



Foreign Minister Wang Yi's Visit to Korea: What it Means for Korea and Its Future Relations with China

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In the midst of thrust at the Korean peninsula due to the current US-China hegemonic competition, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Korea in 4 years and 8 months. During the visit he met with some key politicians and businessmen including President Moon Jae-in and Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha. Unlike the past, Wang Yi strongly emphasized some key foreign policy goals such as the “New Type of Great Power Relations” and “Human Civilization” which were highlighted by the second administration of Xi Jinping. In fact, Wang Yi visited Korea at a time when the trade tensions between China and the US have reached another level, and also at a time when China’s dissatisfaction toward the US grew after the Congress passed The Hong Kong Human Rights Democracy Act and the Yighur Act of 2019. He asserted that “The Cold War way of thinking is outdated, and hegemonic unilateralism is no longer welcomed. Rise of China is an inevitable phenomenon. Yet some strive to dishonor China’s development and try their best to hinder its rise. In their attempt lies ideological prejudice and arrogance, and they are bound to fail.”

Meanwhile, the foreign minister called for closer ties between Korea and China, asserting that the two countries have already become strong economic partners as the amount of trade reached \$300 billion. In order to improve strategic communication between the two countries, Wang Yi suggested the following: (1) formation of higher-level mutual political trust (2) realization of higher-level bilateral cooperation and (3) development of interactive multilateral cooperation. As the hegemonic competition between the US and China grows, there is a high possibility that China will ask Korea for further security cooperation as well as strategic communication. In particular, if Korea decides to conditionally postpone GSOMIA and agree upon the increase in defense cost-sharing, deployment of mid and short-range missiles, and participate in US’s missile defense system, China’s threat perception will rise to a significant level.

Thus, Wang Yi firmly addressed Korea to at least adhere to neutrality under the structural competition with the US.

At the New Economic Forum hosted by Beijing on November 22, Former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger said the US and China were in the “foothills of a Cold War,” and warned that the conflict will bring out consequences worse than WWI if left on its own. Kissinger’s statement regarding the possibility of a new cold war is a powerful message to the international community, as he was the one who, for the past 40 years took charge in forming the so called “Kissinger Order” by conducting President Nixon’s visit to China and normalization of US-China relations. In fact, Xi Jinping leadership no longer seems to be in accordance with the liberal international order established by the United States. Instead, China is forming its own rules and systems based on Chinese norms such as the One Belt One Road Initiative (一帶一路), New Type of Great Power Relations (新型國際關係), a community with a shared future for mankind (人類命運共同體). Furthermore, unlike the US-led international system after WWII which emphasizes the spread of values such as liberal democracy, market economy and human rights, China is on its way to build the so-called China Model clearly different from that of the US. China aims to form a human civilized community where states coexist based on common economic benefits regardless of differences in terms of ideology, polity and culture. Xi Jinping leadership is seeking access to shift China’s role in the international community from being a mere participant to becoming the rule-maker, ultimately altering the US-led global governance. In terms of relations with the US, China is trying to form equal relations with the US by heightening its sphere of influence. Of course, China is well aware of the fact that power discrepancy is still significant in terms of military capacity, science and technology, and soft power. However, what seems evident is that the past world order where only one hegemon existed is slowly altering into an order comprising two hegemons; the US and China. Consequently, it seems imperative for us to critically examine the current changes in the environment of East Asia due to China’s rise, and keep a keen eye on the evolvement of US-China hegemonic struggle. A well-balanced and flexible strategic approach is needed in order to deal with such structural change.

Currently Xi Jinping leadership is putting all its effort into realizing the ‘China Dream (中國夢)’ by 2049 through the “two centuries (兩個一百年)’. In this context, emphasizing US-Korea alliance without careful examination of China’s concern will only make things worse for Korea-China relations. In particular, President Xi’s visit to North Korea celebrating the 70th anniversary of the North Korea-China relations, and his call for ‘hand-in-hand relations bearing in mind the original intentions (不忘初心, 攜手前進)’ have restored the North Korea-China relations on par with the ‘blood brotherhood alliance’ of the past. There is high possibility of North Korea and China to lead future environmental changes occurring in the Korean Peninsula. Thus, Korea

should take charge in resuming four or six-party talks with relevant parties in the Northeast Asian region as well as maintaining strategic talks with China and to pursue step-by-step process in line with China's principles of "simultaneous cessation of North Korea's missile test and the ROK-US joint military exercise (雙暫停)" and "concurrent progress of denuclearization and peace regime in the Korean Peninsula (雙軌並行)."

As such, the Xi leadership recognizes that the relationship between Korea and China will inevitably change due to China's rise as well as the advent of new regional order. In particular, Korea-China relations need new room for strategic cooperation and communication as the environment surrounding the Korean Peninsula is bound to change due to hegemonic competition between the US and China, as well as stronger ties between China and North Korea. Consequently, if Korea adheres to the current strategy of leaning towards China in terms of economy while sticking to the US regarding security issues is bound to create structural dilemma as tensions escalate in the Northeast Asian region. In light of such concern, Korea should diversify its strategic relations with China in areas such as politics, diplomacy, and security. To this end, Korean government should make use of various diplomatic channels such as the ROK-China 2+2 ministerial defense meeting and track 1.5 high-level strategic dialogue, in order to put through President Xi's visit to Korea. In the near future, Korea should actively carry out new plans for Korea-China relations in order to create balanced and harmonious relations with the US and China, while seeking to achieve denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. ❖

※ *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.*