August 24 marked the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Republic of Korea and China. ROK President Yoon Suk-yeol and Chinese President Xi Jinping exchanged congratulatory letters on the occasion. The South Korean leader said in his letter that bilateral ties have developed in various fields over the past 30 years. He expressed hope that the two countries would seek new avenues of cooperation based on a spirit of mutual respect. Yoon Suk-yeol expressed hope that their bilateral ties would go beyond quantitative growth, asked China to continue to play a constructive role in efforts to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue, and expressed his desire to meet the Chinese President to discuss ways to develop bilateral relations.

President Xi said in his letter that he hoped to strengthen strategic communication with President Yoon and build a lasting friendship, taking 30 years of relations as a new starting point. Xi appreciated that the two countries are neighbors who have long maintained friendly relations in all directions, while maintaining openness and interaction. The Chinese leader, for his part, outlined the desire to maintain bilateral friendly relations in a wide range of areas, based on the principles of openness, inclusiveness and mutually beneficial cooperation.
To mark the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations, Seoul and Beijing simultaneously hosted celebrations and commemorations involving the foreign ministers of the two countries. Park Jin said at such an event that South Korea-China relations are at a "new historic turning point" and called for joint efforts to turn the crisis into an opportunity. He said the Yoon administration would work with China to make progress on its “bold initiative” to provide economic assistance to North Korea in return for its steps towards denuclearization, and also stressed the need to expand cultural cooperation and promote people-to-people exchanges.

In addition, experts from the two countries presented recommendations to their governments for strengthening the strategic partnership in a joint report that was presented during a videoconference organized by the Committee for Future Development of China-ROK Relations on August 24. The Committee consists of 44 experts from both countries, mostly former high-ranking officials and academics, who have been tasked with drawing up a roadmap on how to develop relations between Seoul and Beijing on the occasion of the 30th anniversary.

The report contains proposals for four main areas of cooperation: planning for the future, politics and diplomacy, economics and trade, and culture and society. The parties were encouraged to seek a new model of cooperation through a multi-level strategic dialogue to deepen mutual political trust. In particular, two-plus-two talks involving deputy foreign and defense ministers, rather than just summit meetings, and cooperation on supply chains and maritime issues were suggested.

Foreign Ministers of both countries, Park Jin and Wang Yi, attended the event and welcomed the participants.

Also on August 27, the Republic of Korea and China agreed to intensify cooperation and collaboration in supply chains through the establishment of a new high-level consultative body. The agreement was part of a Memorandum of Understanding signed during the 17th South Korea-China Meeting on Economic Cooperation, held online between Korean Minister of Finance Cho Kyung-ho and the Minister in charge of the National Development and Reform Commission, He Lifeng. The memorandum calls for a new group at supply chain director level to discuss related issues “in time” when there are any supply disruptions and to increase policy consultation. This is the first memorandum of understanding between the two neighboring countries.

Another memorandum of understanding was intended to “practically” enhance economic cooperation and jointly respond to global uncertainties through active information exchange and cooperation between their central and local governments, as well as their companies.

According to the Ministry, Seoul has urged Beijing to make real progress in negotiating services and investments under the bilateral Free Trade Agreement (FTA), especially in sectors such as cultural content and the gaming industry, while China has suggested closer cooperation in health and sports. According to the Ministry, Choo also asked China to support South Korea’s bid to host the 2030 World Expo in Busan.

Observing all this, the author recalls how it all began. Until 1992, as a model anti-communist state, South Korea maintained diplomatic relations not with the PRC but with the Republic of China (Taiwan), which for political reasons had a large downtown complex second only to the US. But when the political wind shifted and Roh Tae-woo launched the so-called New North Policy, the Taiwanese were given about 48 hours to vacate the premises and go away, and such a demonstrative blow was very painful.

Since then, relations between the ROK and China have had their ups and downs, and they have come to a meaningful anniversary in no better shape. On the one hand, China has become the Republic of Korea’s largest economic partner, and the latter, in turn, the third largest trading partner. On the other hand, there are enough serious problems.

The controversy dates back to the Park Geun-hye era, with the landmark decision to deploy the US THAAD missile defense system in the ROK. In protest, Beijing has imposed a tacit ban on the spread of South Korean culture in China and discouraged tourist travel by its citizens to the Republic of Korea. Cultural exchanges between the countries have never recovered to their previous level.

Relations between the PRC and the ROK under Moon Jae-in also proved difficult. On the surface Moon froze the THAAD issue and conservatives constantly rebuked him for his pro-China course to the point of accusations of crypto-socialism and a desire to sell the country out to President Xi. In reality, however, Moon was clearly aligned with his political suzerain, the US, and against the backdrop of worsening relations between Washington and Beijing he began, through democrat-controlled NGOs, a campaign to foster hatred of China, which wanted to appropriate the country’s history and culture. Unsurprisingly, the Chinese President’s landmark visit to the ROK under Moon
never took place.

Nevertheless, Moon has gone for the so-called “three no’s” policy - no additional THAAD missile defense deployment, no integration of South Korea into a US-led regional missile defense system and no trilateral alliance of the ROK with the US and Japan.

In this context, the (conditional) conservative Yoon Suk-yeol was expected to take an even more consistent anti-Chinese stance as part of the factional struggle, but this was not the case. Of course, the first hundred days are the first hundred days, but one can see an interesting trend. First, in terms of scandals, the country’s media has again switched to anti-Japanese themes. Second, there are repeated statements by the Foreign Minister and high-ranking officials that the ROK’s activism in pro-US alliances is not directed against China and will not weaken the ties between the two countries. Third, it is worth noting the high level of diplomatic activity: Foreign Minister Park Jin has already visited China, and Chinese representative Wang Qishan was the highest-ranking person to attend Yoon’s inauguration.

But not everything depends on Seoul’s wishes. In the realities of the “New Cold War”, the US-China stand-off could make the situation worse, but in the meantime, after giving a general outline of the situation, the author intends to go into more detail about each aspect of the interaction between the two countries - politics, economics, the US missile defense problem, etc. Look forward to more articles!

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