

## **CHINESE PRESIDENT XI JINPING'S VISIT TO SOUTH KOREA**

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The visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to South Korea, apart from strengthening the bilateral relationship, was intended to send significant messages primarily to two countries namely Japan and North Korea. That Xi visited Seoul before he had visited Pyongyang was a message that the Sino-North Korean bond was under some serious tension. Xi has already met the South Korean President Park Guen-hye five times and held two Summit meetings with her since assuming power; but curiously he has still to meet the North Korean leader despite repeated North Korean requests. China is apparently still smarting at the temerity shown by the North Korean leader to conduct nuclear tests as close as 100 kilometers from the Chinese border, despite China's strong disapproval and the fact that the North Korean leader's uncle Jang Song-thaek was executed for treason for allegedly having secretly sent a letter to the Chinese.

The second message was intended for the Japanese. Both China and South Korea have found common cause in what are euphemistically called 'history issues.' Both were at the receiving end of Japanese militarism and during the Second World War subjected to severe Japanese atrocities. Both seek 'compensation' and both utilize this aspect to put pressure on the present Japanese government. The South Korean-Japan relationship is at present tense despite US pressure that they settle their differences. It is this cleavage that China seeks to exploit to further its policies in North-East Asia.

The Sino-South Korean economic relationship is not only thriving, but at present [2013] the two-way trade stands at US\$270billion and it is expected that by the end of 2015 it will reach

US\$300billion. China is South Korea's largest trading partner and the volume of China-South Korea trade is more than the combined trade that South Korea has with the US, Japan and the EU. Both countries also hope to sign a free trade agreement and 11 rounds of negotiations have already taken place since they first started on 2 May 2012. In the free trade agreement, 14 sectors are expected to be covered, including goods trade, services, investment, environment and e-commerce. Apart from this the two Presidents also agreed to start maritime boundary negotiations, in what was seen as a direct rebuff to Japan which has maritime boundary disputes not only with China but with South Korea as well. The two countries also decided to set up a direct currency exchange mechanism and enhance regional economic co-operation. Surprisingly, the South Koreans also decided to participate in China's initiative to set up an Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank that seeks to rival the ADB; that is supposedly dominated by Japan and the US.

However, at no point did Xi Jinping give an indication that Chinese interests in seeking to keep the North Korean regime afloat were flagging. China seeks stability near its North-Eastern borders and is loath to do anything that would de-stabilize the North Korean regime. While Xi went so far as to concede that 'both countries re-affirm their firm opposition to the development of nuclear weapons on the Korean peninsula' he was not prepared to go beyond this general formulation. Interestingly, the statement speaks of *development*, but does not say anything about *deployment* of nuclear weapons on the Korean peninsula. It is widely believed that the US has *deployed* nuclear weapons on the Korean peninsula, although it refuses to either confirm or deny any such deployment.

Both the North Koreans and the Japanese reacted to Xi's visit by announcing that contacts between the two countries had taken place and that Japan was rescinding some of the unilateral 'sanctions' that it had placed on the North Korean regime. This announcement was made just as Xi's plane was about to land at Seoul. Thus while diplomatic maneuverings are taking place in North-East Asia, it would be too early to draw any conclusive meanings. The South Korean dependence on US military power for its security remains a firm imperative and the US in turn

will not let South Korea go out of its orbit. While the US-Japan security treaty remains the firm bedrock of US policy in the region, the US will not like its allies in the region to go quarreling to the advantage of China. At some point in time, the Chinese policy of trying to wean South Korea away from its security moorings with the US by instituting a solid economic relationship and offering it commercial and economic carrots; will come up against this hard reality. That then will be the test of the effectiveness of Chinese diplomacy.

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