South Korean-Chinese Summit: A Dose of Reality
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The recently completed visit of South Korean President Park Geun-hye to China, and the red carpet treatment she received there, is widely perceived as a seminal event which could ultimately reshape diplomatic relations throughout East Asia.

Not all quarters, however, hailed the results of the precedent setting visit. There was a dark mood apparent in both Tokyo and Pyongyang, although for decidedly different reasons. Japanese press pointed to the fact that a new South Korean president had visited China before Japan. Kyodo News expressed concern that this will “leave Japan out of the loop.” Pyongyang, meanwhile, lashed out at President Park’s remarks on North Korean denuclearization, made in a speech at Tsinghua University, as “just a silly dream.”

In Seoul and Beijing, however, it was all euphoria. Even before the visit began, the Washington Times ran a story titled "Park Geun-hye Fever Sweeps China." The article noted, among other points, "Beijing’s desire to exploit the perceived decline of Washington’s influence on the Korean peninsula by cozying up to Seoul" as wartime operational control is about to be transferred from US to ROK forces. International media noted that the largest trade delegation ever to accompany a South Korean President visited Seoul's number one trading partner. In an attempt to read the tea leaves, the seventy-one business leaders on the China trip were contrasted favorably with the lesser number of fifty-one who traveled with President Park to Washington in May.

Beijing's official press also covered the visit as a love fest, lauding President Park as a "lao pengyou" (old friend) of China, a moniker reserved for such Sinophiles as Henry Kissinger. The South Korean President was also praised for both her fluency in Mandarin and her love of Chinese culture.

The South Korean press, in particular, looked for a new level of cooperation from Beijing on the prickly issue of North Korea as a direct result of the Park-Xi summit. A cold, hard dose of reality may be required to lessen some of these great expectations. Wasn't it just three summers ago that the expectations of both Seoul's diplomats and the South Korean public as a whole were dashed when Beijing adopted a cynical attitude toward Pyongyang's sinking of the Cheonan? Wasn't it Beijing who blocked the efforts of South Korea and its friends in the UN to squarely address the issue and condemn North Korea for the killing of forty-six young South Korean sailors, an "act of war" as then Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell called it at a Senate hearing on September 16, 2010?
Is the ire caused in Seoul by the abrupt visit and what some called “rude” behavior of then Chinese state councilor Dai Bingguo in November 2010 in the wake of the North Korean shelling of Yeonpyeong Island so easily forgotten? The Chosun Ilbo termed that visit, during which Dai gave “a tedious, one-hour talk on the history of relations between South Korea and China” to then-President Lee Myung-bak as a “diplomatic gaffe.” And wasn't it less than two years ago – in December 2011 – that a major diplomatic rift occurred when a Chinese fisherman stabbed a South Korean coast guard member to death while resisting arrest for illegal poaching in waters off of Incheon?

More recently, Beijing's cold indifference to the plight of North Korean refugees has been a subject of much concern by not only South Korean officials but the public as well. Wasn't it just a year ago that former National Assemblywoman Park Sun Young staged her hunger strike in front of the Chinese Embassy in Seoul and the “Save My Friend” campaign drew large crowds to protest Beijing's forced repatriation of refugees? And wasn't it less than two months ago that Chinese officials turned a deaf ear to pleas from Seoul officials not to send nine young refugees expelled from Laos back to North Korea but to instead give them safe passage to South Korea?

And then there was the controversy a decade ago over history – contrasting interpretations of the origin and significance of the Goguryeo Dynasty. The infamous “Northeast Project, undertaken by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, to research the supposed Chinese tributary status of Goguryeo, caused outrage in South Korea. As a result of the controversy, and despite the “Hallyu “ – South Korean cultural wave – which swept China, Beijing took the rather unprecedented step in 2006 of banning broadcasts of the South Korean costume drama “Jumong” on the life of the founder of the Goguryeo dynasty.

Over two decades ago, when Paul Kennedy's work “The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers” first appeared, some South Korea students and intellectuals took the view that America's day was done and that another Pacific power – then Japan – was set to replace the United States. There were calls for accommodation in South Korea to new strategic and trade realities.

A similar phenomenon with regards to China's rise seems to be taking place today. But as we commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of the Korean War armistice later this month, it seems prudent to recall which power came to South Korea's assistance in its hour of greatest peril and which power intervened to prevent the unification of the Korean peninsula. It may be time to recall that old American saying "that a friend in need is a friend indeed."

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