India, China and the Korean Peninsula: Contemporary Policies and Relations

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In many ways, the rise of India and China is closely connected with developments on the Korean Peninsula. Korean-related issues have immense geopolitical and strategic implications for both China and India. The reason for this is that the rise of China and India is predicated upon the stability of the East Asian region.

As such, both China and India are painfully aware that a stable and well-balanced bilateral relationship with North and South Korea is crucial for any sort of bilateral political and economic development. Simultaneously, both South and North Korea seek better relations with these rising powers in accordance with their own national interests. For example, President Lee Myung Bak’s foreign policy is geared towards restoring the South Korean economy by engaging in free trade negotiations and enhancing resource and energy cooperation with foreign entities. Similarly, due to its fragility, North Korea is willing to pursue relations with any state that is willing to assist its economy and does not condemn its nuclear arsenal.

What is of particular interest, however, is that India and China exhibit different approaches towards the Korean Peninsula. This chapter examines those approaches in Indian and Chinese dealings with both North and South Korea. Given the importance of the Korean Peninsula and the dramatic rise of India and China, the chapter addresses two questions: How do China and India view the Koreans? Do they have contradictory or comparable policies towards the Korean Peninsula?

1. Introduction

China’s long relationship with North Korea began in the 1940s. Mao Zedong famously depicted Sino-North Korean relations as being “lips and teeth.” However, bilateral relations have undergone numerous challenges in the past decades, mainly due to North Korea’s militarist attitude. The 1992 agreement with South Korea provided opportunities for Beijing to play a more substantial role on the Peninsula. In the last decade or so, China’s prominent role in the Six-Party Talks, which aims to solve the North Korean nuclear crisis, has further provided space to influence events on the Korean Peninsula. Between 1992 and 2010, Sino-South Korea relations have grown rapidly through comprehensive cooperation in politics, trade and culture. Closer coordination in international and regional affairs such as the Korean nuclear issue and the promotion of East Asian regionalism have equally strengthened ties.

In comparison, India’s association with the Korean Peninsula began during the Korean War. Because of its non-aligned foreign policy, India did not involve itself militarily in the war but sent around 600 medics to the Peninsula in 1950. More than 6,000 Indian troops remained on the Peninsula for the next four years. Formal diplomatic relations were only established in 1973. Between 1973 and 1991, bilateral relations showed little significant development. Between 1973 and the 1990s, though several trade agreements were signed, India and South Korea were preoccupied with internal political and economic developments. Likewise, India’s relations with North Korea were equally insignificant.

It can be reasonably argued that India’s interaction with South Korea really began with the Look East Policy. The liberalisation of the Indian economy in 1991 and the obvious economic successes of East Asian states such as South Korea greatly influenced Indian policymakers. On the whole, relations became more robust after the Indian government shifted its focus from Southeast Asia to East Asia in the late 1990s. With its inclusion in the 2005 East Asian summit, India’s relations with East Asia in general and the Korean Peninsula