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President Park's Visits to Beijing and Washington and Implications for Inter-Korean Relations

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President Park's upcoming trip to Washington can be evaluated in view of her recent visit to Beijing. South Korean President Park Geun-hye's recent visit to China to attend the commemoration ceremony for the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II was warmly welcomed by the Chinese government. The Chinese public also highly appreciated her presence and her popularity in China has surged. The South Korean media were supportive of her visit to China as well, but in fact there was domestic controversy surrounding her diplomatic efforts.

One concerned group was Korean political conservatives. South Korea still faces sporadic provocations from North Korea, and antagonistic words and actions are exchanged regularly between the countries. Given this serious reality, Korean conservatives strongly believe the US-ROK security alliance should be prioritized over any other relationship and befriending China is not a good idea for the country. Ironically, Korean progressives were also not enthused by President Park's visit to Beijing, even though they tend to prefer a more proactive or autonomous foreign policy rather than leaning too heavily on the US-ROK alliance; as South Korean conservatives favor. South Korean liberals responded with sarcasm when they saw President Park standing next to China's non-democratic leaders while overlooking Tiananmen Square where the pro-democracy protest was violently suppressed in 1989. It was not a pleasant image for many Korean progressives who were involved in the democratization movement or who tacitly supported opposition groups during Korea's authoritarian period.

Across the Pacific, in the US as well, some observers were not happy to witness President Park standing at Tiananmen Gate. The appearance of President Park, democratically elected head of American ally South Korea, watching an extravagant Chinese military parade that gave the image of targeting the US was perplexing and even frustrating to many Americans who perceive the rise of China and Putin's Russia as major challenges to American national interests and global leadership. However, if they recalled the fact that China is now South Korea's largest trading partner, having overtaken the US for that title, with a huge trade surplus with South Korea, they might reluctantly understand China's importance to South Korea. In fact, President Park was accompanied by a huge delegation of 156 Korean business leaders, which was the largest such delegation in the diplomatic history between South Korea and China.

Of course, commercial interests were not the only driver of her high profile diplomacy. Another important policy motivation that warrants more attention now is the so-called Park Geun-hye Doctrine. This doctrine emphasizes peaceful reunification as the only way to fundamentally solve North Korea's nuclear problem and highlights cooperation with neighboring countries to accomplish that goal. China is indispensable to implement this vision. Her doctrine may look unconventional to many Americans, but it is not completely new; President Roh Tae-woo also tried to reach out to communist countries, North

Eunjung Lim, lecturer at Johns Hopkins University, explains that "The appearance of President Park, democratically elected head of American ally South Korea, watching an extravagant Chinese military parade that gave the image of targeting the US was perplexing and even frustrating to many Americans."

The East-West Center promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the US Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options.

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Korea’s traditional allies, to extend the sphere of South Korea’s diplomacy almost three decades ago.

Despite these controversies, the recent public poll results in South Korea seem to support her doctrine. Her administration has been struggling with diminishing approval rates; declining to approximately 34% after the MERS Crisis in June and July of this year. However, her support rates have been rapidly recovering, particularly since late August when the South Korean government started negotiations with North Korea after the landmine incident, and her visit to China contributed to increasing the rate even further. Now, nearly 50% of respondents support her administration.

What made South Koreans support her diplomacy? First, her presence at the heart of China was impressive enough to soothe many Koreans’ wounded pride. South Korea used to be the poorest in the world seventy years ago but its transition to prosperity and power was evidenced by its lady president standing next to giant-sized countries’ masculine leaders. By contrast, North Korea’s Choi Ryong-hae, Secretary of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party, was almost invisible in any media reports despite his country’s historical support from China and Russia. Regardless of China’s real intention and its strategic goals, many Koreans got the impression that its former communist enemy has chosen South Korea now and abandoned troublesome North Korea. The other reason for increased popular support for President Park is that many Koreans think neither type of engagement policy previously attempted – Kim Dae-jung’s Sunshine Policy, or the non-engagement represented by the “5.24 Measures” put in place after the sinking of the *Cheonan* – contributed to peace-building. Many Koreans are willing to give her new doctrine a chance, even though they are not fully confident of its success.

Can the Park Doctrine and changing relations between the two Koreas and China be good for the US? Of course it can. John J. Hamre, President and CEO of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), has stated that the newly emerging relations between China and South Korea can be positive for the US because President Park’s policy is neither building another alliance with China nor bashing Japan, another key US ally. As long as the US-ROK alliance remains firm, more collaboration between South Korea and China can increasingly contribute to the US-China relations.

One big missing part of President Park’s visit to China was, however, a more cautious calculation on Pyongyang’s reaction. Honeymoon relations between Beijing and Seoul, as well as her popularity in China, enormously irritated Pyongyang, which had just accepted the “8.25 Inter-Korean Agreement”. President Park and her advisors might have thought that pressing Pyongyang further with its historical ally could be an effective strategy. But, her high profile diplomacy seems to have irked Pyongyang somewhat unnecessarily. As a result, some serious concerns have resurfaced. First, a vicious cycle of large-scale provocations from Pyongyang and further sanctions by the international community might be repeated because Pyongyang’s desire to lash out is always lurking, regardless of the terms of recent agreements. Once Pyongyang launches a rocket, the UN will automatically impose additional sanctions, which could then prompt Pyongyang to conduct another nuclear test. This is exactly why communications between Washington and Seoul remain as critical as ever. When President Park meets President Obama in Washington on October 16, they must discuss North Korea issues at length. She also needs to explain to American policymakers and the American public the necessity of separating humanitarian concerns from security issues. For instance, reunions of separated families, a politically and socially significant issue in South Korea, are scheduled for late October. Even if some provocations are caused by Pyongyang before this event, negative spill-over effects should be avoided because it might be the last chance for these reunions; almost half of all separated family members have already passed away, and the majority of those still alive are in their 80s and even older. October is likely to be a watershed in relations between the two Koreas, and US-South Korea understanding and coordination is required from both.

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