



Yang Jiechi's Visit to South Korea and Its Strategic Implication

Dr. CHUNG Jae-hung
Research Fellow,
The Sejong Institute
(jameschung@sejong.org)

Amid the intensifying COVID-19 pandemic and the U.S.-China conflict, Yang Jiechi (楊潔篪), a Politburo member and director of the Office of Foreign Affairs of the Communist Party of China, visited South Korea for two days from August 21 to 22. He met Suh Hoon, South Korea's director of the National Security Office, in Busan and held a working-level talk in preparation for President Xi Jinping's visit to South Korea. Yang's visit to South Korea implies that China strategically places great importance on South Korea and intends to further strengthen political trust and expand economic interaction with South Korea in the post-COVID-19 era. During the meeting, Yang reconfirmed that President Xi will visit South Korea before any other country. Suh responded positively, especially on restoring exchanges and cooperation between South Korea and China through the establishment of new and expanded channels. Suh also asked China to further collaborate in increasing the number of flights and issuing more visas shortly.

The meeting covered a wide range of topics, such as △ a collaborative response to the COVID-19 pandemic, △ the issues of the Korean Peninsula and other international affairs, △ a push for projects to link South Korea's New Southern and New Northern policies with China's Belt and Road Initiative, △ a joint entry into a third country market, △ acceleration of the second phase of FTA negotiations and signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RECP) within the year, △ expansion of cultural exchanges, △ communal disease control, and △ the election of WTO Director-General. Both parties discussed quite candidly and reached a general consensus on the topics. Details of the discussions are yet reported, and they are expected to be further coordinated in time for President Xi's visit to South Korea. In

addition, China expressed its intent to further develop the ROK-China strategic partnership and continuously enhance the communication and strategic cooperation with South Korea in order to advance the Korean Peninsula Peace Process by denuclearizing and establishing peace on the Peninsula.

China has been seeking new strategic changes since the conflict between the U.S. extended beyond the economic and military sectors to the ideological sphere. The conflict has intensified after the Hong Kong national security law was passed in July, and the level has escalated almost to a new Cold War. On July 14, the United States mobilized two nuclear-powered aircraft carriers (Reagan and Nimitz) to conduct large-scale military exercises in the South Sea China and ordered the Chinese consulate in Houston to close on July 21. The U.S. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper also urged Indo-Pacific countries to stand against China together. On July 23, the U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that the U.S. and its allies must encourage the Chinese people and induce China to change in his speech on “Communist China and the Free World’s Future” at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, publicizing the change in the U.S. policy toward China. The fundamental line of the U.S.-China relationship is shaking as the U.S. continues to reject the One-China policy. For instance, the U.S. sent the Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar to Taiwan, the highest official to visit Taiwan since ties cut in 1979, and highlighted Taiwan as a model case for its transparency and responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in this August. China has been firmly standing against the U.S. series of strong measures, and decoupling is emerging in the U.S.-China relations. Although China does not want conflicts and clashes with the U.S., such are likely to continue as the U.S. artificially creates a new Cold War and damages China’s core interests (regarding Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the South China Sea).

Amid the increasingly complex conflict between the U.S. and China, Yang’s visit to South Korea for strengthening of the ROK-China partnership and his emphasis on President Xi’s preferential visit to South Korea imply strategic importance of South Korea to China’s future plans. While China and South Korea have formed one economic community with the amount of trade reaching \$300 billion, the two countries lack in coordination in diplomatic and security areas. In fact, the two states cannot easily cooperate in the field of security due to their conflicting views on the ROK-U.S. alliance, the THAAD deployment, and the North Korean nuclear issues. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that cooperation in foreign and security affairs between South Korea and China is insufficient compared to that in economic and social sectors. If the conflict between the U.S. and China further intensifies in the future, the issues related to the North Korean nuclear weapons, the Indo-Pacific strategy, the Huawei (華為)

ban, the deployment of Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) and other strategic weapons, the U.S. initiative of the Economic Prosperity Network (EPN), the Taiwan case, and the territorial rights in the South China Sea will all directly or indirectly affect South Korea's core security interests.

After all, a visit to South Korea after visiting Singapore, China's core strategic partner, is a move to further extend China's sphere of influence by strengthening strategic relations with South Korea as the U.S.-China relations worsen during the COVID-19 pandemic. Yang's emphasis on the cooperation with South Korea for multilateralism and free trade during his visit is in line with President Xi's new diplomacy strategy of "new international relations," which highlights mutual respect (相互尊重), fairness and justice (公平正義), and win-win cooperation (合作共贏). In other words, China is aiming for the establishment of a new order in Northeast Asia amid the rapidly changing U.S.-China conflict since the outbreak of COVID-19.

Currently, President Xi, under his rule, is focusing China's entire capabilities to achieve the Chinese Dream (中國夢) through the Two Centenaries (兩個一百年) and prove to be a rich and powerful socialist power by 2049. The escalating tension and conflict between China and the U.S. are the biggest challenge and a national task that must be solved for China under these circumstances. If South Korea does not consider the stance of China at home and abroad but continues to emphasize the Korea-U.S. alliance (or trilateral security cooperation among South Korea, the U.S., and Japan) based on the Cold War mentality and stands against China, it must expect significant frictions in the future ROK-China relations. In particular, South Korea cannot ignore China's influence on North Korea, which has been increasing since the 70th anniversary of China-North Korea diplomatic relations, since China's cooperation is essential for the Korean Peninsula Peace Process. If South Korea and China create a friendly atmosphere and advocate the Chinese idea of phased denuclearization (suspending the North's nuclear tests and ceasing joint exercises of the U.S. and the South's troops at the same time (雙暫停); promoting denuclearization and peace settlement simultaneously (雙軌並行)), instead of pursuing an unrealistic, U.S.-style package settlement (complete denuclearization before any reward), lead the four-party or six-party talks, and prepare the basic framework for the multilateral peace and security system in Northeast Asia, they will set a historic milestone in a new ROK-China relations.

Furthermore, China announced its plan to boost domestic demand and launch the Chinese New Deal in order to revitalize the economy that has been limping due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the China-U.S. trade war. If South Korea encourages its leading companies to actively participate in this plan, pushes for cooperation between South Korea's New Southern and New Northern policies and China's Belt and Road

Initiative, and seeks economic exchanges among South Korea, North Korea, and China via three provinces of Northeastern China, it may enjoy sources of a new growth engine for South Korea-China relations. Yang's visit to South Korea called for strengthening political trust and demanded further economic exchanges. Therefore, South Korea and China should actively consolidate their strategic relationship by increasing the number of flights, issuing more visas, and holding regular high-level meetings in order to invite President Xi early to South Korea despite the COVID-19 pandemic. ❖

※ Translator's note: This is a summarized unofficial translation of the original paper which was written in Korean. All references should be made to the original paper.

※ This article is written based on the author's personal opinions and does not reflect the views of the Sejong Institute.