Wang Yi’s visit to Seoul and Other Aspects of Relations between China and South Korea

Unlike the relationship between China and North Korea, which demonstrates a long-standing traditional friendship, the situation with South Korea is more complicated. On the one hand, high-ranking officials of China openly criticize the policy of the ROK, thereby Seoul periodically starts to claim Beijing’s interference in the internal affairs of the country.

Thus, on June 10 in an interview with CBS, Chinese Ambassador to South Korea Xing Haiming noted that China hopes its relations with South Korea will move forward unaffected by the country’s growing rivalry with the United States. “To that end, I’d like South Korea to take China’s positions into account and be a little more considerate regarding the issues of Taiwan and the South China Sea.”

Similar statements were made at different times by Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian, who noted in particular, “We also hope that ROK politicians and the public will voice support for the development of China-ROK relations amid and beyond domestic elections and inject positive energy into the bilateral relations.” Zhao “noted the remarks by some ROK political figures on issues relating to Hong Kong and THAAD, many of which China finds unacceptable,” stressing Hong Kong is part of China and its affairs are purely China’s domestic affairs.

What made far more noise was Xing’s response to an article by presidential candidate Yoon Seok-youl published in the conservative JoongAng Ilbo newspaper. Yoon wrote that Korea’s diplomatic strategy should be based on a solid
foundation of the Korean-American alliance and “establishing horizontal relations with China is possible only through this framework of international cooperation.” When asked about a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) US missile shield in Korea, Yoon said the matter was clearly in the area of South Korea’s sovereignty.

In response, Xing said that the deployment of THAAD has seriously undermined China’s security interests while, at the same time, China’s radar systems and its military power pose no threat to South Korea. “Sino-Korea relations are by no means an accessory to Korea-US relations, and the development of bilateral relations [between China and Korea] should not be influenced by other factors.”

Xing’s article on the contribution provoked an adverse reaction among politicians and experts in the media, who called such behavior “inappropriate”.

An anonymous representative of the ROK Foreign Ministry also said that a foreign diplomat should be careful about any public opinion regarding a host country politician’s remarks. Such an expression could harm the development of relations between the two countries. The official also made it clear that the THAAD deployment was purely for defensive purposes to counter potential nuclear and missile attacks from North Korea.

As a result, on July 20, 2021, “a senior foreign ministry official cautioned Chinese Ambassador Xing Haiming after the envoy’s public rebuttal of a South Korean presidential hopeful’s remarks prompted criticism it could amount to political interference.”

It should be noted that earlier, a blatantly anti-Chinese article by India’s Ambassador to South Korea was published in South Korea’s media, which didn’t cause a stir.

Similar criticism was raised by the outcome of the visit of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to the ROK on September 14-15, 2021. They have disagreements with the US, followed by discussions between the South Korean and Chinese foreign ministers on strengthening cooperation between the two countries. The ministers were expected to discuss the consequences of Pyongyang’s missile tests, the resumption of activities at the North Korean in Yongbyon nuclear complex, and efforts to bring Pyongyang back to dialogue. Wang Yi will clarify China’s position on crucial regional issues.

However, as the Korea Times wrote, the visit “raised more concern than hope over relations between the two countries.” “... it is regrettable to see Wang turning South Korea into a battlefield to confront the US. He appeared to go out of his way to take China’s anti-US sentiment out on the South, one of America’s traditional allies. It is wrong for him to apply more pressure on Seoul to prevent it from moving closer toward Washington. Such pressure can be seen as nothing more than China attempting to intervene in South Korea’s foreign policy.”

So what happened? First, Wang expressed his objection to a US legislative move to expand the America-led “Five Eyes” intelligence alliance by including South Korea and three other countries. He criticized the move as an outdated product of the Cold War era.

Second, Wang’s remarks about “North Korea’s military provocations” were called dumbfounding. However, Wang stressed the need for concerned countries to exercise restraint to prevent a unilateral military action from causing a “vicious cycle” of tensions on the peninsula. As for the North’s cruise missile tests, he also said that other countries engage in such military activities.

Naturally, the possibility of a visit by the Chinese President is discussed in such a situation. Still, despite repeated invitations from Moon, Xi Jinping has not made a single attempt to visit South Korea.

According to Lee Seong-hyon, Ph.D., a graduate from Harvard University, COVID-19 serves as a convenient diplomatic cover. During the pandemic, Xi has held many virtual summits with many state leaders, and this shows that the Chinese side sees no need for a summit with Moon.

Slowly and gradually, the Chinese side distrusted the Moon administration and its wording, realizing that Seoul says one thing and does another, especially after Moon held a summit with Biden, following which the South China Sea and Taiwan were mentioned in a joint statement.

Distrust of China and the cultivation of anti-Chinese sentiments is a separate big topic. It should also mention the demands to close Confucius Institutes as foreign agents and the violent campaigns of patriotic NGOs against Chinese businesses and joint projects.

On the other hand, work is underway on relatively minor areas, even if it concerns the possibility of discussing
security problems on the peninsula and the prospects for denuclearization of the DPRK (since there is a big
difference between talking and doing things). Thus, on April 12, the Chinese Foreign Ministry announced
the appointment of a new special envoy on the Korean peninsula. The post, which had been vacant for almost two years,
was taken over by Liu Xiaoming, China’s ambassador to the DPRK from 2006 to 2009 and then to the UK from 2009
to early 2021. The Chinese Foreign Ministry said in a statement that Liu Xiaoming “will liaise with the countries
concerned as well as play a constructive role in the political process on the Korean Peninsula.” The meetings
between Liu Xiaoming and his counterpart Noh Kyu-duk took place periodically on June 23, September 29, and
November 1. Each time, Noh called on China to play a more active role and facilitate North Korea’s return to the
negotiating table. Liu reiterated China’s willingness to cooperate constructively to advance the peace process.

On January 16, China and the ROK held a working meeting on defense policy in Seoul to discuss the situation on the
Korean Peninsula and cooperation with the international community to achieve peace and denuclearization in the
region. Also on the agenda were high-level personnel exchanges, the development of contacts to build confidence in
the military sphere, and intensifying exchanges through training programs.

On May 17, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of South Korea signed a cooperation agreement with the National
Research Council for Economics, Humanities, and Social Sciences under the Prime Minister’s Office. The council
explores ways to strengthen relations between the ROK and China in various fields and proposes a vision for future
cooperation between the two countries.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said on May 17 that Beijing supports Seoul’s stance against
Japan’s plans to dump contaminated water from the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant into the ocean.

On June 22, the ROK Foreign Ministry said South Korea would continue to steadily manage its relations with China.
The announcement came “amid speculation that South Korea’s participation in the G-7 summit as a guest makes the
country look like it has chimed in with the G-7 countries on their unified front against an assertive China”.

On August 24, South Korea and China launched a “future-oriented” committee to develop their relations ahead of the
30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties in 2022.

On September 15, 2021-2022 Korea-China Cultural Exchange Year was launched to coincide with the 30th
anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries. The opening ceremony took place eight months after
President Moon Jae-in and Chinese President Xi Jinping reached an agreement. Hwang Hee, Minister of Culture,
Sports and Tourism Republic of Korea, and (by video) Hu Heping, Minister of Culture of China, delivered welcoming
speeches.

On October 30, the foreign ministers of South Korea and China met in Rome. The meeting took about 30 minutes,
and among the things discussed was Seoul’s proposal to formally declare an end to the 1950-53 Korean War. The
two sides also agreed to intensify efforts to promote cultural exchanges as 2022 marks the 30th anniversary of
establishing diplomatic relations. Wang Yi said China supports efforts that contribute to the political settlement of
the Korean Peninsula’s problems.

In addition, South Korea has expressed hopes that China will cooperate in promoting cultural content exchange - a
sore point for Seoul, but talk remains talk, with Chinese patriotic films about the events of 50-53 in the ROK also
under a de facto ban.

So, the political aspect of relations between the two countries remains at the level of “we keep pretending that
nothing bad is going on, but it turns out to be not up to par.”

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