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Beyond Economics, China Still Uncertain and Ambivalent on Security Matters

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What kind of impression is China giving Korea? Images of certain country are formed through visits and first-hand experience as well as through information on a country's leaders, policies, and events. And these impressions are more entrenched than say public sentiment on current issues which may change more easily.

When the people of one country form their basic perception of another country, there is a tendency to respond to that country as a single political entity. Basic factors such as the strength of the other country, collective memories implanted throughout history, survival instincts, a sense of sovereignty, and emotions play a strong role in how we interpret any issue as it arises.

Koreans' Pragmatic View of China

Koreans' image of China is centered on the economy. Accordingly, Koreans have a relatively pragmatic view of China. Following the normalization of relations in 1992, the Korean economy quickly became interlocked with that of China.

In 2004, China surpassed the U.S. as Korea's largest trading partner, and currently 25 percent of Korean exports head for Chinese markets while the U.S. accounts for 18 percent and Japan only 7 percent of Korean exports. And with the trade, investment, travel, entertainment, and service sectors all becoming more and more dependent on

China, many are nervous about the inevitable impact of China's slowing growth on the Korean economy.

According to a public opinion survey on Korean identity conducted by the East Asia Institute (EAI) in 2015, when asked which country among China, Japan, Russia, North Korea, and the U.S. will impact Korea the most ten years from now, 70 percent selected China while just 13 percent picked the U.S. When the same question was asked ten years ago in 2005, 41 percent selected China while 31 percent picked the U.S. indicating that the number of Koreans perceiving a growing Chinese influence on Korea will continue to progressively increase in the future.

Furthermore, when asked whether the influence of a country will increase, hold steady, or decrease ten years from now, 80 percent of Koreans stated that China's influence will increase in the future while only 29 percent said the same of the U.S. Although no one is sure when China's growth will reach its zenith, the fact that the scale of China's economy is so large seems to mean that it will wield significant power over the Korean economy for some time to come.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) announced in 2014 that China's gross domestic product (GDP) in terms of purchasing power parity (PPP) was at 17.6 trillion dollars, larger than the U.S. whose PPP GDP stood at 17.4 trillion dollars. It is also expected that China will surpass the U.S. in

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nominal GDP terms around the year 2025. It is only natural that Korea will gravitate toward China given its close proximity to and high level of dependency on the middle kingdom.

Who Will Help with Unification?

On the other hand, in terms of security issues, Koreans perceive China as uncertain and ambivalent. In 2008, former presidents Lee Myung-bak and Hu Jintao upgraded the ROK-China relationship to that of "strategic cooperation partners" as they agreed to strengthen cooperation not only in the economic and cultural arenas, but also in regard to politics and security. However, China seemed to give consideration to North Korea following the sinking of the Cheonan and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island.

Five years later in 2013, Presidents Park Geun-hye and Xi Jinping adopted the Korea-China Joint Statement for Future Vision which aims to promote strategic communication between the two countries on a variety of issues in order to enhance mutual trust, and included measures such as the regularization of mutual visits by foreign ministers, the establishment of a hotline, and a strategic dialogue on the vice-ministerial level.

However, following North Korea's fourth nuclear test in January and its missile test in February, China seemed to be cautious and cooperated only at the last minute. Given the ambivalent Chinese policy of seeming to cozy up to both South and North Korea, South Korea has no choice but to depend on the U.S. in the realm of security. And security cooperation between South Korea and China will continue to face certain basic limits.

According to last year's EAI survey, when asked which country would help with unification of the Korean Peninsula, 44

percent of Koreans chose the U.S. (this figure is even larger than the percentage of those who selected their own country, South Korea, at 32 percent) while 12 percent picked China. Despite this poor impression of China in the realm of security, when asked in which area relations with China must improve 70 percent of Koreans still answered the economy while only 16 percent selected security.

Americans tend to view China as a threat. This is caused as much by the fear that China's military and economic hard power can supplant the U.S. led order in the Asia-Pacific region as it is by the resistance to the diffusion of the Chinese model in which capitalist growth does not go hand in hand with a transition to democracy.

Because western modernity is based on both the industrial and democratic revolutions, the notion that economic development inevitably leads to a democratic transition is embedded in western thought. The spread of democratic values and institutions is an important goal in American foreign policy. Europe also sees human rights and democracy as the key to good governance and is ordering developing countries to adopt democratic values as a condition of aid.

However, China shows no indications of transitioning into a western-style democracy as the Chinese government seems to be satisfying its 1.4 billion citizens and managing the country relatively well. In its development cooperation as well, China is following a policy of non-interventionism as it supports authoritarian governments in developing countries all the while trying to procure energy and increase trade.

In quite a different fashion from the West which remains uncomfortable with China's domestic and international political status, Korea does not use a western-style democratic

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yardstick to measure China's political system. Korea spent a significant amount of time inside the Sino-centric civilization and the two countries share the moral and social approaches of Confucianism rather than western individualism.

In this way, Koreans can understand Martin Jacques better than most when he says, "China is a civilizational-state rather than a nation-state. The Chinese people understand the authority and legitimacy of a state as the guardian or protector of the Chinese civilization, not from a sense of democratic responsibility." Thus Koreans are not inclined to debate the pros and cons of Chinese politics.

With that said, recent comments opposing the introduction of the THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) system by the Chinese ambassador to South Korea when he met with a representative of the opposition Minjoo Party or threatening statements by other high ranking Chinese officials have irritated Koreans' sense of sovereignty.

Recognizing Korean resistance to these comments, China dispatched Wu Dawei, Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Affairs, as the Chinese government switched to a more persuasive strategy. However, when China's core interests are different from Korea's, it is likely that China will continue to use rough and hard diplomatic measures rather than a soft public diplomacy approach. If this proves to be the case, then the Koreans, who are sensitive about violations of their sovereignty, may become more anti-China.

If there is a green light on economic cooperation with China, then there is a yellow light on security cooperation. Arrogant China has a red light. China needs to understand the Korean people's complex perceptions of their country and if mutual interests can be identified then Korea-China relations can develop further. ■

—— Sook Jong Lee is the EAI President, and a professor at Sungkyunkwan University. Currently, Dr. Lee holds advisory positions in the South Korean government, including the Presidential National Security Advisory Group, Presidential Committee for Unification Preparation and councils for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Unification, and the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA). She also participates as member of the Trilateral Commission, Council of Councils, and many other transnational networks on research and policy studies. Dr. Lee received her B.A. from Yonsei University, and M.A. and Ph.D. in sociology from Harvard University.