Is President Moon Jae-in a pro-China politician?

After the author’s article on South Korea’s “independent politics” was published, he has received a number of comments from conservative circles that attempted to convince him the leftist ROK President had “sold himself to Beijing” and was certainly dancing to its tune. In response, the author has decided to publicize information that shows the China–South Korea relationship is still plagued by problems and, in fact, old issues are compounded by new ones.

Let us start with a few facts about the stance taken by South Korea. Seoul has primarily focused on convincing Beijing to a) lift its ‘unofficial’ sanctions imposed in 2017 after the ROK had deployed a US missile defense system — the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) — on Korean soil; and to b) arrange a visit by General Secretary of the Communist Party of China to Seoul, which could, subsequently, be portrayed as a breakthrough in relations between the two nations.

On 7 April 2020, South Korea issued a statement saying that it was still discussing the Chinese President’s trip to the ROK, thus contradicting the report by the conservative Chosun Ilbo newspaper saying that the two sides had chosen not to arrange the visit or to postpone it until the second half of 2020 or even later due to the ongoing Coronavirus outbreak.
The article also mentioned that although Moon Jae-in had made every effort to convince Xi Jinping to visit South Korea to improve his approval ratings and had even delayed closing the border with China, he was not successful in his endeavor. However, a spokesperson for the Blue House accused the media outlet of distorting facts and said that the two sides were (still - author’s note) discussing the issue.

Every single formal meeting over the past half a year between members of China’s and South Korea’s elite political circles ended with joint statements by the two sides saying that the nations needed to strengthen the relations with each other and foster cooperation without mentioning concrete steps, and that PRC’s issue concerning THAAD had been broached. On interpretation, this diplomatic doublespeak means that the parties failed to come to an agreement. The visit by the Chinese leader kept getting postponed due to objective as well as arbitrary reasons. After all, the trip is not as important for Beijing as it is for Seoul.

The economic ties between the two countries if relevant developments are taken into account have essentially amounted to purely ceremonial events. So let us have a look at facts, numbers and figures. On the one hand, there is no downward trend in some sectors or it is not very significant for now. For instance, export of South Korean beer to China is viewed to have increased four fold over the last three years. As a result, beer manufactured in the ROK was in third place based on its popularity among China’s inhabitants after that made in Mexico and Germany.

Citing COMTRADE (the UN International Trade Statistics Database), the Federation of Korean Industries reported that in 2019, imports from ROK companies accounted for 8.5% of the total in the PRC market in comparison to 10.4% in 2015. Two South Korean companies LG Chem and SK Innovation were included on Chinese whitelist of firms to receive electric vehicle battery subsidies. The second-phase investment by Samsung Electronics into its 2nd semiconductor plant in Xian has started. Eight billion US dollars out of the total of $15 billion are to be spent at this stage.

On the other hand, the ‘unofficial’ sanctions have been in place after the deployment of the US anti-ballistic missile defense system in the ROK. At present, there are no group tours from China to South Korea. Chinese tourists are only allowed to travel to the ROK on private tours. The ban on group travel packages was expected to be lifted in October 2017 but this did not happen. Incidentally, the number of Chinese tourists visiting South Korea has increased to levels seen before pressure was applied on the ROK. In 2019, there were 6 million visitors from the PRC, i.e. 25% more than the previous year. South Korea was among the three most popular tourist destinations for Chinese residents along with Thailand and Japan.

PRC’s ‘unofficial’ restrictions on hallyu, or Korean culture, have been imposed since 2016. South Korean film Parasite “was to be screened at a Chinese film festival,” but Beijing “suddenly called it off due to a technical reason.” Three South Korean students out of 80 from an Eastman School of Music orchestra of the University of Rochester were denied visas to China.

Some experts believe that such restrictions are not necessarily punitive, and in fact, China “aims to boost its domestic entertainment industry with its own strength” without the influence of Korean culture, which, at present, is viewed as unnecessary. In addition, ”hallyu content implicitly contains American and Western ideas such as political democratization, social justice and gender issues” and “Beijing wants to block the ‘reckless’ entrance of such content that it believes problematic”.

According to data from the Hyundai Research Institute, South Korea’s economic losses have amounted to more than $9 billion after the deployment of THAAD.

In November 2019, the relationship between the PRC and the ROK was tested yet again on account of the events in Hong Kong. In fact, South Korea supported the protesters there and members of civic groups on its university campuses began to create so-called Lennon Walls full of posters and messages expressing solidarity with the demonstrators. This resulted in tensions between South Korean and Chinese students. At times, fights broke out, and at others, messages were ripped off the aforementioned walls. Similar activities to show support for the protests still continue.

It is also worth noting that despite the relative dominance of leftist, pro-Moon Jae-in media outlets, the overall view on China in articles being published is far from positive. For instance, amid the Coronavirus pandemic, there have been periodic reports in the ROK media reflecting the US stance that the PRC has censored “research on the origins” of the outbreak, or that the crisis has dealt a “blow to Beijing’s credibility” and “Xi’s leadership”, or that discuss an investigation initiated by US political elites into whether the virus could have emanated from a lab in Wuhan, China. The absence of pro-Chinese articles is blatantly obvious at present.
It is also worth noting that the search by South Korean conservatives for Chinese propagandists online is comparable in intensity to that for Russian trolls in the West. It is widely believed that PRC’s web brigades play an important role when it comes to manipulating public opinion on the Internet and to spreading pro-Chinese government and pro-Beijing content in order to divide South Koreans who hold different political views.

The Coronavirus outbreak in China also had an impact on the relationship between the two nations. As early as January 2020, there were appeals being made not only by conservatives but also by epidemiologists at the Korea Medical Association to ban entry from China in the ROK. South Koreans began avoiding districts and areas in Seoul that are popular among Chinese tourists. And some restaurants in the city “even posted signs saying ‘No Chinese allowed.’”

After a video that featured actress Lee Young-ae wishing China’s doctors, medical workers and inhabitants all the best in their fight against the Coronavirus pandemic as they exerted maximum efforts to combat the outbreak went viral, it “was met with a cynical reaction from Koreans”.

Leading the anti-China charge is the key opposition Liberty Korea party that, all in all, has been voicing criticism against the PRC and accusing Moon Jae-in of supporting pro-Chinese policies. It was partially right in its views, as the government delayed taking measures against the outbreak in its attempt not to spoil the relationship with China. It also used the lack of relevant recommendations from the World Health Organization to explain its decision.

When on 4 February 2020, new Chinese Ambassador to the ROK Xing Haiming advised Seoul to follow WHO suggestions and “not to impose a total entry ban on China,” even The Korea Times, a newspaper with a left center bias, wrote that it would be justifiable to compare the Envoy “to arrogant senior messengers from Ming or Qing emperors who treated Joseon kings as their subordinates”, and that his statement was “an unmistakable show of dissatisfaction over Korea going too far in self-protective measures.”

Anti-Chinese sentiments increased after media outlets reported that “Chinese Eastern Airlines concentrated Korean flight attendants on domestic routes in areas with high numbers of confirmed patients”.

As a result, on 4 February, a petition (which we wrote about earlier calling for impeachment of South Korea’s President was posted in the dedicated section of the web site maintained by the Blue House. It stated that the government’s measures to counter the crisis were “ineffective and useless, and devoid of a fundamental countermeasure” and that it seemed as if Moon Jae-in behaved more as “the President of China, not South Korea”.

Following recommendations from authorities, many South Korean universities suggested Chinese students returning from New Year holidays “take a leave of absence for the first semester this year.” They also began preparing facilities to quarantine students who chose to return. ROK health authorities called on colleges “to temporarily stop Chinese students from interacting with their Korean classmates and others on and off campus to stop the possible spread of COVID-19.”

Seoul’s reactions to similar measures taken by China in response to the Coronavirus outbreak in the ROK (i.e. quarantining individuals arriving in the PRC from there) were somewhat negative. On 26 February 2020, Foreign Minister of South Korea Kang Kyung-wha expressed her reservations to her Chinese counterpart Wang Yi about the severity of restrictions being imposed against ROK citizens arriving in a number of PRC provinces. Later on, Kang Kyung-wha criticized the strictly enforced quarantine measures in China and labelled them as excessive, and pointed out that Seoul was moderate in its border control response. Xing Haiming was subsequently chastised for his comments.

On 16 March, Seoul “filed a formal protest with the city of Beijing over its decision to quarantine all incoming travelers for two weeks, with individuals to foot related bills.” Ambassador of ROK to China Jang Ha-sung said that “South Korea had sent a letter of protest” to Beijing and had asked its authorities “to at least allow residents of the capital city to self-quarantine at home.”

On 27 March, an official spokesperson for South Korea’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed deep regret over China’s decision to suspend practically all entry to the country by foreigners.

So is this really what a pro-Chinese shift in policy in South Korea looks like?

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