

TENSIONS OVER THE ANNIVERSARY: SOUTH KOREAN REACTIONS TO XI'S SPEECH

Joanna Beczkowska

November 2020

SUMMARY

The policy brief refers to Xi Jinping's latest speech upon the 70th anniversary of China's participation in the Korean War and is focused on the South Korean reaction. The memory of the Korean War is one of the key foundations of South Korean national identity, and, as such, the sharp narrative from Beijing is recognized by Seoul as a potential threat that needs to be challenged. The reason for this was not the desire to defend the ally, but rather China's belittling of the role played by North Korea in starting the conflict while putting an emphasis on the United States. However, the response from the South Korean authorities was rather balanced, as Seoul continues to avoid meddling in rivalry between China and the United States. At the same time, there is growing criticism and distrust of China and Xi Jinping among South Koreans, which resulted in the government's response being considered insufficient. Despite economic interests, if Koreans were to choose, they would strengthen an alliance with the United States. In this context, questions arise as to whether China's "hardliners" would antagonize South Korea, and to what extent the social forces in South Korea will influence Seoul's relations with Beijing.

INTRODUCTION

With a very nationalistic speech upon the 70th anniversary of China's participation in the Korean War directed at the U.S. and employing phrases such as "they [Chinese soldiers] smashed the myth that the American military was invincible," Xi Jinping mobilizes the domestic audience. The appeal to national memory is a tool for reviving "hot" nationalism

that serves current goals - such as the fight for domination with the United States. The Korean War can be regarded as an ideal example of various historical narratives, especially since it is considered a "forgotten war" in the West. Due to this, it is easier for China to declare a "spectacular victory", even if, in the context of this (still officially unfinished) conflict, it is difficult to talk about winners: the Korean peninsula is still divided. While for Washington the Chinese leader's speech can be read as a threat and a manifestation of power - seventy years ago, despite being a weak and poor country, China managed to defeat "American invaders", so now nothing is impossible for "mighty China" - from Seoul's perspective the Korean War is a key foundation of national identity. Any attempt to change the narrative about this past must be met with resistance. Furthermore, as allies of the United States, South Koreans must condemn China's hostile rhetoric. At the same time, Seoul wants to maintain good economic relations with one of its most important trading partners. Since the very beginning of the U.S.-Chinese dispute, South Korea has had to maneuver between the role of an ally and its own interests.



From Seoul's perspective the Korean War is a key foundation of national identity. Any attempt to change the narrative about this past must be met with resistance.



CHANGING THE NARRATIVE ABOUT THE KOREAN WAR

In some ways the Korean War was the only direct military conflict between China and the United States, but also New China's demonstration of power. By presenting this conflict as a victory, Xi Jinping signaled China's military determination to defeat invaders - at the same time warning that any attempt at attacking the Chinese nation will be met with a "suitable" answer. The Chinese leader emphasized that China would not initiate conflicts but respond to them - and that it is not afraid to answer with full force. What is striking in the Chinese leader's speech is the recognition of the Americans as the invaders and the omission of South Korea. From a South Korean and Western perspective, it changes the narrative about the Korean War. South Koreans, both politicians and academics, immediately noted the "distortion of history": South Korean Defense Minister Suh Wook said "it is crystal clear that North Korea invaded the South, under the instigation of Stalin

and Mao Zedong. According to South Koreans, the Korean War was initiated by North Korea. As Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha said this fact “is clearly stated and recognized by the U.N. Security Council”. It is worth noting that Seoul was not outraged by the statement that the invaders were Americans, but rather by the undermining of the “well known fact” that the initiator of the Korean War was someone other than North Korea. It should be emphasized that for Koreans, the Korean War is a conflict about the legitimacy of power over the entire Korean nation. For South Korea, it must have been North Korea that started the conflict - this justified the fight against the invaders, seen not as Koreans but as communists without the legitimacy of the nation. While there has been a decline in the narrative of North Korea as an enemy since the days of South Korea's Sunshine Policy, the initiation of the Korean War remains unchanged. Even historical evidence that the Republic of Korea could provoke the DPRK is rejected. In 1950, each side considered unification through conflict - as long as the other Korea initiated it. Therefore, South Korea will never agree to change the narrative of the Korean War as “the American invasion”. Hence Seoul taking “necessary communication measures with the Chinese regarding this matter”, to quote the Minister of Foreign Affairs, who by “this matter” meant the claim regarding the American invasion during the Korean War.

In their response politicians did not refer to the absence of South Korea in Xi's speech - however, it did not go unnoticed by the media and specialists. Xi Jinping called the conflict on the Korean Peninsula “the war to resist U.S. aggression and aid Korea”. In the context of the Korean War, the mentioned “Korea” is DPRK. Moreover, the Chinese leader stated that the great victory was achieved “together” with North Korea. If South Korea was now ruled by conservatives, this part of the speech would also have received considerable criticism. However, it was noted in the media that Xi Jinping's attitude is an obstacle for South Korea's efforts to build “the future-oriented” bilateral relations. This term is often used by the South Korean government as a call to separate a problematic past from economic cooperation, especially with Japan. It is worth noting, that only in September South Korea repatriated over one hundred remains of Chinese soldiers killed during the Korean War. Similar



Xi Jinping's attitude is an obstacle for South Korea's efforts to build “the future-oriented” bilateral relations.



actions are being taken regarding North Korea - excavations are carried out in the demilitarized zone which Moon Jae-in wants to transform into "peace zone". Xi's speech was perceived in the media as demonstrating a lack of willingness to create a future-oriented bilateral relationship - since the narrative of the Korean War is being changed despite Seoul's "good gestures".

HISTORY DISTORTION AND THE SINO-US CONTEXT

It is not an open secret that South Korea's relationship with neighboring countries (China, Japan and North Korea) shows that the greatest obstacle to building "future-oriented" relations is a memory conflict problem. Any distortion of history creates conflict - which is especially evident in relations between Seoul and Tokyo, but now also with Mainland China.

It is worth noting that nationalism has been increasing in China in recent years. While for Koreans the Korean war is "their" conflict - because it resulted in the probably permanent division of the Korean nation - it was not a typical civil war. According to the Chinese government over 180,000 soldiers died in the Korean Peninsula. Moreover, from a Chinese perspective, the conflict between 1950-1953 was not "the Korean war" but a "war to resist American aggression" - and this kind of rhetoric was not new but rather forgotten. Placing a focus on this particular conflict served Xi Jinping's purpose - stimulating anti-American sentiments. In this way it was not directed at South Korea. If only Xi Jinping had not changed - from the Korean perspective - the story of who started the war, Seoul would not have responded to the 70th anniversary itself.

More to the point, controversies over the Korean War are not something new. The disregard for participation in the Korean War as aid was criticized by Chinese social media in early October. During the award ceremony a member of global sensation k-pop group BTS referred to the Korean War as a conflict in which the US aided South Korea to fight against North Korean invasion. The singer thanked both nations for their sacrifices. Chinese fans felt that he "humiliated" their country by not recognizing the sacrifices of the Chinese soldiers. It was the very lack of recognition of past Chinese aid (which from South Korean perspective was no aid at all) at a time of growing patriotic attitudes that caused dissatisfaction in Chinese society. What is important in this case, however, is that

this statement was made by a star of “the Korean wave” and was related to another conflict of cultural origin. Along with the global increase in interest in Korean popular culture, there is a growing tendency in neighboring countries to boycott it - in the name of defending one's culture. At that time the Chinese Foreign Ministry's answer was simple: “we all should learn lessons from history and look forward to the future and hold peaceful and strong friendships”. Not even a month later Xi Jinping gave a new lesson of the Korean War – that it should be a source of pride, as “weak” China managed to defeat the “mighty” United States while helping another nation. China, unlike the US, was not an aggressor.

Seoul's reaction to the speech should also be read in the context of the Sino-American conflict which places South Korea in a difficult situation. On the one hand, the alliance with Washington is critical for Seoul. On the other, South Korea also has strong economic ties with China: in 2019 a quarter of total South Korean exports (around \$136 billion) were directed to China. It would be difficult to suddenly lower the economic dependence on the Chinese market. To make the situation even more complicated, one of the goals of Moon Jae-in's government is resolving the nuclear problem on the Korean Peninsula. This can be achieved not only through Washington-Pyongyang dialogue – China might be the only North Korea ally and can aid in talks. If tensions in inter-Korean relations recur, Seoul cares about relations with Beijing for the same reasons. It seems that it is in the interests of South Korea's government to maneuver between the powers. Hence the rather lukewarm response from the South Korean government to Xi Jinping's speech – and the ambiguous reaction to the rivalry between China and the United States.



It seems that it is in the interests of South Korea's government to maneuver between the powers.



At the same time, the South Korean public, whose approach is different from that of the authorities, should not be ignored. According to an Asan survey, 35% of South Koreans see this rivalry as a “threat to national interests”. While there is growing criticism both of Xi Jinping and Donald Trump, South Koreans show less trust towards China and prefer strengthening the alliance with the U.S. – even though they recognize the increasing influence of China in the region.

CONCLUSIONS

Collective memory is a strong source of nationalism, which in the hands of the authorities can become hot and serve to mobilize the nation against a common enemy. However, it can be an obstacle to conducting pragmatic and rational international cooperation. Xi Jinping's declaration regarding the Korean War clearly shows that domestic mobilization in the context of conflict with the United States is valued more than the practical cooperation with the highly developed South Korea. On the other hand, the South Korean authorities had to respond to the speech's distortion of history. They limited themselves to reminding the public that the Korean War was initiated by North Korea - and that this is an internationally recognized fact. In case of history distortion by Japan, the South Korean response is usually much fiercer.

At least now, South Korea has avoided taking sides in the conflict between China and the United States. As long as it is not necessary to take sides, South Korea should gradually reduce its economic dependence on China and its military dependence on the United States.

The lack of a strong response from the Korean government was also related to the lack of need to mobilize nationalist feelings. If it had been an election year in South Korea, the conservative side of the political scene would have reacted much more strongly.



**CENTRE FOR
ASIAN AFFAIRS**
University of Lodz

RESEARCH OPINIONS ADVICE

FIRST OF THIS KIND UNIVERSITY BASED
THINK-TANK IN POLAND

OPINION-FORMING UNIT

POLITICAL AND BUSINESS ADVICES

ASIA EXPERIENCED TEAM

www.osa.uni.lodz.pl

