

The China-ROK Relationship: A Blueprint for China on a Wider Stage?

Written by Scott Adam

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SCOTT ADAM, SEP 29 2011

China's growing influence in the international system is receiving a lot of attention, both positive and negative. In some quarters, China's 'rise' is complete (Sutter cited in Yue 2008: 440), though this opinion can be considered premature as China is not yet a global equal of the United States (US). Nonetheless, China is of growing, if uneven, importance of every region in the world.

This growth is especially felt in North East Asia (Han and Kim 2010: 424). As it lies at the 'strategic nucleus' of the region (Han and Kim 2010: 416), the Republic of Korea (ROK) needs to take great interest in China's future role on the regional and global stage. China is the ROK's largest trading partner (Sheen 2007: 141), and as such, a major source of economic security. Conversely, the ROK maintains a bilateral alliance with the US, who has seen China as a competitor (Dupont 2011: 7). This paradox further demonstrates the ROK's unenviable location at the 'juncture' of great power rivalries (Tow and Rigby 2011: 172). Indeed, the entire Korean peninsula has been deemed a 'test case' for an emergent China and the international order (Shirk 2007: 123).

This policy brief will aim to determine if China is a threat, opportunity, or a combination of both to the ROK. This will be done by examining China's approaches to four areas of great importance to the ROK. They are the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), the ROK-US alliance, the greater Asia Pacific region, and the international economy. In doing this, it will be demonstrated that while in some areas the Chinese approach has been positive from a ROK perspective, in other areas it has been negative. This being the case, this policy brief will conclude that at this time, China is showing more traits that make it a threat to the ROK than traits that make it an opportunity.

The DPRK is the ROK's greatest external security threat. The recent sinking of a ROK naval vessel, the *Cheonan*, and artillery exchanges near the maritime Northern Limit Line (NLL) demonstrate this. China is the DPRK's major ally, and this has led the ROK to see China as an opportunity as it has been hoped that China can influence the DPRK and have a positive effect on its actions (Tow and Rigby 2011: 161). China showed further promise by acting as a responsible power in participating in the 6 party talks concerning the DPRK's nuclear arsenal (Dupont 2011: 11), and this support is crucial in managing the issue (Han and Kim 2010: 427). If China can temper the DPRK, China serves as an opportunity for the ROK.

This early promise, however, has taken a setback. Since the sinking of the *Cheonan*, it has been argued that China is more concerned with protecting its ally than maintaining international norms (Han and Kim 2010: 418). This threatens regional stability, and as such, poses a threat to the ROK. Furthermore, China is more concerned with a stable DPRK rather than dismantling the DPRK's nuclear weapons (Snyder cited in Koh 2010: 366). While this in itself does not make China a threat to the ROK, it has resulted in a perception that China views the DPRK as a 'strategic buffer' (Feng 2009: 22). Should reunification be the ultimate goal of both the DPRK and ROK, this may be a challenge as Chinese, in addition to that of the US, support will be needed (Chung 2006: 93). As such, while in terms of dealing with the DPRK, China offers an opportunity, threats exist as well.

China is one of the ROK's major external influences. The US is the other (Han and Kim 2010: 429). In recent years, the ROK's relationship had grown closer with China due to greater volumes of trade and domestic weariness of the

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ROK/US alliance (Chung 2009: 471). A conservative change of government and recent belligerence from the DPRK has reversed this, and the alliance remains central to the ROK's security (Han and Kim 2010: 419).

China is suspicious of this 'lingering' alliance and others like it in the region (Tow and Rigby 2011: 159). China considers the ROK/US alliance 'strategic separatism' in light of China's economic relationship with the ROK and has criticized it (Han and Kim 2010: 417-8). Though this criticism may be accurate, China is a threat here. The ROK is not alone in trying to achieve security through different avenues. Seeking one form of security from one power, from a ROK perspective, shouldn't prevent it seeking another form of security from another. Indeed, this may be the ROK's only option (Han and Kim 2010: 431). By suggesting that the ROK can only have one at the expense of the other is not in the national interest of the ROK. The status quo of the ROK's relations with these two powers is beneficial to the ROK. China's antagonism to the ROK/US alliance makes it a threat. Considering the US's similar alliances in the greater region, a major source of stability (Snyder cited in Han and Kim 2010: 419), this is troubling both for the ROK and the greater region.

East Asia[1] has been a major source of foreign direct investment (FDI) for China, helping its economic development (Deng and Zheng 2008: 128). Elsewhere in the region, however, developments have been less promising, particularly in relation to territorial disputes in the South China Sea, 'Asia's Persian Gulf' (Panda and Khan 2010: 306). For much of the previous decade the South China Sea had been peaceful (Shirk 2007: 115), however recent increased tensions between China, the Philippines and Vietnam demonstrate the continued volatility of the region (Martina 2011). China has also had confrontations with the US in the region both physical (Starr 2009), and more recently verbal (Richburg, Wan and Branigin 2011). This is troubling for the ROK.

Several of the islands at the centre of the South China Sea territorial disputes are near shipping lanes (Han and Kim 2010: 19). The ROK is a trading nation and relies on external sources for energy making the open passage of these lanes crucial. The US presence in the region has allowed this. This is not to say that China does not have legitimate claims in the region, however, its actions, in part, have fueled an increase in arms spending in the region which suggests a shift away from political compromises in the area (Han and Kim 2010: 19). Free navigation in the South China Sea is critical to the ROK, and ongoing territorial disputes involving China make it a threat.

China and territorial disputes are also a concern to the ROK in other, indirect ways. Historical interpretations of Korean history are feared to be a basis of Chinese territorial ambitions involving the greater Korean peninsula (Chung 2009: 478-9). In some quarters there is a fear of a return to an earlier period of history where Korea was a tributary state of China (Chung 2006: 102), with others claiming it threatens Korea's historical basis itself (Choo 2008: 227). Though both governments have suggested that the differing interpretations of Korean history are academic debates (Chung 2009: 472), the link to territorial disputes cannot be ignored. With China varying its approaches to its territorial disputes (Nie 2009), this ambiguity poses a threat to the ROK. There is, however, cause for optimism when China's approach to global affairs is considered.

As of 2009, China had joined 100 international organizations and signed over 300 treaties (Yang 2009: 25). This is evidence of China supporting the current international order, especially in terms of international trade and economics (Buzan 2010: 21). By acting as a responsible power, China presents itself as an opportunity. China is the ROK's largest export market (Chung 2006: 94). Unfortunately, in the past, China and the ROK have not been immune from trade disputes, with the last significant one occurring in 2000 (Chung 2009: 473). A China that is willing to abide by international rules and norms is good for the ROK, and as China is now more comfortable doing this (Yang 2009: 31), this is an opportunity for the ROK. Trade disputes are more costly to the ROK than they are China, placing adherence to international trade agreements high in the ROK's national interest. China is displaying a willingness to do this, making it an opportunity for the ROK.

The four areas covered involving China are the most salient from a ROK perspective. Unfortunately, in terms of threats and opportunities, the views are mixed. China's approach to the DPRK while at times offering an opportunity can also be a threat. Furthermore, China may be a hurdle to eventual reunification on the peninsula. China's position on the ROK/US alliance, the very basis of ROK's security, is undoubtedly a threat. This is a cause of concern. China's ongoing territorial disputes in the region, especially in the South China Sea, are also a threat,

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unless they are resolved peacefully and in accordance with international rules and norms. There is a cause for optimism here, as China has been willing to abide by these rules and norms when trade is involved. A China that continues to do this is an opportunity. Nonetheless, at this time for the reasons mentioned above, China is largely a threat to the ROK.

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[1] For the purpose of this policy brief, the ASEAN states are considered East Asia. See Dick K. Nanto (2006), 'East Asian Regional Architecture: New Economic and Security Arrangements and U.S. Policy', Congressional Research Service, <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/75280.pdf> [accessed 18 August 2011].

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Written by: Scott Adam
Written at: Deakin University
Written for: Chengxin Pan
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