

Interviewee

Sukhee Han

With China's fifth generation of leaders headed by Xi Jinping coming to power at the end of 2012, it is important to assess how this will affect China's foreign policy and the future course of U.S.-China relations. The EAI talked with Professor Sukhee Han, Yonsei University and Chair of the EAI's Center for China Studies, on the expected foreign policy of the new leadership. He further offered his thoughts on the South China Sea dispute and the role of South Korea in U.S.-China relations. The following is a summary of the main policy recommendations from the interview.

**Q1: What is the background to China's assertive behavior in the South China Sea?**

**A1: "The background to China's assertive behavior can be explained in four ways: 1) the relative decline of the United States; 2) the impact of domestic politics during the leadership transition process; 3) the increased role of the military in the decision-making process; and 4) the historical context."**

- The most important factor in understanding China's assertive behavior is the impact of the global financial crisis since 2008. The economic decline of the United States has had considerable impact on the perceptions of the Chinese people who had always thought that they would never be able to catch up with the United States, even with their country's rapid economic growth. The beginning of the debate about China's "core interests" derives from the growing confidence of the Chinese people since 2008. The perception that China should portray itself as a superpower grew as the power gap between China and the United States decreased, and therefore, China's attitude toward its foreign policy changed accordingly.
- Another important factor is the impact of China's domestic politics on the leadership transition process. In a one-party state, it is safer for the existing political elites to take on a conservative approach in order to guarantee their political future during the highly competitive leadership transition period.
- The growing role of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in China's decision-making process is another important variable. It is a well-known story that during the January 2011 visit by Robert Gates, then U.S. Secretary of Defense, the PLA conducted a test flight of its J-20 stealth fighter. When Robert Gates asked President Hu Jintao about this, he appeared to be unaware of the test flight. While this anecdote should not be taken at face value, it is true that

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the role of the PLA has extended into the decision-making process in China and this helps explain its military expansion over recent years.

- The historical context of the so-called “hundred years of humiliation” should also be taken into consideration. As a country which has suffered greatly from Western imperialism and Japanese militarism, China is now focused on securing its national interests as its power increases. In regards to the South China Sea dispute, China’s State Councilor Dai Bingguo echoed such sentiment when he stated that, “China will not tolerate bullying by smaller countries, such as the Philippines.” These words have their roots in the perception that the dispute is an invasion of Chinese territory.
- Officially, China’s “core interests” are limited to Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang. Still, Beijing seems to be speaking on the South China Sea dispute as if it were a “core interest” in order to emphasize the importance of the issue.

## **Q2.What are the prospects for China’s foreign policy under the fifth generation of leaders?**

**A2: “It is highly likely that the fifth generation of leaders will seek regional hegemony for the following reasons: 1) the political independence of the Xi Jinping government in terms of foreign policy; 2) the advisory role of Yan Xuetong; and 3) the possibility of more assertive foreign policies to offset domestic pressures.”**

- Among the different paths that China could choose, whether “a regional hegemony,” “a responsible stakeholder,” or “a developing nation with focus on its rise,” the fifth generation of leaders is expected to push ahead with foreign policies focused on its role as a regional hegemon. There are three reasons for this policy choice.
- Firstly, the Xi Jinping government will wield more political independence than their predecessors from the fourth generation. Previous generations have tended to stick to Deng Xiaoping’s reform and opening policy and *tao guang yang hui* or “hide our capacities and bide our time.” President Hu Jintao undertook efforts to obtain a degree of political independence through concepts, such as “scientific development” and “peaceful development.” However, he did not break away completely from Deng’s legacy. Xi Jinping, in seeking more political independence, will emphasize China’s status as a superpower.
- Secondly, Tsinghua University’s Professor Yan Xuetong is expected to play a bigger role in advising the fifth generation of leaders. Under President Hu Jintao, Peking University’s Professor Wang Jisi played an important role in advising China’s foreign policy. It is expected that Professor Yan Xuetong will take on a similar role under Xi Jinping. The policy advice though will be different. Professor Wang Jisi emphasized that China should maintain a low posture and concentrate on the nation’s development, avoiding any confrontation with the United States. By contrast, Professor Yan is likely to advocate that China should break away from its approach of “hide our capacities and bide our time” and take on a new role corresponding with its enhanced national power. Such ideas were laid out in his editorial for the *New York Times* entitled “How Assertive Should a Great Power Be?”
- Thirdly, the domestic political challenges that Xi Jinping will face are important. There is a considerable difference regarding the domestic political environment that Xi Jinping will operate in compared to what his predecessor President Hu Jintao faced. Although China continues to maintain strong economic growth, it faces domestic calls for political reform which reflects the growth of the middle class. The concern is that the new leadership will act in a more assertive manner toward foreign policy issues in order to divert domestic attention.

### **Q3: Where should South Korea situate itself within U.S.-China relations?**

#### **A3-1: "South Korea will have to pursue a hedging strategy for the short term. This means improving ROK-China relations pivoted on the ROK-U.S. alliance."**

- South Korea's fear of being caught between China and the United States is a dilemma that has long been identified. When the policy approaches taken by China and the United States are examined carefully, it seems likely that U.S.-China relations will eventually lead to conflict. South Korea will face an impossible task managing any conflict between the two superpowers. Therefore, the main concern for Seoul is how to ensure its national interests in such an environment.
- South Korea will have to pursue a hedging strategy toward China, by making sure that the ROK-U.S. alliance is always at the core. While it is true that China has long shown opposition to alliances in East Asia, it is also true that this has not extended to Beijing specifically calling for an end to the ROK-U.S. alliance. Given this situation, South Korea can receive some understanding from China regarding the ROK-U.S. alliance that it is essential for its security. At the same time, Seoul should seek Washington's understanding of the importance of South Korea's economic relationship with China. At present, South Korea's trade dependence on China is at twenty-four percent and is expected to increase to twenty-eight percent in the future. Seoul should explain clearly the difficulty it has in cooperating with the United States to contain China. Especially when compared with Japan, which has relatively low trade dependence on China, South Korea has a lot more to lose.

#### **A3-2: "South Korea should extend its role beyond Northeast Asia. It should also maximize its national interests by positioning itself according to the issue at hand."**

- Can South Korea maintain such a hedging strategy for the long term? To address this question, a more fundamental approach is needed. In this regard, South Korea should continue to enhance its status in the world through expanding its international role. Seoul should also strengthen its national interests by positioning itself according to the issue at hand rather than supporting either China or the United States.

### **About the Interviewee**

#### **Sukhee Han**

Professor Sukhee Han received his PhD from Fletcher School of Tufts University in the United States, and is presently serving as the professor of the School of International Studies at Yonsei University as well as the chair of Center for China Studies at East Asia Institute (EAI).