

South Korean and Chinese leaders meet over North Korea, economic ties

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South Korean President Moon Jae-in concluded a four-day trip to China on Saturday, his first since becoming president in May. He met with his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping and other senior officials to discuss North Korea and attempt to mend the relationship between Seoul and Beijing.

Meeting with Xi last Thursday, Moon called for a “new start” in South Korean-Chinese relations while blaming North Korea for the rapidly rising tensions in the region. “I hope we will reaffirm our countries’ joint stance to peacefully resolve the North Korean nuclear problem that threatens peace and security not only in Northeast Asia but the entire world, and discuss specific ways to cooperate,” Moon told Xi.

Relations between Seoul and Beijing soured quickly in July 2016 when the previous South Korean administration of Park Geun-hye agreed to the deployment of an American Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery. Ostensibly aimed at protecting the South from a North Korean missile attack, THAAD is in fact an integral part of Washington’s war plans against China. The battery utilizes a radar system that can peer far into Chinese territory and obtain intelligence that would be otherwise unavailable.

“China-South Korea relations experienced a setback due to the reason we all know,” said Xi, who avoided using the term THAAD during the public portion of the summit. “I am confident the president’s [Moon’s] visit will be an important opportunity for us to improve our relationship by paving a better way based on mutual respect and trust.”

Before the summit began, Seoul and Beijing had agreed not to release a joint statement—a reflection of continuing tensions. However, the two presidents did agree to four basic principles: war on the Korean Peninsula is unacceptable; dialogue and negotiations for dealing with North Korea; denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula;

and improved inter-Korean relations.

The reality is, however, that neither Moon nor Xi has any influence over Washington’s militaristic stance towards North Korea. The Trump administration in particular faces a worsening political crisis that encourages it to launch a catastrophic war in the desperate attempt to deflect acute internal tensions outwards.

A South Korean presidential official sought to assuage fears about conflict. “The military option is meant to shore up diplomatic and peaceful means. The US is officially in favor of a peaceful, diplomatic resolution, and the four principles agreed upon with China are not that different from the US’s position,” the official claimed.

In fact, Trump has threatened to “totally destroy” North Korea and ruled out any talks to end the confrontation unless Pyongyang capitulates to the US demand. South Korea is closely integrated into the US war plans.

This does not mean Seoul blindly follows Washington ignoring its own interests, which were at the heart of Moon’s trip. South Korean diplomatic sources quoted in *JoongAng Ilbo*, for example, stated that the US wanted Moon to pressure Xi to impose an oil embargo on North Korea. This did not occur.

For Moon, the trip was aimed at convincing China to end its punitive economic measures against South Korea after Seoul’s decision to allow the US to deploy a THAAD battery. The sanctions caused a sharp decline in sales for South Korean companies doing business in China. Tourism also took a hit when Beijing banned group travel packages to South Korea, resulting in lost revenue of as much as \$15.9 billion.

Beijing and Seoul had already agreed on October 31 to improve relations so long as South Korea accepted China’s so-called “three no’s:” No new THAAD deployments, no participation in a US missile defense system, and no trilateral military alliance with the US and

Japan.

During Moon's trip, the two countries agreed to begin talks on adding service industries to their free trade agreement that took effect in December 2015. The South Korean president also met with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang last Friday and both pledged to reopen communication channels on trade and to resume bilateral economic projects.

For its part, Beijing is attempting to undermine US efforts to strengthen ties with South Korea and throughout Asia against China. Christopher Hill, a former US ambassador to South Korea, commented: "The hope is that South Korea can play the kind of role that the [UK] has played in European politics, that is, South Korea can somehow deliver—in the Chinese view—a more reasonable US [foreign] policy."

China pressed Moon to stand by the "three no's," which have already been called into question by Washington. US National Security Advisor H. R. McMaster in early November dismissed the "three no's" out of hand. Moon's office stated around the same time: "The principle of the 'three no's' is not a promise we made to China, but more of a statement that this has been our position thus far."

South Korea, Japan, and the US conducted joint war games this month aimed at preparing for a massive bombing campaign against North Korea. Despite Moon's criticisms of Japanese imperialism in China, his administration has moved to thaw relations with Tokyo that were damaged during the previous Park government.

Seoul is conducting a precarious balancing act between Washington and Beijing as the US ramps up the threats of war against North Korea. Moon and his ruling Democratic Party of Korea may want better economic relations with China, but his government is committed to the US military alliance and will fall into line with Washington's war drive against North Korea.



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