

# **THE CHINA FACTOR IN SOUTH KOREA'S FOREIGN RELATIONS**

YUAN Jingdong

*EAI Background Brief No. 1109*

Date of Publication: 3 February 2016

## Executive Summary

1. China's rise and its growing influence is an important factor in South Korea's (or Republic of Korea, ROK) foreign relations. It provides both opportunities and challenges for Seoul.
2. Under President Park Geun-hye, South Korea pursues an active foreign policy that seeks to further strengthen its alliance with the United States while expanding a strategic partnership with China.
3. The essence of this balanced approach aims to promote *trustpolitik* in managing inter-Korean relations and improving regional cooperation, especially in the context of China-Japan-South Korea relations.
4. South Korea's alliance with the United States remains strong, despite the differences in tactics and priorities. President Park has placed great emphasis on consolidating ties with the United States and regarded the alliance as the bedrock of South Korean security.
5. Seoul and Washington have had to address a number of issues where the two sides differ. South Korea has been hesitant in accepting US proposal to deploy theatre high altitude area defence anti-missile systems partly due to strong Chinese concerns. It decided to join the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in March 2015 despite Washington's entreaty not to.
6. China's growing importance to South Korea is reflected in their economic ties where China has become South Korea's largest trading partner and a major export destination for South Korean products.
7. Seoul also recognises Beijing's ability to influence North Korea's behaviour over the longer term and rein in the latter's misendeavour in the short term. In principle, China supports Seoul's ultimate goal of peninsular unification and agrees that North Korea's nuclear weapons programme must be stopped.

8. However, Beijing continues to place emphasis on peninsular stability and is opposed to measures aimed at regime change in North Korea, while supporting limited and targeted sanctions on North Korea in response to its nuclear and missile tests.
9. Inter-Korean ties in 2015 remained volatile, with tensions flaring up in early August over mine explosions wounding two ROK soldiers. A late August joint statement after marathon negotiations defused the crisis and paved the way for the 20th round of family reunions in October.
10. ROK-Japan relations improved with the joint agreement on the comfort women issue in late December 2015. Meanwhile, President Park pursued a more flexible and pragmatic approach to managing the relationship with Tokyo. A notable development was the South Korea-China-Japan summit held in Seoul after a lapse of three years.
11. North Korea's nuclear test strains the limit of President Park's *trustpolitik* policy. How to work with the United States and Japan and press China to restrain North Korea to deter its future misbehaviour, while continuing to maintain the balance between its two most consequential ally and partner will be the most daunting challenges for President Park in 2016.