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No. 31, 2006

## Strategic Cooperation Between China and South Korea and Strategic Structure of Northeast Asia

**Zhao Lin**

**Zhao Lin** is a graduate student in the Institute of International Studies, Tsinghua University, China. He can be reached at [bourboot@hotmail.com](mailto:bourboot@hotmail.com).

This paper was presented at the 5th East-West Center International Graduate Student Conference, February 16-18, 2006 in Honolulu, Hawaii USA.

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# **Strategic Cooperation Between China and South Korea and Strategic Structure of Northeast Asia**

**ZHAO Lin**

**Institute of International Studies, Tsinghua University, China**

bourboot@hotmail.com

## **Abstract**

From the very beginning of 1950s, nowadays' strategic structure of Northeast Asia has formed, in which USA, Japan and South Korea make up of the "South Triangle" as well as China, Russia(Soviet Union) and North Korea make up of the "North Triangle". This two "Triangles" are the main roles of confrontations and conflicts during the past fifty years. However, in the Six Party Talks on North Korea's nuclear issue, the "South Triangle" gradually shows cracks. South Korea finds more and more common view China, its former enemy state, on the contrary, finds it more and more difficult to continue to follow America's stands on this issue, which is always considered as South Korea's firmest ally. Meanwhile, because of the historical reason, relationship between South Korea and Japan continues to worsen, which even America, as the leader of "South triangle" feels tough to deal with. In this paper, the author tries to analyze the backgrounds of changes in Northeast Asia's strategic structure and give an explanation why South Korea shows so much "centrifugal" tendency in "South Triangle" and why strategic cooperation between China and South Korea became possible from the perspective of geopolitics, political economics and interior politics. Meanwhile, the paper also tries to discuss the influence of China-ROK strategic cooperation on forming a new strategic structure of Northeast Asia.

## **Background: the rapid development of China-South Korea full-scale strategic cooperation**

Since the Korean War in 1950s, the bilateral relation of China and South Korea had long been in an adverse situation, the two countries did not recognize each other's legitimacy. In 1990s, China and South Korea set up their formal diplomatic relation. From then on, the cooperation and communication between the two countries began to develop rapidly in areas of both economy and politics. Up to the end of 2004, Korean investment in China has added up to 25.9 billion US dollars which made China become South Korea's No.1 investing destination, about 40 thousands factories have been set up in China<sup>1</sup>. At the beginning of the diplomatic relation in 1992, the bilateral trade amount was 5 billion US dollars, while that of 2005 has broken through 100 billion US dollars. Since the establishment of diplomatic relation, China and South Korea keep on high level exchange visits, which greatly promote the bilateral cooperation in full scale. In November 2005, Chinese president Hu Jintao paid a visit to South Korea and raised four points suggestions for China-South Korea cooperation, including to set up hot-line between foreign ministers, to expand economic cooperation, to develop mutual study on humanities and to cooperate on regional security affairs. All these suggestions were totally agreed by South Korean president Roh Moo-hyun.

As well as the rapid development in economic cooperation and bilateral political relation, the cooperation in politics and regional security are also increasing at a high speed. During President Roh's visit to China in 2003, he suggested that China-South Korea relation should be promoted from "fellowship" to "comprehensive cooperative fellowship" which including cooperation in military and regional security. In March 2005, South Korean defense minister said South Korea was considering cooperation with China for Korean peninsula's stability, he also pointed out "will seek to establish military cooperation not below South Korea-Japan's level<sup>2</sup>. According to Chosin Dailiy of South Korea, during his staying in Beijing, South Korea

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<sup>1</sup> For details: <http://cccme.mofcom.gov.cn/aarticle/zhongyswhd/200504/20050400082468.html>

<sup>2</sup> "ROK Defense Minister Stress: ROK-China Military Should Speed Up", for details: <http://news.tom.com/1003/3295/200547-2022938.html>.

and China reached agreement on developing cooperation system of air force and navy to secure the security of West Sea, Yin also held a discussion with Chinese colleagues about set up hotlines between fleets commanding systems and anti-air systems of the two countries.

In the process of dealing with North Korea nuclear crisis, China and South Korea keep close cooperation to coordinate respective positions and finally succeeded in organizing the six party talks, in which China and South Korea have common or similar positions on many important issues, actively coordinate and mediate to reduce the divergences between US and North Korea, for many times, these endeavors saved the talks from the edge of break. China and South Korea both fully support each other's position on issues of providing North Korea with energy aid and security assurance, which forced US to make some concession on these two key issues and made it possible to resolve the crisis peacefully and completely.

## **The steadily increasing common interest and interdependence between China and South Korea**

### **1. Peace of Korean peninsula and the common security interest of China and South Korea**

For a long time, Korean peninsula as powers' arena plays an important role in the strategic structure of Northeast Asia. As neighbor and a part of the peninsula, as well as the participants of Korean War, no matter from the perspective of geopolitics or from that of history, China and South Korea undoubtedly has strong concern with the stability and peace of the peninsula.

On issues related to the stability and peace of the peninsula, China's persistent position is any issues must be resolved in peaceful means to keep the peace on the peninsula. As for North Korean nuclear issue, Chinese government stresses "China insists on keeping the stability and peace of Korean peninsula, and from this principal position, China supports non-nuclearization of the peninsula and is against the existence of nuclear weapons on the

peninsula.” However, China also emphasizes “China is against any means of sanction, pressure or force threat.”<sup>3</sup>

As for China, North Korea’s nuclear program will provide Japan with reason for obtaining nuclear weapons, and will also spur South Korea’s pursuit of nuclear weapons, all of which will undoubtedly worsen the security environment of Northeast Asia. What is more, North Korea’s nuclear program may invite military attack from the United States, which may bring the second Korean War. Whatever the result were, China would be in a dangerous situation. Firstly, large amount of refugee would bring China heavy economic burden as well as damage to the social stability of Northeast China, which would disturb the carrying out of China’s Northeast revival strategy. Secondly, as an important buffer zone between China and US-Japan alliance, North Korean also has significant geographic strategic meaning to China. Thirdly, China and South Korea has close economic relation. Because many enterprises in China depend on the parts from South Korea, war on Korean peninsula would destroy the industrial chain between the two countries, which would bring great loss to China’s producing industry. Besides that, from long term perspective, the overturn of the current North Korean regime would change the existing power balance in Northeast Asia and bring many uncertainties to the future, which are adverse to the peaceful circumstance for China’s development. Therefore, to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue in a peaceful way and sustain the stability of the peninsula will always be China’s fundamental position.

Similarly, it is also a disaster for South Korea to bear a war on the peninsula. Whether the regime in North Korea collapses or not, South Korea will be involved in the war inevitably. If the current regime in the North collapses, the following refugee flush and the reconstruction after war will bring even more disaster beyond the war. Based on these considerations, the ROK government insists on the peace and stability policy while dealing with the North Korean nuclear crisis. On Nov 3<sup>rd</sup> 2004, North Korean president Roh said “South Korea, which is built up on war relic, will not take the risk of another war.”<sup>4</sup> Obviously, peaceful

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<sup>3</sup>For details: <http://www.southcn.com/news/international/zhuanti/negotiation/srzx/200402251133.htm>.

<sup>4</sup>For details: <http://www.sina.com.cn> Dec 10<sup>th</sup> 2004, 11:11 *Global Times*.

manner is the only practical choice of South Korea in dealing with the North Korea nuclear issue. On this point, China and South Korea share the same position. In the joint communiqué released during President Roh's visit to China in 2003, the necessity of sustaining the peninsula's peace and a peaceful manner was specially stressed while referring to the nuclear crisis.<sup>5</sup>

## **2. China and South Korea's Unified "Battle line" towards Japan**

In modern history, China and South Korea were both war-worn from Japanese invasion. During the Japanese invasion and colonial rule, people in China and South Korea both paid great cost, which is not only sacrifice and economic loss, but also hurts to people's heart feelings. These feelings are just one of the main sources of the mistrust and hatred. In recent years, the right-wing tendency in Japanese politics and the wrong words from political leaders, especially PM Koizumi's visits to Yasukuni Shrine greatly stimulate Chinese and Korean people's hatred, directly caused many anti-Japanese demonstrations in both the two countries.

The Yasukuni Shrine issue and the text book issue have become the key factor puzzling China-Japan and South Korea-Japan relations. China and South Korea keep a consistent stance on the issues related to history, they both demand Koizumi to stop visiting Yasukuni Shrine, and demand that Japanese officials and political leaders to understand and rethink history correctly. Both the two countries urge Japan to abide the "Peace Constitution" and continue its peaceful development. In this process, Chinese leaders and South Korean leaders both negotiate and put pressures on Japan, the two countries keep a close cooperation.

However, in defiance of China and South Korea's position, Prime Minister Koizumi continued his visit to Yasukuni Shrine and resulted in strong reaction from the two countries. After Koizumi's recent visit to Yasukuni Shrine, Chinese leaders and South Korean leaders both canceled planned high level visit to Japan. In the 10+3 conference held in Dec 2005, the summit of China, South Korea and Japan, which has been lasted for seven years, was

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<sup>5</sup>For details: <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/wjdt/1179/t57973.htm>



canceled. During the conference, Chinese premier and South Korean president both refused to meet with Koizumi to express strong dissatisfaction with Japan. As for Japan's bid to become the permanent member of UN security council, China and South Korea both hold a negative attitude and cooperate to prevent the "four countries' resolution" for UN reform.

### **3. The rapid development of China-South Korea economic cooperation**

From the establishment of China-ROK diplomatic relation, the bilateral economic relation keeps a rapid development; the total trade amount has risen from 1992's 50.28 hundred million US dollars to 2005's 111.9 billion US dollars at an average growing rate of 24.24%. In 2005, the bilateral trade kept a growth of 24.3%, which is much higher than China-Japan's 9.9%. China has become South Korea's NO.1 exporting destination and NO.2 trade partner.

China and South Korea also obtained great achievement in investment. By the first quarter of 2004, South Korea has become China's No.3 direct investment sourcing country, the percentage of South Korean investment in China's total foreign investment has increased from 1992's 1.1% to 2004's 10%. The rapid growth of South Korean investment greatly promoted the development of bilateral trade, especially of the trade within industry. All of these contributed to a closer economic relationship.

Economy of China and South Korea has a character of mutual reinforcing. The domestic market in South Korea is relatively limited, while China has a population of 1.3 billion and the average GDP has reached more than 1000 US dollars, which endows China with a huge domestic market of diversity consuming demand. In the past few years, Chinese economy sustains a high growing speed, the domestic market is further expanded, and import amount grows significantly, which provides an unprecedented opportunity for South Korea's export-depending economy. China's abundant natural and labor resources, South Korea's high-tech economy, are being combined together gradually to make a huge foreground for further cooperation.

## **Current strategic structure of Northeast Asia and its evolvments**

### **1. The structural change of Northeast Asia after Cold War – from “double triangles” to “single triangle”**

After the end of Korean War, a situation of “South Triangle” vs. “North Triangle” came into being in Northeast Asia. Three north socialist countries, China, North Korea and Soviet Union formed “North Triangle” by three bilateral allying treaties. Three south capitalist countries, South Korea, United States and Japan formed “South Triangle” by “US-Japan Security Treaty” and “US-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty”. During the Cold War, this kind of ideology-based two triangles’ confrontation formed the basic strategic structure of Northeast Asia.

During the Cold War, the “Double Triangles” structure was the reflection of US-USSR power balance in Northeast Asia, which therefore kept the power balance and peace in this region. But along with the collapse of Soviet Union, the dual polar pattern was broken up. In Northeast Asia, the successor of Soviet Union—Russia will not keep the promise on North Korea’s security; meanwhile, because of the economy-first strategy, China will no longer provide North Korea with economic assistance at all costs, and in fact, neither will China provide security assurance to North Korea. By then, actually, the “North Triangle” had collapsed. However, the “South Triangle” did not disappear with the collapse of its counterpart, US-Japan and US-ROK alliances still exist mainly in its used pattern.

Although the “South Triangle” can survive after the Cold War, the collapse of “North Triangle” has caused radical change in Northeast Asian security structure. China and Russia have both abandoned ideological thinking and begun to pursue a good cooperative relation in pursuit of economic development and prosperity. Especially in a period of rapid globalization and growing interdependence, the pursuit of peace and stability for economic prosperity has greatly promoted multi-literal cooperation in a broad range of regional affairs including security and politics. For North Korean nuclear issue, the regional powers in Northeast Asia have tried to seek a peaceful resolution for several times since 1990s. Successively, they

organized “four-party talks”, “three-party talk” and the current “six-party talks”, which have greatly relaxed the situation of Korean peninsula and created opportunities for a diplomatic solution of North Korean nuclear issue. This multilateral cooperation on regional security affairs showed the gradual disappearance of the old two-camp-confronting structure in Northeast Asia.

## **2. The “crack” from South Korea—challenges faced by US-ROK alliance**

During the Cold War, in the structure of North-South Triangles’ confrontation, the US-ROK alliance was an important part in American Asia-Pacific strategy and the core South Korean national security strategy. To cope with the military threat from North Korea is South Korea’s basic purpose to ally with the United States.

After the Cold War, the “North Triangle” collapsed, although the situation of confrontation on Korean peninsula continues, along with the change of the regional strategic structure and relaxation of North-South relation on the peninsula, the long-term sense of insecurity begins to fade out gradually. The direct result is the crack appearing in the US-ROK alliance. South Korea and the United States show disagreements on a series of important core issues including issues of North Korean nuclear and regional military cooperation. These disagreements greatly damaged the two countries’ alliance.

Since President Kim Dae-Jong, South Korea has been carrying out “Sunshine Policy”, whose purpose is to promote mutual communication and understanding. In the past decade, South-North relation has made great progress, the two sides keep close high-level contacts and the bilateral trade and economic cooperation grows rapidly, which brings obvious relaxation to the long-term hostility. However, meanwhile, because of the nuclear and missile issues, the US-North Korea and Japan-North Korea relations faced crises constantly, which brought shadows to the relaxation of the Peninsula’s situation.

On North Korean nuclear issue, although South Korea also demands the abolishment of North Korean nuclear program and opposes North Korea’s obtaining of nuclear weapon,

there is still big divergence in how to dealing with the issue. Since George Bush came into power, a series of engagement policy for North Korea was abandoned. Bush administration even refused to hold dialogue with North Korea and attached a label of “evil axis” to North Korea, on which South Korea and the United States showed great disagreements. During President Kim’s visit to America in 2001, President Bush expressed support for the “Sunshine policy” on one hand; on the other hand, he also showed high doubt of North Korea and refused to hold direct dialogue<sup>6</sup>. After the breaking out of the second North Korean nuclear crisis, under the mediation of China and South Korea, the “Six Party talks” began to hold in Beijing. In the talks, divergences between South Korea and the United States on their North Korean policies were further revealed. Different from the U.S and Japan’s demand that North Korea must firstly dismantle its nuclear facility in a CVID manner, along with China and Russia, South Korea showed understanding on North Korea’s security concern and also tabled a proposal that the nuclear dismantlement goes with economic compensation and security assurance step by step. This suggestion broke the stalemate in the talks, meanwhile, also showed the “cracks” within the south triangle alliance directly in a multilateral occasion.

Besides that, the US-ROK alliance also show “cracks” on other issues of regional security. Bush administration raised NMD program again and caused strong opposition from many countries including Russia and China, but what surprised the U.S most is the opposition from its traditional ally—South Korea. In Feb 2001, Russian President Putin paid a visit to Seoul and signed “Russia-ROK Joint Communique” with President Kim Dae-Jong, in which both the two countries agreed that the “Anti-ballistic missile treaty” was the basis of strategic stability and nonproliferation<sup>7</sup>. This formal position expressed by South Korea government broke the long time harmonious position of the ROK-US alliance again.

With the adjustment of the strategic interest and security policy, the U.S plans to withdraw land forces as well as to strengthen its navy and air force in South Korea, in order to make it have the ability to deal with security situation outside Korean peninsula. However, as for this

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<sup>6</sup> “News Analysis: Bush Holds A Strong Position on North Korea”, <http://www.jczs.com.cn> Mar 10<sup>th</sup> 200.1

<sup>7</sup> “South Korea Says to NMD”, for details: <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/guoji/24/20010306/409735.html>

plan, South Korea's attitude is against that US army in its territory interferes in East Asian affairs outside Korean peninsula, especially in Taiwan Strait. In the speech marked as the "Roh MooHyunism", President Roh noted that "the relocation of the US army in South Korean to other region in Northeast Asia must have been agreed by South Korea primarily, South Korean army will not follow US army to involve in regional conflicts outside Korean peninsula."<sup>8</sup>

It is obvious that South Korea's future security strategy will not be to depend completely on the US but to be more independent and of self-reliance. Since Korean War, South Korea's national defense has been greatly depending on the US.

## **The future strategic structure and regional security in Northeast Asia**

### **1. The collapse of the "South Triangle" and the development of China-South Korea strategic cooperation**

The so called "South Triangle" is an US-led three countries' cooperative regime based US-Japan and US-ROK allies. As for the US-ROK ally, its core is their military allying and regional security cooperation in Korean peninsula. However, because of the change in Northeast Asian strategic structure, South Korea and the U.S have tremendous divergence in security interest and strategy after the Cold War, which results in the emergence of "cracks" in US-ROK military security cooperation. With the adjustment of the U.S security strategy in Northeast Asia and the emergence of Roh Moo-hyunism in South Korea, these divergences will be further increased. Besides that, the conflicts on historical factors between South Korea and Japan will become a strengthening variable in the process of South Triangle's collapse. Predictably, the development of this trend will finally caused the collapse of the current ROK-US-Japan allies in a sense.

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<sup>8</sup> Zhan Xiaohong: "Foh Moonhenism and Strategic Structure of Northeast Asia", *South Wind Window* Semimonthly 4<sup>th</sup>

Meanwhile, the comprehensive cooperation between China-South Korea keeps a rapid growth, in which the bilateral common interests on regional security, economy and culture are increasing gradually. All these increasing common interests provide a firm basis for the further development of strategic cooperation between the two countries. At present, China and South Korea not only have common positions on a series of important regional security affairs, but also cooperate effectively on North Korean nuclear issue. The cooperation on regional security is gradually deepened and specialized, including regular exchange visit for high rank military officers and setting up military hot-line. In future, there is still great space for strategic cooperation in peaceful settlement of North Korean nuclear crisis, sustaining stability on the peninsula and promoting regionalization of Northeast Asia. The strategic cooperation based on broad common interests will facilitate a new strategic structure of Northeast Asia.

## **2. A regional security regime in the new strategic structure of Northeast Asia**

For a long time, the strategic structure in Northeast Asia has an obvious character of confrontation, the two “Triangles” considered each other as security threat of itself. After the Cold War, in spite of “North Triangle” disappearing, the remaining “South Triangle” still considers North Korea as common threat and rival. Of course, as for the U.S and Japan, China and Russia behind North Korea are their real potential rivals. The confronting character of Cold War still exists in the strategic structure of Northeast Asia in a certain extent. As a result, although keeping a peaceful and stable Northeast Asia tallies with every country’s national interest, countries in this region find it difficult to found up mutual-trust and make compromise, which greatly baffle the endeavor of establishing a regional cooperative regime for peace and stability.

However, in the forming process of the security regime in Northeast Asia, the establishment of close strategic cooperation between China-South Korea, will directly break up the remaining “South Triangle” structure and make it possible to build a multi-lateral security regime in Northeast Asia.

On the current North Korean nuclear issue, the effective cooperation of China and South Korea has promoted the convening of Six-party talk; it is the first time for powers in this region to sit together in pursuit of a solution for regional security issue through negotiation. In this talk, cooperation between China and South Korea on manners of nuclear dismantlement, economic compensation and security assurance, guaranteed the continuing of the talks. We can image, if there were two confronting camps in the conference, the atmosphere would be greatly poisoned and finally no compromise could be made. Besides that, China and South Korea's mediation and common position has limited policy choosing of the U.S and Japan, which is beneficial to make compromise with North Korea.

The Six-party talks provide an inspiration for security cooperation in Northeast Asia, that is: the strategic cooperation between China and South Korea can directly break up the situation of "single Triangle" in Northeast Asia, reduce the confronting character and serve the development of multilateral coordinating regime. With the further development of China-South Korea strategic cooperation, we may assume that an institutionalized Six-party talk will appear in this region to serve as a regime, in which Northeast Asian countries can cooperate and coordinate for regional security affairs to sustain long-term peace and stability.

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