. Furthermore, China signaled its intent to advance efforts to counter the United States at the multilateral and regional levels by stressing the Asia-Pacific Community and cooperation and common prosperity in the region. China will emphasize to South Korea the importance of multilateralism, free trade, and supply chain stability, demanding South Korea’s official support and participation. China may use South Korea’s support and participation to criticize the Trump administration’s unilateral policies and attempt to drive a wedge between South Korea and the United States.

2. China’s Use of North Korea Relations as Leverage over South Korea

Despite the Lee Jae Myung administration’s conciliatory approach, North Korea consistently maintains a hostile stance toward South Korea. In this situation, the Lee administration requested enhanced communication with China during the South Korea-China summit to restart inter-Korean dialogue. This appears aimed at gauging North Korea’s intentions or securing dialogue channels with Pyongyang through China, which maintains cooperative relations with North Korea. Although President Trump’s recent Asia tour failed to produce U.S.-North Korea talks, the possibility of such talks occurring within his term remains consistently raised. The Lee administration may have judged that enhanced communication with China could help South Korea play a mediating role between the United States and North Korea.

However, China is unlikely to respond as South Korea intends. China recently restored its relationships with North Korea during the event during its Victory Day celebrations. Considering the Lee Jae Myung administration’s inclination to seek improved inter-Korean relations, China intends to leverage its relationship with North Korea as a bargaining chip in its dealings with South Korea. China will expand high-level exchanges and trade with North Korea to demonstrate its influence over Pyongyang, while simultaneously insisting that South Korea create an environment conducive to U.S.-North Korea dialogue and inter-Korean talks. China is expected to demand South Korea reduce or halt ROK-U.S. and ROK-U.S.-Japan joint military exercises, citing North Korea’s “legitimate security concerns,” and attempt to set back U.S.-led regional security cooperation.

3. Blocking China’s Attempts to Undermine the ROK-U.S. Alliance

Although South Korea and the United States reached a trade agreement at the ROK-U.S. summit, discussions on pending diplomatic and security issues, such as defense cost-sharing, strategic flexibility of U.S. Forces Korea (USFK), and the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON),

will continue. Under the banner of “alliance modernization,” The Trump administration emphasizes the strategic flexibility of USFK to contain and counter China in the Indo-Pacific. It demands that South Korea expand the scope of alliance cooperation and participate in countering China. Meanwhile, the Lee administration, championing strategic autonomy and self-reliant defense, has made the transfer of wartime operational control within its term a national policy goal and is actively pursuing it.

If the Lee Jae Myung administration’s OPCON transfer become tangible, China will perceive it as a reduction of U.S. military influence in the region and an opportunity to secure the initiative on the Taiwan issue. In this regard, China will persistently demand that South Korea secure strategic autonomy. Through this, China is expected to indirectly encourage limitations on the role of USFK or reductions in ROK-U.S. combined exercises, aiming to diminish U.S. military influence in the region and create cracks in the U.S. alliance network. China will likely conduct frequent military exercises in areas like the West Sea and the Taiwan Strait to expand its own military influence within the region.

Policy Recommendations

While the recent South Korea-China summit laid the groundwork for improved bilateral relations, the structural issues within the relationship have deepened. China approaches South Korea from the perspective of U.S.-China relations. As a U.S. ally, South Korea must strengthen the ROK-U.S. alliance for the security of the Korean Peninsula while simultaneously managing its relationship with China, which competes with the United States. When pursuing its China policy, the South Korean government should pay close attention to the following points:

First, as South Korea strengthens strategic communication with China, it must define the scope and limits of cooperation with China to avoid conflict with the ROK-U.S. and ROK-U.S.-Japan cooperative frameworks. China will demand the suspension of ROK-U.S. and ROK-U.S.-Japan joint exercises under the pretext of creating an environment for inter-Korean dialogue. Simultaneously, while ostensibly supporting the Lee administration’s pursuit of strategic autonomy, China will attempt to pull South Korea away from the United States and reduce the U.S. influence in the region. To counter North Korea’s military provocations, South Korea must strengthen its defense capabilities while reinforcing the ROK-U.S. alliance to prevent a security vacuum on the Korean Peninsula. Within the U.S.-China strategic competition structure, the process of strategic communication with China carries the risk of causing unnecessary misunderstandings with the United States and like-minded countries. Therefore, South Korea needs to first define the scope and limits of cooperation with China before proceeding with communication. South Korea must clarify its position on regional security issues, such as the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait, and clearly communicate it to China.

Second, rather than focusing on the outward achievement of restoring South Korea-China relations, Korea must clearly convey its concerns regarding pending issues between the two countries and ascertain China’s specific stance. As this summit strengthens communication between the two governments, Seoul needs to take this as an opportunity to explicitly convey its concerns on these issues and demand that China clarify its position. Only then can Korea devise appropriate countermeasures and urge China’s cooperation.

Third, South Korea should temper its excessive expectations of China's role in improving inter-Korean relations. At the summit, the Lee administration hoped to deepen strategic communication with China as a way to restart inter-Korean dialogue. Yet the more South Korea emphasizes China's role in improving inter-Korean relations, the more likely China is to flaunt its cooperative relationship with North Korea and use it as leverage to coax or pressure South Korea. China will likely argue that if South Korea truly wants to progress with the North, it must prioritize its relationship with China—which maintains friendly ties with North Korea—rather than leaning toward the United States. Instead of relying on China's mediation, South Korea should urge China to act responsibly, pointing out that Pyongyang's provocations ultimately undermine China's own ambitions for multilateralism and economic cooperation.

About the Author

Dr. LEE Dong-gyu is a research fellow at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. Dr. Lee received his B.A. and M.A. from the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, and Ph.D. in politics from Tsinghua University in China. His research focuses on Chinese politics and foreign policy, South Korea-China relations, and Northeast Asia security. His recent publications include "The Belt and Road Initiative after COVID-19: Implications of Expanding Health and Digital Silkroads," "Is Political Reform of the Chinese Communist Party Going Back: Changes and Durability of Intra-democracy in the Xi Jinping Era," "Xi Jinping Thought from the Perspective of the Chinese Communist Party's Ideological Strategy," "Development Factors and Specificity of Korea-China Relations in the Cold War Era: 1972-1992," "A Study on the Sinicization of Marxism after Reform and Opening Up," etc.

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