JOINT U.S.-KOREA ACADEMIC STUDIES

ASIA’S UNCERTAIN FUTURE: KOREA, CHINA’S AGGRESSIVENESS, AND NEW LEADERSHIP

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China’s National Identity and the Sino-U.S. National Identity Gap: Views from Four Countries
The View from South Korea

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The Korean Peninsula remains at the center of national identity debates in Northeast Asia.1 Sino-South Korean debates surfaced saliently in 2010 during a period of rising regional concerns over Chinese “assertiveness.”2 These debates also revealed the centrality of the United States in Sino-ROK identity politics,3 especially after the global financial crisis, which according to some Chinese scholars marked the end of post-Cold War U.S. unipolarity.4 Perceptions of a potential widening of U.S.-China differences have prompted new efforts to enhance South Korea’s diplomatic capacities as a middle power, reflecting a dynamic interaction between Sino-ROK identity debates and views of the Sino-U.S. identity gap.

Two factors reinforce the intensity of South Korean identity perceptions in relation to China. First, China’s rise is a primary factor conditioning South Korean visions of Korea’s strategic future.5 In the Sino-ROK context, China’s rise reinforces South Korean sensitivities to a history of hierarchical relations.6 In the U.S.-China context, the structural impact of China’s rise arouses South Korea’s vulnerabilities to great-power rivalries on the peninsula. The growing asymmetry in Korea’s contemporary relationship with a rising China challenges South Korea’s identity as an advanced economy and democracy seeking to play a global leadership role.

A second factor amplifying the Sino-ROK identity debate is North Korea, viewed as a “little brother” by both South Koreans and Chinese. The North Korea question relates fundamentally to the national identity of a reunified Korea, and underlies the persistent historical and territorial disputes characterizing the Sino-South Korean relationship.7 In ROK domestic politics, North Korea policy remains the dividing point between conservatives and progressives, which extends to divisive views toward China and the United States.8 Uncertainty over China’s rise and North Korea’s future exacerbates South Korea’s key dilemma of reconciling conflicting identities as a U.S. military ally and economic partner of China.9 The question of “China or the United States?” dominated South Korean strategic thinking from the beginning of the Lee Myung-bak administration in 2008.10 South Korea’s orientation between its security alliance with the United States and economic partnership with China more broadly influences its position between the U.S. alliance system in Asia and a China-centered regional economic order.11

Park Geun-hye’s election in 2012 raised hopes for improving Sino-South Korean relations after a period of strain under Lee, whose hard-line DPRK policy and emphasis on the U.S.-ROK alliance drew harsh criticism among Chinese as a source of regional tension. Although Park’s election extends Seoul’s conservative rule for another five years, her decision to send her first team of special envoys to China in January 2013 suggested an effort to narrow the differences with Beijing that have emerged after twenty years of normalization.

This chapter assesses South Korean identity debates on China and their implications for the United States, with a focus on trends since 2010 and prospects under the new leaderships. It addresses three main issues. First, I discuss the status of the Sino-ROK relationship at the end of the Lee administration in the context of the evolution of South Korean views of China since normalization in 1992. Second, I examine South Korea’s identity gap with China across different aspects of identity, including historical and cultural identity, human rights and political identity, territorial issues, North Korea and
Korean unification, and economic identity. Third, I consider the role of the United States in Sino-ROK identity debates. To conclude, I identify factors likely to frame the identity debate under the new leaderships.

**SINO-SOUTH KOREAN RELATIONS AFTER TWENTY YEARS OF NORMALIZATION**

Foreign policy issues under South Korea’s previous conservative administrations—including Roh Tae-woo (1988-1993)’s engagement with Russia and China and Kim Young-sam (1993-1998)’s management of the first North Korean nuclear crisis—received relatively little public attention, playing an increasingly important role in South Korean identity politics over the course of democratic consolidation. Under progressive rule, South Korea’s alliance relationship with the United States emerged as a major issue in national identity debates at the end of the Kim Dae-jung administration (1998-2003). South Korean identity was shaped by nationalist discourse under Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008), producing anti-American sentiment that constrained the alliance.

Lee Myung-bak’s inauguration in 2008 ended ten years of progressive rule and refocused Seoul’s diplomatic priority of sunshine toward North Korea. Although Lee and Hu Jintao upgraded the China-ROK relationship to a “strategic cooperative partnership,” Lee’s reconsolidation of the U.S.-ROK alliance was a persistent strain on this partnership. Frictions over DPRK aggression overlapped with a series of Chinese disputes with other regional players in 2009-2010, a period of marked deterioration in China’s overall diplomatic relations. Subdued commemorations of the 20th anniversary of Sino-ROK normalization in 2012 reflected mutual recognition of the latent irritants in the bilateral partnership. Despite anticipation of reconciling differences in the post-Kim Jong-il era, Lee’s two summits with Hu Jintao in 2012 were held against the pressures of public protests in South Korea, where the media described a “far from amicable” mood under China’s “darkening shadow.”

A joint report by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, Chicago Council on Global Affairs, and Korea Economic Institute at the end of 2012 showed that just over half of South Koreans viewed China as a partner (53.5 percent) rather than a rival (46.5 percent), with an overwhelming 94 percent expressing support for the U.S.-ROK alliance. One compilation of South Korean public opinion data from 1997 to 2012 suggests a decline in favorable attitudes toward China and an increase in favorable attitudes toward the United States since 2005. According to the East Asia Institute, favorable Chinese attitudes toward South Korea also declined from 73 percent in 2006 to 53 percent in 2011, suggesting a widening of public discord between China and South Korea. South Korean public animosity toward China raised concerns in Beijing in 2010, when Wen Jiabao in talks with Lee pointed to a “misunderstanding about China after the Cheonan incident.” The Chinese foreign ministry criticized South Korean “radical behavior” in response to protests against China in 2011, while the Global Times released a survey on South Korea’s “aggressive public opinion.” North Korea’s third nuclear test in 2013 poses an early challenge to coordinating DPRK policies and restoring public attitudes under the new leaderships.
**THE SINO-SOUTH KOREAN IDENTITY GAP**

While the twenty-year Sino-ROK relationship is the newest in Northeast Asia, the identity gap stems from Korea's historical relationship with China as a dependent peripheral state from the 13th to 19th centuries. China's place in South Korean identity continues to evolve. While South Korea's ideological gaps with China in the 1980s were embodied in discourses on “Communist China” or “Red China,” over the course of China's economic growth and opening, South Koreans have focused increasingly on the nature of Chinese intentions as a rising power.²³

Two images of China in the post-Cold War era emerged in South Korean debates in 2010.²⁴ The first view sees China as an “aggressive” power seeking to expand military, political, and economic influence on the peninsula. From this perspective, Chinese behavior on the peninsula in the Lee era demonstrated “Chinese confidence resulting from its rise.”²⁵ In the second view, as a global economic power China is likely to rise as a “responsible great power.” China’s joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, cooperating on the war on terror after 9/11, and mediating the Six-Party Talks from 2003 contributed to positive views of China as an economic opportunity and responsible stakeholder. Responses to its behavior on the peninsula since 2009, however, suggest a reassessment of Chinese intentions. South Korea’s dual image of China continues to shape assessments of the Sino-ROK identity gap, which has widened across various dimensions of identity during this period.

**Historical and Cultural Identity**

Differences over the Sino-Korean historical relationship have a deep impact on South Korean identity in relation to China, reflecting tensions between Korea’s historical position as a tributary state and contemporary role on the global stage. The Koguryo history war of 2003-2004 altered South Korean public perceptions of China after a decade of normalization.²⁶ In 2010, concerns over distortions of history resurfaced with China’s commemorations of the sixtieth anniversary of the Korean War, which reinforced Sino-ROK ideological gaps as Cold War enemies and elevated China’s “lips and teeth” alliance with the North. China’s rewriting of history continues to raise suspicions over its long-term intentions on the peninsula, provoking South Korea’s sensitivities as a subject of great power competition in Northeast Asia.

South Korea’s 2004 verbal agreement with China on Koguryo history does not preclude continued politicization of the issue.²⁷ South Korean analysts have tied China’s “nationalization” of history to contemporary sociopolitical needs in the context of China’s domestic pluralization, implying a continuously changing Chinese identity and volatile Sino-ROK relationship.²⁸ In summer 2012, claims by China’s State Administration of Cultural Heritage extending the eastern end of the Great Wall to Heilongjiang and Jilin provinces drew renewed accusations that Beijing was intruding on Koguryo history for the sake of “national unity.”²⁹ After the conclusion of China’s ten-year compilation of Qing dynasty history in 2012, the South Korean conservative media attacked its reframing of history as a tool of “historical imperialism.”³⁰ From this perspective, China’s state-led history projects are designed to “preempt” long-term territorial settlements in the event of Korean unification or North Korean collapse. As one scholar argued at the end of China’s
“Northeast Project” in 2007, Sino-ROK history disputes are not about ancient history but current Chinese “hegemonic” threats to regional peace. In 2009, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences’ claims on other Korean kingdoms drove similar suspicions over China’s revisionist intentions on the peninsula.

During 60th anniversary commemorations of China’s entry into the Korean War in October 2010, Xi Jinping’s references to the war as “a great victory” against “imperialist invaders” ignited another clash over historical interpretations. The ROK Foreign Ministry suggested China’s representation of “an indisputable and historical fact that has been internationally recognized” undermined its global role as a “responsible member of the international community.” Xi’s comments countered the “frank” Chinese assessments of the Korean War that became prevalent after Sino-ROK normalization and raised early concerns over the strategic orientation of Chinese foreign policy amid political uncertainty in Pyongyang.

Disputes over history in Internet forums indicate evolving national identity debates in both China and South Korea. South Korean grievances over Chinese attempts to “steal” history have expanded into broader debates on the ownership of Confucian values, tradition, and other representations of national heritage. Beijing’s designation of “Arirang” as part of China’s ethnic Korean culture fueled another wave of public outrage in 2011 attacking the move as a threat to the South Korean cultural ministry’s own “brand image” campaign. These debates also surrounded the clashes between Chinese students and South Korean demonstrators during the 2008 Beijing Olympics torch relay in Seoul, which reminded many South Koreans of their own national pride as Olympic hosts twenty years earlier. Like the South Korean case, the Beijing Olympics symbolized China’s global emergence and discarded a history of “humiliation” by foreign invaders. But some Koreans saw the protesting Chinese students as a “shadow of themselves that they’d like to leave behind,” arguing that, unlike the South Korean experience, China’s hosting of the games does not raise hopes for a democratic transition.

Human Rights and Political Identity

One area of contention that highlights Sino-South Korean gaps in political norms and values despite close economic ties is human rights. China’s handling of DPRK refugees as “illegal economic migrants” emerged as a point of diplomatic dispute during North Korea’s famine and humanitarian crisis in the 1990s, when China resisted intervention by international agencies based on the claim that the issue was a North Korean internal affair. Beijing pursued a two-track approach after a series of high-profile North Korean defections at foreign diplomatic missions in China in the early 2000s, cracking down on defectors in cases of limited foreign contact and adhering to international legal standards otherwise. ROK government appeals to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees have drawn attention to the direct contradictions between Beijing’s international obligations and bilateral repatriation agreement with Pyongyang.

While the DPRK refugee issue subsided in the mid-2000s, it reemerged in two instances in 2012. First, reports of Beijing’s planned repatriation of refugees in February led to U.S. and South Korean protests against China’s “inhumane” behavior and public calls by Lee Myung-bak urging China to follow “international norms.” As Seoul threatened to raise the issue at the UN Human Rights Council after the breakdown of bilateral consultations, the PRC
foreign ministry spokesperson criticized the South Korean media’s tendency to “emotionally play up and politicize the issue.” South Korea has in the past pursued “quiet diplomacy” to avoid confronting China over human rights, but activists have pushed Seoul to press harder for Chinese cooperation since Kim Jong-il’s death, accusing Beijing of supporting Kim Jong-un’s repressive assertion of control as new leader.

The second clash over human rights occurred in July 2012 with China’s release of four South Korean activists who were detained for assisting DPRK defectors and endangering China’s “national security.” The activists were released shortly after PRC State Councillor and Public Security Minister Meng Jianzhu’s meetings with Lee Myung-bak and other officials in Seoul, the first official visit to South Korea by a Chinese public security minister since normalization.

Political tensions, however, only worsened with claims by prominent rights activist Kim Young-hwan that he had been tortured while under Chinese custody. Kim’s case demonstrated Beijing’s cautious behavior in managing high-profile and internationally-publicized cases related to DPRK refugees given the potential legal challenges and costs to China’s global image. It also raised domestic debates in South Korea, where lawmakers attacked the foreign ministry’s failure to undertake sufficient diplomatic actions against China. Sino-ROK human rights issues show that norms and values remain an important source of friction that reinforce South Korean impressions of a rising China as a growing challenger to international standards of behavior.

**Disputes over Territory and Exclusive Economic Zones**

Regional power shifts have raised the danger of territorial competition with China over the past decade. China’s territorial disputes in Asia in 2010 and reaction to U.S.-ROK military exercises sharpened South Korean images of what was widely perceived as growing “assertiveness” in Chinese behavior. Sino-ROK disputes over EEZs and Ieodo/Suyanjiao (Socotra Rock) present potential security challenges. As seen in contestations over history and culture, territorial sovereignty issues importantly feed into South Korean views of what is Korean or Chinese.

Although both China and South Korea recognize that the Ieodo issue is not a territorial one, Chinese surveillance activities in 2011 drew renewed political attention to the issue since it first emerged in 2006. In response to claims on Ieodo by China’s State Oceanic Administration in March 2012, Lee Myung-bak publicly asserted that Ieodo falls “naturally” in South Korea’s jurisdiction. The Society of Ieodo Research has argued that Ieodo is “of great strategic interest considering China’s strengthening naval power,” citing Beijing’s “hardened rhetoric” against U.S.-ROK military drills in surrounding waters. In addition to its strategic implications, the significance of Ieodo in Korean legend has justified its protection for South Koreans.

The Ieodo issue relates to EEZ disputes in the Yellow Sea and East China Sea, a more persistent source of strain that has produced frequent clashes over illegal fishing, including fatal incidents in 2008 and 2010-2012. Seoul and Beijing have failed to reach agreement on the demarcation of EEZs in waters surrounding Ieodo after sixteen rounds of talks since 1996. Recent clashes in the Yellow Sea have incited public protests and domestic debates in South Korea reinforcing unfavorable views of China. The death of a ROK Coast Guard in December 2011 provoked warnings in the South Korean media that violations of maritime sovereignty undermine China’s “national interests and image.” Domestic criticism has focused more pointedly on the Lee administration’s management of these issues, revealing
South Korea’s political polarization on China policy. While lawmakers have pressed for
tougher measures after Seoul “bowed to Beijing’s diplomatic pressure” in a similar fatal
incident in 2008, some others have opposed risking the political fallout seen in Sino-Japanese
disputes over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands.

One issue reflecting South Korea’s growing vulnerabilities to Chinese territorial ambitions
is the 1909 Gando Treaty, which transferred Japan’s territorial rights over what is now
the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture to China. While the National Assembly in
2004 attempted to nullify the treaty, concerns about China’s potential response thwarted
subsequent efforts. A South Korean editorial in 2009 stressed the long-term significance of
islands near the China-Korea border, including the Wiwha and Hwanggeumphyong islands
that China and North Korea designated as special joint economic zones in 2010, arguing that
“we must never again witness the handing over of our land to China.”

**North Korea and Korean Unification**

China’s approach to North Korea and the unification question is a key factor that has shaped
perceptions of a rising China as a long-term strategic challenge. Responses to North Korea’s
2009 nuclear test and Cheonan and Yeonpyeong attacks in 2010 revealed fundamental gaps in
policy preferences. Chinese restraint at the UN Security Council and promotion of friendship
with Pyongyang drove a sharp deterioration in South Korean views of China. Beijing’s
engagement of North Korea during this period prompted a comprehensive reassessment of the
Sino-ROK strategic partnership that cuts across all dimensions of identity.

The expansion in China-DPRK leadership exchanges in 2010 far beyond China-ROK levels
reversed Beijing’s traditional policy of equidistance and provoked a deep sense of betrayal
among South Koreans. Unification Minister Hyun In-taek urged China to play a “responsible
role” when Hu Jintao hosted Kim Jong-il in Beijing in May 2010 three days after meeting Lee
Myung-bak in Shanghai. While TV broadcaster SBS criticized Beijing’s “double standard” in
dealing with the two Koreas, other commentators in the media cautioned that the China-ROK
partnership “must not be burned in fiery emotion and rhetoric.” China’s political contacts
with the Kim Jong-un leadership since 2012 have affirmed a continued pursuit of friendship in
line with the consolidation of the Kim regime.

China’s economic ties with a sanctioned North Korea have heightened South Korean
perceptions of China’s rising relative influence over Pyongyang. China-DPRK trade in
2011 surpassed $5 billion, more than three times the inter-Korean level. The launching
of the China-DPRK Rason Economic and Trade Zone and Hwanggumphyong and Wihwa
Islands Economic Zone in June 2011 drew much attention in South Korea, as did Beijing’s
reception of Kim Jong-un’s uncle and patron Jang Song-thaek in August 2012 for the joint
promotion of the zones. To show “who is running North Korea,” the South Korean media
released a picture of PRC Ambassador Liu Hongcai accompanying Kim Jong-un and his
key supporters at a Pyongyang amusement park in July 2012. Such images have revived
the 2004 debates on China’s intentions to turn North Korea into its “fourth northeast
province.” China’s official support of peaceful unification remains questioned. An East
Asia Institute survey in 2010 showed that 30 percent of respondents identified China as
the biggest obstacle to unification after North Korea. South Korean conservatives in 2011
pointed to a “misconception” of China as “mediator between the two Koreas,” criticizing
Beijing’s “simultaneous diplomacy” as an attempt to “use closer ties with North Korea as a bargaining chip.” Unification gained increased attention in domestic political debates in 2010 and reflected ambivalence about China’s engagement with the North. The Blue House refuted the Financial Times’ October 2010 interview remarks by Lee urging North Korea to “emulate China’s economic model,” while denying Seoul’s reported concerns about a “belligerent” Pyongyang falling under Beijing’s political influence. The consolidation of China and North Korea’s fifty-year friendship has underscored the weaknesses of South Korea’s political and security ties with China relative to both the Sino-DPRK alliance and the economic side of the Sino-ROK partnership.

**Asymmetric Interdependence and Economic Identity**

China’s reform and opening since 1978 has presented a major opportunity for South Korea’s export-led growth as an Asian power, contributing to a favorable image of China as an economic partner. Despite divergent political systems and security priorities, trade was a driving force for diplomatic normalization in 1992 and remains an important foundation for mutually beneficial cooperation. While South Korea is China’s sixth biggest trade partner, China replaced the United States as South Korea’s top trade partner in 2002. Bilateral trade reached $220 billion in 2011, exceeding South Korea’s combined trade with the United States and Japan. Since the 2008 global recession, South Korean assessments of the rapidly expanding economic partnership with China have focused on the growing asymmetry of interdependence and broader strategic implications.

Cooperation with China on the 2010 Shanghai World Expo and 2012 Yeosu Expo demonstrated South Korean efforts to strengthen the economic and cultural relationship. The popularity of the “Korean Wave” in China appeared to wane in the mid-2000s with the impact of history and trade disputes. ROK authorities worked hard to promote South Korea’s high-tech industry and popular culture at the Shanghai Expo, where Seoul displayed the second biggest national pavilion after China’s. Yet the expansion in cultural exchanges has also raised the intensity of public disputes, as seen in protests during the 2008 Beijing Olympics torch relay in Seoul, the first direct experience of Chinese nationalism for many South Koreans.

The rapid growth in trade and investment has implied an increase in South Korean economic vulnerabilities to China. Trade wars over garlic and kimchi in 2000 and 2005 shifted South Korean attention to the risks of competition with China, while public views of Chinese products deteriorated further with scandals over tainted Chinese imports in 2008. China’s rising economic power has also prompted efforts to enhance South Korean competitiveness in “soft power” through corporate networks and NGOs.

The structural transformation of the bilateral relationship that has accompanied China’s shift to high-end industries indicates a growing asymmetry in economic interdependence. Concerns about China’s rise as a global economic power appeared in a 2009 Ministry of Strategy and Finance report that cautioned against intensified competition with China in export markets and energy diplomacy. A Federation of Korean Industries survey in 2010 indicated that South Korea may lose its technology advantages over China within four years in key sectors accounting for over 60 percent of all South Korean exports. Such trends were evident in 2010, when China replaced South Korea as the world’s top shipbuilding country and biggest market for South Korea’s own Hyundai Motors. In July 2012, a Samsung
Securities report warned that China’s industrial restructuring over the next decade would enhance Chinese competitiveness against Korean firms rather than present opportunities.

As discussed in Part III of this volume, talks for a China-ROK free trade agreement (FTA) present new opportunities and challenges for bilateral and regional integration. Despite the potential benefits from the FTA, ROK Deputy Trade Minister Choi Seok-young pointed to “significant differences in opinion” after the first round of talks in 2012. FTA talks through the summer of 2012 incited protests by South Korean farmers voicing concerns over the economic costs and health threats of Chinese agricultural imports. The Korea Institute for International Economic Policy estimates that the annual loss for South Korea’s farming industry is almost four times higher than the estimated losses from the Korea-U.S. (KORUS) FTA, which came into force two months before the formal launching of China-ROK trade talks. Prolonged negotiations for the KORUS FTA were a key factor in initial reluctance in pursuing FTA talks with China, reflecting reservations toward closer integration into a China-based regional economic order.

THE UNITED STATES IN THE SINO-SOUTH KOREAN IDENTITY DEBATE

Underlying South Korea’s identity gap with China is an acute awareness of its uneasy position between China as its key economic partner and the United States as its military ally. While U.S.-China identity conflicts became more salient with the increase in regional tensions from 2009, South Korea’s reliance on China and the United States for growth and security makes a stable U.S.-China relationship a top priority. Regional reverberations of the 2010 Cheonan incident prompted calls for Seoul to play a “diplomatic mediator” role to minimize the likelihood of a U.S.-China confrontation in the region. To address a heightened dilemma of maintaining favorable relations with both powers, South Korean experts have argued for shifting Seoul’s diplomatic strategy of “hedging” to a focus on strengthening South Korea’s global capacities as a “middle” and “normative” power. This diplomatic reorientation in response to a potential widening of differences between the United States and China underscores the dynamic interaction between Sino-South Korean identity debates and views of the Sino-U.S. identity gap.

Evolving discourse on history shapes South Korean identity as a subject of great power rivalry between China and the United States, shadowing the image of “Global Korea” that Lee Myung-bak actively promoted after his inauguration. Sino-ROK historical contestations also reveal competing views of the peninsula’s future that present important implications for U.S. strategic interests in the region. These issues were raised in a December 2012 U.S. Congressional report on China’s role in Korean unification, the drafting of which reportedly led the ROK Foreign Ministry to dispatch experts from the Northeast Asia History Foundation to Washington to consult on China and South Korea’s interpretations of Koguryo and Balhae history. Reactions in the South Korean media suggest continued politicization and volatility of the history issue. Debates on the Korean War similarly morph into questions on U.S. and Chinese interests in the peninsula’s strategic future. While Chinese military leaders have firmly opposed “Cold War thinking” on the peninsula in response to the strengthening of the U.S.-ROK alliance, Chinese commemorations of the Korean War’s 60th anniversary in 2010 renewed these very ideological gaps.
The Sino-ROK political identity gap sharpens the divide between South Korea’s economic partnership with China and alliance with the United States. While differences in political systems and values have not undermined the pursuit of mutual economic interests, disputes over human rights reinforce the gap between China’s authoritarian regime and South Korean identity as a democracy. Joint responses of U.S. and South Korean civil society organizations to China’s handling of North Korean refugees demonstrate the shared values underlying the U.S.-ROK relationship while drawing attention to China’s violation of international norms. At the height of public frustrations over the Cheonan issue in 2010, South Korean commentators contrasted the “double standard” in Chinese behavior against the “deep roots of reciprocity and friendship” in U.S.-ROK relations.82 Xi Jinping’s assertions in 2010 in support of the new DPRK leadership’s goal of “peaceful national unification” appeared to challenge the 2009 U.S.-ROK joint vision statement on “peaceful reunification on the principles of free democracy and a market economy.”83

While territorial clashes have heightened perceptions of the traditional security threat posed by a rising China, the DPRK issue is the most important factor that constitutes South Korean identity as a U.S. military ally. U.S.-ROK military exercises against DPRK provocations in 2010 raised voices in Beijing that revealed gaps in regional strategic priorities and undermined views of China as a “responsible stakeholder” and mediator of the Six-Party Talks. China’s economic ties with North Korea and challenge to the implementation of UN sanctions have further posed questions about its international image. At the same time, South Korea has also sought to avoid taking sides in a U.S.-China dispute. During ROK Defense Minister Kim Kwang-jin’s visit to China in July 2011, People’s Liberation Army chief Chen Bingde’s public criticisms of U.S. “superpower” behavior raised South Korean anxieties over being caught in a rivalry. The foreign ministry’s subsequent affirmations of its neutral position on the South China Sea reflected South Korea’s ongoing struggle to balance “alliance solidarity” with the United States and pragmatic cooperation with China.84

Controversy over South Korea’s Jeju naval base since construction began in 2011 has revealed the salience of China and the U.S. alliance as key divisive questions in ROK domestic politics. While critics suspect the base will primarily serve U.S. regional defense interests and aggravate China, others see the facility as an important development for countering China’s rising military presence and protecting ROK maritime interests in the region.85 In an August 2011 news editorial, the president of South Korea’s Society of Ieodo Research criticized Chinese “imperialistic” behavior in EEZ clashes with Vietnam and argued: “Asia’s mistrust of China and fear of Beijing is based on its territorial ambition… China’s ambition should be counterbalanced by the United States as a Pacific partner to Asia-Pacific nations.”86 In response to China’s aircraft carrier trials that same month, a Korea National Defense University professor similarly indicated that “Korea can secure military deterrence by reinforcing joint deterrence capacity with the United States.”87

In contrast to the Sino-ROK security relationship, trade and investment ties with China have helped solidify South Korea’s economic identity as an advanced player in the international economy. However, concerns over an increasingly asymmetric relationship with China have increased with China’s rise as the world’s second biggest economy in 2010 after the United States. Regional trade patterns over the past two decades clearly indicate South
Korea’s growing dependence on China, with a shift in relative trade dependence from the United States to China after 2003-2004. Some analysts see U.S. promotion of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) FTA as a key driver of China’s current pursuit of economic integration with South Korea and Japan. The China-ROK FTA further supports trilateral FTA efforts with Japan under the CJK framework, which embodies the functional interests that weigh in on South Korean identity perceptions as an Asian power. Such initiatives are decisive factors in South Korea’s orientation between China-centered economic regionalism and the U.S.-led alliance system in Asia, and perceptions of national identity in relation to China and the United States.

**CONCLUSION: IDENTITY POLITICS UNDER NEW LEADERSHIPS**

South Korean debates across various dimensions of national identity reflect competing forces of alignment between China and the United States. Four main factors of Chinese behavior shape South Korean views of national identity. First, China’s rise remains the background condition against which South Korea assesses its regional and global position. Chinese claims of historical and territorial sovereignty and cultural “ownership” have fed suspicions about China’s long-term intentions on the peninsula as a rising challenger to the United States. China’s relationship with North Korea is a second factor that shapes views of China as a strategic challenge, including in post-unification scenarios. Given continued DPRK aggression and stalled inter-Korean relations, China’s engagement of the DPRK leadership undermines Seoul’s relative influence over Pyongyang in coordination with the United States. Third, commercial ties remain a primary foundation of the Sino-ROK relationship that broadly shapes assessments of identity amid the structural transformation of regional relations. While the prospect of China’s growing competitiveness presents new concerns over asymmetric interdependence, economic integration with China through new multilateral initiatives raises questions about South Korea’s position within the traditional network of U.S. alliances. Fourth, domestic political reform in China is another variable that influences South Korean views of the potential for narrowing the normative gaps with China relative to the United States.

Park Geun-hye’s early prioritization of the China-ROK partnership and North Korea policy in an effort to stabilize regional relations will shape the direction of the identity debate. While economic cooperation with China supports Park’s policy priority of revamping South Korea’s export-dependent economy, the growing asymmetry of interdependence is likely to intensify unease toward China’s leverage in the relationship. Bilateral political disputes with Japan under returning LDP Prime Minister Abe Shinzo further challenge the prospects for economic integration.

While assessments of Chinese foreign policy suggest a continued assertive orientation under the Xi leadership, renewed DPRK provocations under Kim Jong-un will require close coordination between China and U.S. regional allies. Park raised hopes for reconciling differences with China since her election campaign differentiating her approach to North Korea from Lee’s hard-line policy. In her November 2012 Wall Street Journal article, she also stressed the importance of a strong U.S.-China partnership for South Korean strategic interests. Park’s emphasis on favorable relations with China and potential engagement with North Korea presents possibilities for narrowing the identity gap with China. This, however,
remains contingent on Xi Jinping’s approach to North Korea and the U.S.-ROK alliance, the two key points of contention shaping South Korean identity perceptions in relation to China and the United States.

ENDNOTES


47. “Gov’t Vows Efforts to Deal with S. Korean Activist’s Alleged Abuse in China,” Yonhap, July 30, 2012.


55. “Seoul and Beijing Deal with Illegal Fishing Fallout,” Hankyoreh, October 18, 2012.


68. Korea Trade and Investment Promotion Agency.


72. Yoo Choonsik, “South Korea Wary.”


79. Gilbert Rozman, “U.S. Strategic Thinking.”


84. “S. Korea to Keep Neutral Stance on South China Sea Dispute,” *Yonhap*, July 19, 2011.


88. China-ROK trade accounted for 1 percent of South Korea’s GDP in 1990 while U.S.-ROK trade accounted for 14 percent. By 2011, China-ROK and U.S.-ROK trade accounted for 20 percent and 9 percent of South Korea’s GDP respectively. Korea International Trade Association, World Trade Organization, and International Monetary Fund data.


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