On “China’s Interference in Korean Affairs”

Illegal Migrants

Illegal immigrants get into South Korea periodically, and they are caught with the same frequency. For example, on June 13, six Chinese citizens suspected of having entered South Korea illegally, using small lifeboats to cross the waters between the two countries, were detained. The search for illegal immigrants began in April, when an unregistered lifeboat was found ashore. Items found on the boat suggested the boat was from China. It was later revealed that the boat had carried a total of five illegal immigrants, each of whom paid between 10,000 and 15,000 Chinese yuan (US $2,120) for an unauthorized boat ride to South Korea. They entered the country to illegally get jobs at farms or construction sites and were gathered together by a broker via the Internet.

On August 5, the South Korean Coast Guard arrested all 18 Chinese citizens who secretly entered the country by sea in April and May, as well as a Chinese man who allegedly organized three such illegal boat rides. Three other Chinese nationals were also arrested for allegedly helping the 18 people while they were on the run after arriving in the South.

Chinese Poachers in the Waters of the Republic of Korea

According to Hong Moon-pyo, a spokesman for the main opposition People Power Party, the number of cases of either arrest or expelling of Chinese fishing boats operating in South Korea’s western waters reached 6,543 in 2019. This is more than doubling from 3,074 in 2017, and according to Hong, the authorities’ response became weaker than it should be, as number of arrests of Chinese vessels has been dropping constantly (from 278 in 2017 to 195 in 2019), and the authorities prefer expulsion, quite often even without any penalties (from 2,796 to 6,348). Only five boats were arrested from January to August of 2020. According to Hong, by arresting and imposing fines on illegal fishing boats, the government can eradicate illegal fishing. But the government is merely heeding potential retaliation from China.

However, as officials said on October 23, South Korean Coast Guard is enhancing its crackdown on Chinese fishing boats illegally operating in its waters, including the resumption of seizure operations. Expulsion without arrest was previously due to the fact that it was required to avoid in-person contacts during the coronavirus pandemic. Coast Guard officers will wear protective clothing and follow anti-infection guidelines in the process of arrest and investigation.

More interesting is another piece of news: on November 6, 2020, South Korea and China agreed to cut the number of their boats fishing in the two country’s exclusive economic zones (EEZs) from this year’s 1,400 to 1,350 in 2021, as the parties seek to preserve maritime resources. South Korea and China also discussed ways to prevent Chinese boats’ illegal fishing in waters near the Northern Limit Line (NLL), the de facto inter-Korean sea border. If the South Korean Coast Guard provides information on Chinese fishing boats returning home after illegal fishing in the seas of North Korea, China will agree to inspect those vessels and punish them under Chinese laws if they are found to have
Illegally fished in the North's seas.

Invasion of the Korean Air Defense Identification Zone and Exclusive Zone by Chinese Warships and Military Aircraft

On June 24, the Chinese plane, presumed to be a Y-9 aircraft, entered the South Korean air defense identification zone (KADIZ), prompting Seoul to get a fighter jet into the air. In response to the protests, China said it was carrying out a regular exercise with the surveillance plane.

According to the Joint Chiefs of Staff data released by Rep. Kim Min-ki of the ruling Democratic Party on October 16, Chinese war vessels crossed the tentative median line in South Korea’s 200-mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) around 290 times last year. The figure has been on the rise from some 110 times in 2016 and 2017 to 230 in 2018. As of August this year, the comparable figure stood at 170.

There is another problem with the “median line.” Seoul has demanded that the EEZs of South Korea and China be demarcated by drawing a median line between the two countries’ overlapping areas. Beijing has then demanded that such EEZ line be drawn by taking into account coastlines and the population along them.

It bears reminding that the air defense identification zone is NOT the country’s airspace, no matter how much Seoul would like to privatize it, and problems with the EEZ begin not when a warship sails there (as opposed to the country’s territorial waters), but when resources begin to be extracted there.

Internet Wars and the “Beijing Trolls for Moon” version

Here, rumors and facts are most mixed, but the sharp reaction of Chinese Internet users to what they consider an insult is known from the recent story with Lee Hyo-ri, after the celebrity announced that she intends to use “Mao” as her stage name in a recently televised MBC’s show. A large number of Chinese internet users expressed criticism for her “being disrespectful” towards the communist revolutionary leader Mao Zedong, and eventually Lee announced that she was leaving social media.

This incident prompted a number of experts to state that the criticism was organized from the top, as Korean pop culture attracts interest in China, and its content could work either in favor or against the spread of patriotism in Chinese society. Others noted that 200,000 negative comments are nothing by Chinese standards, given that the total number of online users in China is 600 million. Moreover, the majority of the commentators are most likely Chinese students in the Republic of Korea.

Conservatives respond by stating that about 70,000 Chinese students are enrolled in South Korea, and up to 75% of them are believed to be members of the Communist Youth League, which is linked to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Consequently, “Komsomol members are doing the Party’s bidding.” This is also how they explain the conflicts between Korean and Chinese students, when in November 2019, South Korean students posted posters on the campuses of several universities, supporting Hong Kong protesters.

It is not rumors that Chinese cyber fraudsters are active in the Republic of Korea. In September 2020, South Korean police rounded up 24 leaders of a gang based in China, that was engaged in “voice phishing” through fraudulent phone calls and text messages. They managed to steal more than $1.7 million from South Korean victims. The scammers operated out of Huizhou, in China’s Guangdong Province, in a residential apartment.

According to the data provided by the military to the National Assembly, hacking attempts targeting South Korean military networks totaled 10,655 cases in 2019, compared with 1,051 cases detected in 2017, and there have been 7,113 attempts so far in 2020.

However, here southerners usually make a reservation that such hacking attempts, traces of which lead to the PRC, do not necessarily mean that Chinese hackers are involved. North Korean hackers have been frequently blamed for trying to attack South Korea through China.

Much more interesting is the reasoning of ultra-conservatives that Internet speeches in support of Moon are being conducted not from Korea, but from China.

On conservative-owned resources, China has long been known to employ its “50 Cent Army” -- a group used to manipulate public opinion by sock-puppetry and trolling on the Internet. Moreover, they use ethnic Koreans who are Chinese citizens (called Joseonjok) and Chinese students in South Korea. It turns out that “a Web user noticed” that Chinese speakers are instructing on the Internet to sign a petition in support of Moon. Is there any proof? There is a
photo showing an instruction in Chinese that “President Moon Jae-in is facing South Korean opposition in the midst of a raging epidemic, and pressure has peaked, but he is still giving China masks, protective suits and support money.” There is an evidence that a Twitter account @comewithmesir instructed its 4,600 followers to click “thumbs down” under an anti-Moon post, and when screenshots of this went online, @comewithmesir made the Twitter account non-public, and then finally deleted it. The same account is credited with using software that allows to multiply the number of “likes” or “dislikes” – the very thing for which the notorious Druking was imprisoned.

As can be seen, conspiracy theories are based on one or two posts from an anonymous source (reminiscent of similar news about horrors in the DPRK), despite the fact that these manipulating accounts may also have home origin. The fact that the President’s cronies have been engaged in Internet manipulation, and continue to do so, is an open secret.

“The Chinese Bought Everything!”

Another rumor is that China is building enclaves in South Korea as part of the One Belt, One Road Initiative. For example, a 1,200,000 square meter fenced-in Chinatown is allegedly being built in Chuncheon City and Hongcheon County in Gangwon Province. This is carried out with Chinese money support with the connivance of Governor Choi Moon within the La Vie Belle tourist zone and looks like a “Chinese Cultural Complex Town”. The estimated project cost is $540 million, and in the future such a “small China” will have to attract both Chinese tourists and investments.

National security experts, unnamed by conservatives, however, are expressing strategic and security concerns. Less than a 10-minute walk from the complex there are apparently numerous military installations, more precisely, bases for reservists or long-term storage warehouses in case of war. Nearby is also one of the key combined training ranges for the South Korean and US militaries.

In a different part of Chuncheon City, a 15-story luxury hotel is under construction, which apparently has the goal of destroying more than 10,000 prehistoric artifacts during the construction process, refuting Chinese theories that ancient Korea was a part of Chinese history.

Even more massive is the “Chinatown under construction in Jindo.” According to Sisa News, in September 2018, the state-owned China Railway Construction Corporation will develop the island’s port and infrastructure, building both resorts and universities or clinics for medical tourism. The most important project is to build a South Korea-China university to send Chinese students to South Korea as part of the Belt and Road Initiative, which is not just building infrastructure, but extending China’s influence and control.

Conservatives argue that while Moon Jae-in’s government did not officially announce its involvement in the Belt and Road Initiative, former Prime Minister Lee Nak-yeon met with Premier of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) Li Keqiang on Hainan Island in March 2019, after which the PRC Foreign Ministry stressed that South Korea intended to actively participate in the Belt and Road initiative. The Loon’s administration then categorically denied this, but in May 2019, Jang Ha-sung, the South Korean ambassador to China, allegedly told Xi Jinping that South Korea wanted to “actively participate” in the PRC’s Belt and Road Initiative, which was captured on China’s state television.

To support the Belt and Road Initiative, South Korean-China Business Association was founded in August 2017, and the chairman of the Hong Kong BP group, Lee Jun, became the first chairman, who generously donated $900,000 to the Association. When an investigative reporter at Chosun Monthly tried to contact BP Group in Hong Kong and its branch office in Korea as listed on its website, he could not reach the BP Group as the phone line was always busy and the emails sent came back unanswered. Moreover, there apparently is no such company at the specified address.

Developing the topic of “enclaves”, South Korean conservatives have discovered 29 hidden Chinatowns in the Republic of Korea, whose representatives voted in the presidential elections in the Republic of Korea and brought Moon to power. China is also suspected of inserting its representatives into the “candlelight revolution” and anti-THAAD protests.

What is the result of all this? According to a survey by the American Pew Research Center, conducted from June to August among residents of 14 countries, including South Korea, 75% of respondents in the Republic of Korea answered that they perceive the PRC negatively. This is the highest this figure has been in recent years. From 2015 to 2017, it increased from 37% to 61%, and last year it was 63%. Only 24% of Koreans surveyed stated a positive
attitude towards China.

And if one takes an unbiased look, the pro-Chinese course or the Chinese lawlessness are still nowhere to be seen.

Konstantin Asmolov, PhD in History, a leading research fellow at the Center for Korean Studies of the Institute of the Far East at the Russian Academy of Sciences, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.
