Observing South Korea’s Position in China’s Foreign Policy from Three Dimensions*

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This paper attempts to pinpoint the position of China-South Korea relations to China’s foreign policy through a detailed analysis of three dimensions: the closeness level of China-South Korea relations, the depth and breadth of their bilateral cooperation, and the importance of South Korea. Analysis of those three dimensions indicates that South Korea is located at the mid-level of China’s foreign policy. The result suggests that although China-South Korea relations are currently “the best in history,” they are not yet one of China’s most important bilateral relationships and South Korea policy is not China’s priority. In contrast, the Park Geun-hye administration places China-South Korea relations next only to South Korea-US relations. China and South Korea consider their relationship differently and, as a result, South Korea’s disappointment with China was once again triggered after North Korea conducted its fourth round of nuclear tests, and the phrase “discourse of South Korea’s failed foreign policy towards China” was used.

Key Words: China-South Korea relations, closeness, depth and breadth, importance, foreign policy positioning

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I. Introduction

After North Korea conducted its fourth round of nuclear tests in January 2016, a strong sense of disappointment with China was triggered in South Korea, with frequent talk of “South Korea’s failed foreign policy towards China” (Lee, 2016; Ahn, 2016). This sentiment was similar to that shown toward China after the sinking of the ROKS Cheonan and the bombardment of the island of Yeonpyeong, both of which occurred in 2010 (Zhan, 2011:116-124).

The discourse of South Korea’s failed foreign policy towards China was created against a backdrop of the Park Geun-hye administration making its foreign policy towards China a priority, yet China did not offer a matching response after North Korea’s nuclear tests. After President Park took office, the first special delegation she sent overseas was to China, unlike her predecessors, who usually sent their first special delegations to the United States. During Park’s inaugural address on February 25, 2013, she pledged to strengthen the mutual trust between South Korea and the US, China, Japan, and Russia.

In the order of precedence of the countries, this was Park’s first time to place China before Japan. Two days later, Yun Byung-se, then-nominee for the post of Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the incumbent Minister of Foreign Affairs, said specifically that Japan was placed after the US and China in terms of their importance in Park’s foreign policy. On June 27, 2013, Park embarked on a state visit to China, making it the second major country she visited after her state visit to the US. This arrangement broke the routine of former presidents, in which a state visit to Japan always preceded one to China. In September 2015, despite pressure from the US and Japan, Park participated in a military parade in Beijing commemorating the 70th anniversary of China’s victory over Japan in the Sino-Japanese war. In addition, South Korea joined the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the AIIB, as a founding member state.

In response, China upgraded the precedence of its foreign policy towards South Korea. During his visit to South Korea, Wang Yi, the Foreign Minister of the People’s Republic of China, told Park, “China