

China-South Korea Relations: Two Parallel Visits, or “We’ll Dance with Both of You”

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Two important visits took place on April 2-3, 2021, the combination of which perfectly illustrated the difficult situation in which Seoul finds itself amid the standoff between Beijing and Washington. On the one hand, the US is South Korea’s main military and political ally, and the policy of rebuilding alliances that the new President Biden has addressed is trying to further strengthen the trilateral interaction in the Washington-Tokyo-Seoul triangle, both on the North Korean issue and in terms of “deterring” China. On the other hand, China is North Korea’s leading trading partner, and interaction with it has a chance to push North Korea toward inter-Korean cooperation.

The South Korean media often compares the country’s policy to walking on a tightrope, as Seoul wants to avoid spoiling relations with either side. Naturally, this requires having good relations with everyone. In a demonstrative manifestation of this policy, on the same day ROK **Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong** met with Chinese **Foreign Minister Wang Yi** and **National Security Adviser Suh Hoon** arrived for a private meeting with his counterparts from the United States and Japan.

Let’s start with the visit to China.

On April 2-3, Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong visited Xiamen, China, at the invitation of the Chinese side. The foreign minister was last in China in November 2017, and the meeting of foreign ministers of the two countries took place for the first time since November 2020.

Before leaving Seoul, the South Korean foreign minister told reporters that cooperating with China to make progress in Seoul’s efforts to build a lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula is “very important,” and noted that discussions between Korea and China on the matter are [going wel](#).

The talks were expected to discuss cooperation between Seoul and Beijing in preventing escalation of tensions in the region, high-level exchanges (including the possibility of a visit to Seoul by Chinese President Xi Jinping) and preparations for events marking the 30th anniversary of the establishment of bilateral diplomatic relations, which will be in 2022. In addition, Chung Eui-yong and Wang Yi were going to touch on US policy toward the DPRK

and its provocative actions, as well as China's involvement in building lasting peace in the region, since the resumption of denuclearization talks between the United States and North Korea in the near future is unlikely after Pyongyang's recent launches of short-range ballistic missiles.

Conservatives immediately criticized the visit. JoongAng Ilbo noted that the first thing most Korean foreign ministers did after taking office was to visit Washington, D.C. Chung, on the other hand, goes to China, which shows how much importance the Moon Jae-in [administration attaches](#) to China. If the Korean diplomat does not behave assertively, "Korea could be pried away from its decades-old alliance and be subjugated to China".

At the ministerial meeting, Wang Yi stated that "South Korea and China are strategic partners and have common or similar positions on preservation of regional peace and stability, pursuit of co-development and security of global [governance](#)". Calling the two countries eternal neighbors, Wang stressed the importance of strategic communication between Seoul and Beijing and said the talks were very timely.

Wang pointed out that the two sides favor "openness and inclusiveness", pledging to "maintain an international order based on international law and to work together to protect multilateralism and expand common interests". Regarding the DPRK, Wang added that "China, along with South Korea, will strive for a process of political settlement of the Korean Peninsula problem through dialogue".

Chung Eui-yong also stressed that the two countries share the common goal of complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

As for the visit of Chinese **President Xi Jinping** to South Korea, the sides agreed to achieve this "as soon as the situation with COVID-19 stabilizes". Though, there was no mention of this in China's final statement.

Chung and Wang also agreed to "continuously explore cooperation between South Korea's regional policy [initiatives](#) and China's Belt and Road Initiative".

In addition, they agreed to establish a joint committee in the first half of the year to develop a roadmap for the future development of relations between the two countries, since next year Seoul and Beijing will celebrate the 30th anniversary of the establishment of their ties. The ministers also agreed to seek a strategic dialogue at the level of deputy foreign ministers and a "2+2" meeting involving diplomatic and security officials in the first half of this year.

The Korea Times noted in this regard that Seoul is trying to enlist Beijing's cooperation in order to revive the stalled denuclearization talks between Pyongyang and Washington and achieve a peace process, since China is the only country that can still exert influence on the North. However, it is unclear whether the US and China are willing to cooperate with each other on global issues of common concern, such as the North Korean nuclear issue. Given the escalating rivalry between the G2, the prospects for their cooperation are not bright. This is all the more so when Washington is doubling down on forming an anti-China alliance. Biden is trying to expand the informal Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, better known as the Quad. But it is crucial for Seoul to maintain a balance between Washington and Beijing so as not to get [caught](#) in the crossfire.

The more conservative Korea Herald mentioned that Wang Yi allegedly said that “North Korea’s reasonable anxiety about its security must be [addressed](#)”. According to the newspaper, this means that Beijing wants to preserve the ruling regime of the DPRK, and that the sanctions against the North must be eased. In this context, “it is questionable if Beijing will play a helpful role in denuclearizing North Korea”.

Now about the trip to America.

The meeting between **Suh Hoon, Jake Sullivan and Shigeru Kitamura** took place face-to-face at the US Naval Academy in Annapolis (symbolically, experts say) near Washington, and Suh Hoon became the first high-ranking South Korean official to visit the United States since the creation of the Joe Biden government.

According to National Security Council spokeswoman Emily Horn, the meeting provided “an opportunity for our nations to consult on a wide range of regional issues and foreign policy priorities, including maintaining peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, and combating climate change.” The multilateral dialogue at the level of national security advisors “reflects the importance we place on broadening and deepening our cooperation on key issues and advancing our shared prosperity across a [free and open](#) Indo-Pacific”. Just in time for the final formation of a new policy on the DPRK, which the allies have a chance to influence or at least have a say in.

According to Suh Hoon, South Korea, Japan, and the United States “agreed on the urgency of the North Korean nuclear issue and the need for a diplomatic solution to the issue,” reiterating their joint efforts to resume denuclearization talks with Pyongyang as soon as [possible](#). “The US side explained the interim outcome of the ongoing North Korea policy review, and the security advisers of South Korea, the US and Japan held in-depth discussions on various issues related to preparations and implementation of measures for negotiations with North Korea”.

Also, “South Korea, the US and Japan also discussed global issues such as climate change and agreed to strengthen their cooperation based on their shared values”. The last phrase is very important for the author: recall Pompeo’s and others’ statements that the confrontation between the US and China is not political, but a value-based confrontation: freedom versus totalitarianism.

Of course, “agreed to strengthen” means that there is no full-fledged cooperation yet, but Suh Hoon believes that “the three countries were able to hold strategic dialogue on various issues of mutual interest through this trilateral security advisers’ meeting.”

The White House, in its statement following the meeting, highlighted something slightly different. The advisers “shared their concerns about North Korea’s nuclear and ballistic missile programs and reaffirmed their commitment to address and resolve these issues through concerted trilateral cooperation towards denuclearization”. They also stressed the need for full compliance with UN Security Council resolutions prohibiting any nuclear or ballistic missile tests by the North and “reaffirmed their steadfast commitment to working together to protect and advance their shared security goals”. The importance of “reuniting separated Korean families, and the swift resolution of the abductions issue” was specifically [mentioned](#).

Almost the same wording, including “cooperation based on shared values,” appeared in the

joint statement at the end of the meeting: “a commitment to cooperation and joint action to resolve the North Korean nuclear problem,” “concern over Pyongyang’s continued nuclear and missile programs,” and “the need for full implementation of UN Security Council resolutions”. Nevertheless, “efforts to resume negotiations between North Korea and the US must continue as soon as possible,” and it is claimed that this phrase was included in the text of the statement at the [request](#) of Suh.

In addition to the general meeting, the ROK representative met with each of the vis-a-vis individually. In bilateral talks with Sullivan, Suh said he emphasized the positive impact of good inter-Korean relations on denuclearization talks with the North. However, he also noted the importance of a “coordinated strategy between South Korea and the United States”. In this context, it can be considered a success that the US side “explained the progress made so far regarding North Korea and agreed to continue consultations throughout the remainder of the process”. In other words, the general line was explained to Seoul. But they agreed to listen.

But Seoul and Washington have reached an “agreement in principle” to hold a summit between the presidents of the ROK and the US. Without setting an exact date, the parties agreed to hold the summit as early as possible.

Suh also held bilateral talks with his Japanese counterpart at which “South Korea and Japan agreed to play a constructive and active role in the process of reviewing US policy toward North Korea and agreed on the importance of cooperation between South Korea, the United States and Japan to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue”. The wording is rather vague, considering that before the visit, the ROK media wrote that “during the meeting with Shigeru Kitamura, chairman of Japan’s National Security Council, joint measures by Seoul and Tokyo to establish sustainable peace on the Korean Peninsula will be discussed”.

As can be seen, in both cases the sides announced that the negotiations went well, but the visible results are seen in areas of little significance, because the big issues remained here and there. In fact, both meetings discussed regional security issues, including the North Korean issue, and in both China and America, South Korean officials demonstrated a constructive and positive approach. In both cases, however, the affair ended with general statements of willingness to cooperate and little specifics about the areas of minor importance.

Moreover, if we pay attention to the media coverage of the two visits, the English-language media in the ROK, which has a more conservative orientation, was much more critical of the trip to China than of the trip to America. From the point of view of conservatives, who constantly accuse Moon of cryptocommunist and pro-Chinese politics, “It is high time for Seoul to stop groveling to Beijing and remember who its main ally is”.

A similar position, albeit for different reasons, is held by supporters of the realist approach. This view holds that if we consider the trouble that one side would cause if Seoul were to join the other, although China has shown its teeth in the wake of the ROK’s decision to host THAAD, the United States’ grip could be much stronger, even in terms of a possible trade war.

Nevertheless, while Seoul desperately tries to sit on two parting chairs, already preparing to use the cross twine, the author watches with interest to see how such acrobatics will end.

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