

Chinese Views of South Korea: Aligning Elite and Popular Debates

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China and the Republic of Korea (ROK) have experienced periods of conflict and cooperation since officially forging “partnership” relations in 1998. From a historical perspective, Korea was among the most willing participants of the Sinocentric tribute system and its underlying cultural hierarchy.¹ Yet the 2003-2004 dispute over the ancient Koguryo kingdom’s identity marked the first major downturn in the China-ROK relationship since normalization. The rapid expansion of trade, at an average annual rate of 18 percent since 1992,² has not prevented the two sides from fighting over political grievances. Most notably under the current Xi Jinping leadership, Beijing’s assertions of unprecedented friendship quickly turned into accusations of betrayal requiring economic punishment. Why and how did China’s policy toward South Korea shift so drastically after two decades of diplomatic normalization? To answer, we must focus on the expectations raised by China’s national identity for ties with South Korea.

This study examines the evolution of Chinese views of South Korea with a focus on elite and popular narratives since 2013. Despite increased interdependence, these narratives point to China’s increasingly fragile political ties with Asian partners. Most importantly, China’s growing weight facilitates its strategic combination of economic and discursive tools of diplomacy framed by national identity. Recent tensions over the U.S.-ROK military alliance displayed Beijing’s denial of direct economic retaliation under the cover of public hostility, conveniently blurring the lines between state-led and voluntary actions. By hardening the identity dimensions of conflict, such strategies may only have long-term counterproductive effects of constraining Beijing’s political influence at home and abroad.

The four sections below proceed as follows. First, I review two decades of China-ROK relations since the establishment of partnership ties in 1998. I identify two related trends: the intensification of political disputes despite trade, and China’s growing economic leverage in managing those disputes, keeping an eye on the role of national identity. Second, I assess the pessimistic turn in China’s domestic discourse on South Korea in the Xi Jinping period, using official, academic, and media sources. Third, I trace the interaction of elite and popular narratives, focusing on the 2016-2017 dispute over a U.S. missile defense system, Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD). I briefly extend the discussion to public clashes over Hong Kong in 2019 to underscore the enduring impact of China’s major power and domestic political identities on China-ROK relations. To conclude, I consider the trajectory of bilateral relations under the leadership of Xi Jinping and Moon Jae-in, including the domestic and foreign policy implications of nationalist discourse.

Two Decades of “Partnership”

Six years after diplomatic normalization, China and South Korea forged a “cooperative partnership” during President Kim Dae-jung’s state visit to China in 1998. The partnership supported Beijing’s regional engagement under Jiang Zemin’s “new security concept” of post-Cold War cooperation, which rejected U.S. military alignment in favor of a “neutral” South Korea.³ For China’s Asia experts, the 2000 inter-Korean summit signified not just North-South reconciliation, but also the real end of the Cold War, elevating China’s role in the Korean peace process.⁴ But by the end of the 1990s, others also warned that an “increasingly nationalistic Beijing leadership” and its “assertive foreign policy” would test the resilience of the China-ROK partnership.⁵ The garlic trade dispute in 2000 was the first major indicator of China’s growing economic weight in the form of retaliatory import

restrictions.⁶ Three years later, the Koguryo history war coincided with a turning point in the bilateral trade relationship, when China replaced Japan and the United States in 2003-2004 to become South Korea's biggest trade partner. The upgraded "comprehensive cooperative partnership" in 2003 envisioned the rapid expansion of economic, security, and cultural ties, as the Hu Jintao leadership assured neighbors of China's "peaceful rise." This image, appealing to soft power, contrasted with the confidence found in assumptions behind South Korea's need to show deference on North Korea, trade, and history. The message spread to users of the internet, where the Koguryo dispute triggered a broader "cultural war" on the supposedly audacious cultural pretensions of Koreans in claiming symbols belonging to China.

Seoul's conservative Lee Myung-bak administration from 2008 presented major uncertainties for Chinese counterparts, despite the establishment of a new "strategic cooperative partnership."⁷ According to some critics, China's role in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) nuclear issue had been reduced from mediating the Six-Party Talks to "rubber-stamping" agreements between Washington and Pyongyang.⁸ The fallout with Seoul over handling DPRK military provocations in 2010 revealed Chinese anxieties over South Korea's increasingly "multifaceted strategic alliance" with the United States.⁹ Marking 20 years of diplomatic relations, the Xi Jinping and Park Geun-hye administrations laid aside these differences in 2013 and launched the bilateral free trade agreement (FTA) in 2015. The China-ROK economic partnership still confronted Chinese unease over Seoul's security ties with Washington and deteriorating public perceptions on both sides.¹⁰ It only reinforced the attitude that South Korea belongs to China's cultural sphere, whether in responding to Japan's affronts over history or in accepting growing claims of Sinocentrism, such as Xi Jinping's references to a "common destiny."¹¹

These trends clearly surfaced in the dispute over South Korea's 2016 decision to deploy THAAD. After a year of Chinese economic retaliation, Beijing and Seoul agreed in October 2017 to put relations "back on a normal track" for the sake of "mutual interests."¹² The agreement was reached amid important domestic and international developments, including Seoul's transition to the Moon government in May 2017, ending a decade of conservative rule, the October 2017 Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Congress consolidating the Xi leadership, and Trump's first Asia trip in November 2017, introducing Washington's "Indo-Pacific strategy" to the region. Xi Jinping assured Moon Jae-in in Beijing in December 2019, "we have always been close friends and partners for cooperation."¹³ Beijing's official accounts of this summit appeared to replay past Korean subordination to imperial China, implying a common civilizational sphere as a force shaping policy choices.

Continuities and Change

The development of China-ROK partnership since the 1990s reveals several points of continuity and change. First, China's Korea policy is largely framed by its major-power identity. Moon Jae-in's rise and the 2018 inter-Korean summit revived the same great-power debates that North-South reconciliation ignited two decades ago. Rooted in China's involvement in the 1950-1953 Korean War, China's great-power identity in the region makes the orientation of the U.S.-ROK alliance a primary concern. From China's national security perspective, a "strategically neutralized" Korea is the optimal scenario since "Beijing's long-term strategic concern is not whether there will be two Koreas or one reunified Korea,

but how to reduce U.S. influence there.”¹⁴ The prospect of unification in the early 2000s raised four images embodying such views of Korea: a source of change in the regional power structure, a key player in U.S. containment of China, a partner in promoting China’s economic development, and a facilitator of China’s own reunification with Taiwan.¹⁵ These views persisted at the start of the Xi leadership in 2012, when peninsula tensions underscored the diplomatic troubles posed by a divided Korea.¹⁶ Geopolitical competition with the United States under the Trump administration from 2017 only heightened Beijing’s view of Korea’s dilemma of being “stuck between the past and the future.”¹⁷ Not only was the issue of managing ties with South Korea seen as political and economic, but also as having an essential cultural dimension.

China’s domestic political identity as a transitioning regime is another enduring source of its Korea policy. Indeed, the linkages between domestic and international priorities drove the decision to normalize ties with the South in 1992.¹⁸ Since committing to reform and opening in 1978, unresolved issues of social order, political adjustment, and national unification have placed significant constraints on China’s international role.¹⁹ As Chinese leaders have long argued, China’s active regional diplomacy since the 1990s is primarily aimed at fostering favorable external conditions for its domestic development. Beijing’s engagement of both Koreas is consistent with its post-Cold War policy of ensuring a stable regional environment conducive to China’s ongoing modernization drive.²⁰ Yet modernization is only one objective of China’s rise.

The orientation of China-ROK relations over the past two decades has also changed in two related ways (Table 1). First, bilateral disputes have intensified despite the expansion of trade. The management of the garlic trade war signaled a mutual willingness to avoid the costs of prolonged fallout, especially after China’s World Trade Organization entry in 2001 enhanced the prospects for China-ROK economic ties.²¹ But subsequent disputes only intensified with increased interdependence, evolving from competing historical narratives to harder security issues involving North Korea and the United States.²² Second, China’s economic leverage in managing such disputes has clearly increased. When the garlic war broke out in 2000, China represented 9 percent of South Korea’s total foreign trade, and less than half of U.S.-ROK trade. By the time of the THAAD dispute in 2016, South Korea depended on China for 23 percent of its foreign trade, more than the combined shares of its trade with the United States and Japan. In contrast, the portion of China-ROK trade in China’s total foreign trade has hovered around 7 and 8 percent since 1996. China’s increased economic leverage in managing political disputes amplifies the national identity dimensions of conflict. Such leverage empowers Beijing to strategically combine economic and discursive tools of diplomacy, as manifested at bilateral and state-societal levels.

| Table 1. China-ROK Political and Trade Relations (1998-2018) | | | | | |
|--|--------------------|--------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| Year | PRC Administration | ROK Administration | Major Dispute | PRC's % Share of ROK Trade | ROK's % Share of PRC Trade |
| Cooperative Partnership | | | | | |
| 1998 | Jiang Zemin | Kim Dae-jung | | 7.62 | 6.56 |
| 2000 | | | Garlic trade | 9.39 | 7.27 |
| 2002 | | | | 13.08 | 7.10 |
| Comprehensive Cooperative Partnership | | | | | |
| 2003 | Hu Jintao | Roh Moo-hyun | Koguryo history | 15.30 | 7.43 |
| 2005 | | | | 18.43 | 7.87 |
| 2007 | | | | 19.91 | 7.36 |
| Strategic Cooperative Partnership | | | | | |
| 2008 | Hu Jintao | Lee Myung-bak | | 19.63 | 7.26 |
| 2010 | | | Cheonan & Yeonpyeong | 21.13 | 6.96 |
| 2012 | | | | 20.15 | 6.63 |
| 2013 | Xi Jinping | Park Geun-hye | | 21.29 | 6.59 |
| 2014 | | | | 21.43 | 6.75 |
| 2015 | | | | 23.61 | 6.98 |
| 2016 | | | THAAD | 23.45 | 6.86 |
| 2017 | | Moon Jae-in | | 22.81 | 6.82 |
| 2018 | | | | 23.56 | 6.77 |

Sources: Korea International Trade Association; National Bureau of Statistics of China; World Bank.

Chinese Views of South Korea under the Xi Jinping and Moon Jae-in Leaderships

In a 2002 interview with *People's Daily*, China's ambassador to Seoul, Li Bin, identified China and South Korea's "same oriental civilization" as key to the 10-year relationship's success.²³ Since normalization, however, the China-ROK relationship has dynamically evolved through multiple narratives of core-periphery kingdoms, common victims of Japanese aggression, Cold War enemies, and economic partners. Despite the 2017 agreement to "renormalize" relations, current official, scholarly, and media assessments of South Korea point in an overall pessimistic direction. China's major-power and domestic political identities inform these debates.

Official Assessments

Leadership exchanges at the end of 2019 offer a snapshot of Chinese official positions on South Korea. During Moon's December visit to China, Xi Jinping stressed the need to "develop strategic cooperative partnership, and accommodate each other's core interests."²⁴ Premier Li Keqiang expressed Beijing's willingness to "enhance political mutual trust" for the relationship's long-term development, noting rapid trade growth and a "similar culture."²⁵ State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit earlier that month, as China's highest-level official to visit South Korea since Moon took office, raised hope for moving past the THAAD dispute.²⁶ Both Xi Jinping and Wang Yi called for strengthening the social foundation of friendship using the Joint Committee on People-to-People Exchanges launched in 2013.

Wang Yi carried four bigger messages to Seoul beyond just advancing the bilateral partnership, in apparent criticism of the United States. First, "unilateralism and bullying" are the biggest current threats to world peace and stability.²⁷ Facing global uncertainties, China and South Korea should "safeguard shared legitimate rights and interests" as "close neighbors, friends and partners."²⁸ As he reminded Korean counterpart Kang Kyung-wha, China always pursues an independent foreign policy, supports democracy in international relations, and rejects interference in internal affairs. To former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, he hinted that "some superpower does not abide by international rules, nor fulfill its international obligations."²⁹

Second, against this unilateralism, China remains committed to opening up to the global community.³⁰ As Wang told Moon, China and South Korea should "jointly champion" multilateralism, free trade, and international norms.³¹ Third, any containment strategy toward China will inevitably fail, especially considering the success of China's "correct development path" of "socialism with Chinese characteristics led by the Communist Party of China."³² According to Wang, "not everyone hopes to see China succeed" due to the "prejudice of ideology" and "arrogance of power politics." Finally, China's national development contributes to global development. After achieving what took Western countries hundreds of years in just a few decades, China under the CPC leadership has become the "main engine of global growth."³³

China and South Korea's trilateral summit with Japan and wider regional engagements reinforced these messages at the end of the year. While the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) reached a breakthrough in managing protectionism according to Li Keqiang,³⁴ U.S.-ROK frictions over burden-sharing played out the perils of bullying. As the CCP tabloid *Global Times* wondered, "is the 66-year-old alliance in deep trouble?"³⁵

Academic Assessments

Chinese academic reviews reflect a consensus on China and South Korea's difficult recovery since the deflation of the Xi-Park "honeymoon."³⁶ The major-power perspective remains dominant, highlighting the current dilemmas of U.S.-China competition for Seoul suggested in official narratives. But there is also a growing debate on Seoul's quest for greater foreign

policy autonomy under Moon Jae-in, and the United States' "third-party" interference in China-ROK relations. While pessimists remain critical of South Korea's dependence on Washington, others point to favorable conditions for China-ROK leadership on broader regional cooperation. The common struggle against Japanese imperialism remains a point of solidarity shown in nationalist reflections of the PRC's 70th founding anniversary in 2019.

The current academic debate on South Korea was inspired by the highs and lows of the 2013-2017 Xi-Park period, which left the relationship at a critical juncture since normalization.³⁷ South Korea's relationship with China and the United States frames three schools of thought, centered on South Korea's economic ties with China and security ties with the United States, its balancing between the two, and its closeness with the United States and distance with China. The Xi-Park period affirmed the zero-sum nature of these two relationships and lack of common understanding of the future regional order. As Zhang Huizhi argues, current pressures of U.S.-China competition heighten Seoul's classic "dilemma of choice."³⁸

At the same time, China's Korea experts like Zhang recognize Seoul's growing confidence in seeking "diplomatic autonomy and flexibility." Academic attention at the beginning of the Xi period focused on the impact of South Korea's "middle power diplomacy" on Beijing's efforts to improve its surrounding environment.³⁹ Moon Jae-in's pursuit of greater national autonomy has become an important standard for assessing Seoul's diplomatic orientation, especially when it comes to the unification issue.⁴⁰ South Korea's joining of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2015, THAAD decision in 2016, and detached position on the South China Sea indicate that its strategic choices are more diverse than conventional assumptions of dependence on China and the United States suggest.⁴¹

Skeptics in China point out that although Moon's policy approach expands the scope of China-ROK cooperation, it does not eliminate South Korea's inclination to "check and balance" China.⁴² For many Korea watchers, U.S. "third-party interference" is a growing obstacle, as suggested by the qualitative changes in China-ROK disputes over the past decade.⁴³ This interference makes it more difficult for Beijing and Seoul to rely on the positive spillover effects of cooperation to build trust and avoid Northeast Asia's Cold War dynamics.⁴⁴ But for optimists in China, Seoul's enhanced diplomatic autonomy opens up significant opportunities for China-ROK leadership on regional cooperation. South Korea could optimize China's surrounding environment by playing a critical "coordinator" role, bridging the gap between security and economic engagement in Northeast Asia.⁴⁵

As academic reflections on the 70th anniversary of the PRC's founding emphasize, nationalist clashes since normalization ignored China and South Korea's close historical and cultural linkages.⁴⁶ Korea's March 1, 1919 movement against Japanese occupation has always served as a "next-door mirror" reflecting China's national liberation and path to Xi Jinping's envisioned "national rejuvenation."⁴⁷ Northeast Chinese authors advocate the study of Korean patriotism education as a lesson for China on the systematic cultivation of patriotism to advance "socialism with Chinese characteristics."⁴⁸ But as Chinese media narratives indicate, such nationalist discourse projects both favorable and unfavorable images of the China-Korea relationship.

Media Assessments

Driven primarily by state sources, media debates align with academic interpretations of the official line. Pessimists equate Seoul's traditional insistence on "strategic ambiguity" with masked alignment with Washington. For optimists, Moon's emphasis on autonomy means greater possibilities for regional cooperation with South Korea. The state media prominently feature nationalist voices suggesting that Seoul's strategic ambiguity only breeds mistrust. Trump's November 2017 Asia tour triggered such debates, as reflected in reactions to Seoul's "inconsistent, contradictory, and confusing" position on Trump's Indo-Pacific strategy.⁴⁹ A commentator for *China Youth Daily* concluded that Seoul's "two-sided" strategy makes South Korea "far from China's country of strategic trust." By ignoring Pyongyang and Beijing's proposals, "how can Moon Jae-in break the shackles of the U.S.-ROK alliance and move towards autonomy?"⁵⁰ Progress in South Korea's defense cooperation with India under Moon Jae-in in 2019 prompted warnings in the *Global Times* against the possibility of Seoul being lured into the Indo-Pacific strategy.⁵¹

Not all media assessments are pessimistic, especially in anticipating the regional impact of Moon's diplomatic diversification. His remarks on his first state visit to China in 2017 left a good impression on Chinese by emphasizing historical periods of common prosperity. A *Global Times* assessment at the end of 2019 pointed to an unprecedented opportunity for promoting regional cooperation with South Korea, China's only FTA partner in Northeast Asia.⁵² Similarly, a *China Youth Daily* commentator urged the Chinese public to change traditional perceptions of its "small" neighbor, calling South Korea an important global player and China's biggest trade partner behind the United States and Japan.⁵³

More importantly, China and South Korea now share an understanding of the dangers of "unilateralism" of "some countries," claims a writer for *Global Times*.⁵⁴ Their views on the DPRK nuclear issue are more consistent compared to the position of the United States, which has "dared to bully South Korea" given its strategic dependence on Washington. According to another *Global Times* editorial, Moon's December 2019 China visit was an ideal time for promoting "interdependent benefit-based" China-ROK-Japan cooperation in Asia, where U.S. interference has aroused national sentiments "to increase the three's entanglements."⁵⁵

Interaction of Elite and Popular Debates

In addition to the external geopolitical constraints that undermined the Xi-Park period, the lasting impact of national identity conflict dampened the expectations for change under the Moon leadership.⁵⁶ Chinese academic sources identify Korean nationalism as an increasingly prominent factor challenging sustained cooperation, driven by Korea's "tragic history, arrogant mentality, and emotional character."⁵⁷ The effects of this nationalism were evident from the start of the Xi period in China and South Korea's "close but not friendly" political ties, rising trade protectionism, and growing societal animosities. Although active public diplomacy from both sides has enhanced China's national image since normalization, mutual distrust continues to inhibit friendship.⁵⁸ As a *China Youth Daily* commentator observed a year into the 2017 agreement to restore ties, THAAD's shadow still clouds public sentiments.⁵⁹ These national sentiments resurfaced at the end of 2019 during public clashes over Hong Kong.

Compared to previous episodes of identity conflict, asymmetric interdependence magnifies the impact of national identity by granting Beijing more leverage in managing disputes. While the history of China-ROK normalization since the early 1970s demonstrated Beijing's longstanding principle of separating politics and economics,⁶⁰ recent disputes point to the increased difficulty of avoiding these linkages. In addition, new modes of online communication give the spread of Chinese nationalism new characteristics of a much more expansive and dynamic "network nationalism." The China-ROK case is a classic example of cyber nationalism's double-edged sword: while Chinese netizens should not "play around" with nationalism, Chinese media should also not "manipulate nationalism" in guiding public opinion. As China's THAAD debate shows, the media can powerfully shape not just the policy agenda, but also how the public links certain policy issues together.⁶² The 2016-2017 THAAD dispute and 2019 controversy over "internal affairs" illustrate the mutually reinforcing interaction of elite and popular debates on South Korea framed by China's major-power and domestic political identities.

THAAD and China's Major-Power Identity (2016-2017)

Seoul and Washington's July 2016 announcement on deploying THAAD sparked intense debates in Chinese official, academic, and media outlets on the repercussions for national security and regional stability.⁶³ Under the Moon administration, the October 2017 agreement between foreign ministries embodied Seoul's "Three Noes" promising to not join the U.S. missile defense system, not join U.S.-Japan-ROK military cooperation, and not make additional THAAD deployments.⁶⁴ As China's defense ministry made clear a month later, Beijing's position remained unchanged: "it is up to the doer to undo the knot. And the fundamental solution to the issue is to stop deploying the THAAD system...the Chinese military will take its due measures to firmly safeguard national security."⁶⁵ State media commentators called the 2017 agreement a "staged consensus."⁶⁶

Policy journal and media debates echoed Beijing's disappointment, centered on South Korea's betrayal of China in the context of U.S.-China rivalry. For China's Korea experts, Seoul's THAAD decision signified joining U.S. containment strategy in Asia, portrayed by some sources as a "U.S.-led trick" of "squeezing and encircling" China in a "new cold war."⁶⁷ South Korea's "choice" of supporting the United States revealed "inevitable contradictions" in the China-ROK relationship.⁶⁸ Described by the state media as "Northeast Asia's Cuban missile crisis," the dispute clearly destabilized the U.S.-ROK-China triangular relationship, requiring Seoul to rethink its tendency of "bundling" security policies with Washington.⁶⁹ Journal and media sources agreed that the Moon government's ambiguity on the "Three Noes" would only disappoint Beijing and Washington. A *China Youth Daily* commentator urged Seoul to abandon such "strategic speculation" based on hopes to "gain economic benefits from China and security benefits from the United States."⁷⁰

According to Moon in July 2017, China's "economic retaliatory measures" cost the Korean economy \$8 billion.⁷¹ Beijing projected these non-tariff measures as independent actions by local authorities or private actors, blurring the lines between state-directed and voluntary retaliation. As the foreign ministry indicated when deployment began in March 2017, "we support normal business and trade exchanges between China and the ROK, but this needs

a corresponding basis in public opinion.”⁷² *Global Times* similarly argued that “the success of foreign companies operating in China is determined by the Chinese market and Chinese consumers,” claiming that 95 percent of Chinese netizens supported boycotting South Korean conglomerate Lotte after its land swap agreement with the ROK defense ministry for THAAD deployment.⁷³ A *Global Times* op-ed arguing that “all states have the right to sanction those that have posed a threat to their national sovereignty” prompted an online debate focused more explicitly on “state-led sanctions.”⁷⁴ Sanctioning cultural products was especially effective because “if Chinese audiences sink TV dramas and stars from South Korea into oblivion, it will turn into an enormous blow to the latter’s national pride.”⁷⁵

Chinese public responses largely aligned on what the foreign and defense ministries warned as “necessary measures,”⁷⁶ reflecting Beijing’s strategic combination of economic and discursive tools of influence. The state media featured Korea experts like Cai Jian of Fudan University’s Center for Korean Studies, who urged Chinese to “be more vocal about sanctions” as Beijing prepares “follow-up measures.”⁷⁷ Some authors recommended comprehensive political, military, economic, and cultural countermeasures to address China’s heightened security dilemma.⁷⁸ Economic and diplomatic sanctions topped the *Global Times*’ list of proposals, before a third military option.⁷⁹ Such outlets further insisted that “Chinese consumers should become the main force in teaching Seoul a lesson, punishing the nation through the power of the market.”⁸⁰ As one student told China Global Television Network, “the ROK is a small country. It’s time for us to teach it a lesson.”⁸¹ A university dormitory displayed a similar message: “Seoul is tiny and insignificant! Empower my big China!”⁸² *China Youth Daily* called for “patriotic” unity among society, government, and businesses in making sure South Korea “pays the price it deserves.”⁸³ At the same time, netizens used social media to promote consumer boycotts, emboldening the “patriotism” prescribed by official narratives. To mobilize public protests, one WeChat petition named Lotte a “traitor and enemy of the Chinese people.”⁸⁴ Xinhua justified such protests in national security terms: if “Lotte can exchange land with the South Korean military for the sake of ‘national security,’” then “Chinese consumers can also say no to such companies or products for the sake of ‘national security!’”⁸⁵

The THAAD dispute abruptly ended the China-ROK honeymoon and exposed the partnership’s fragility.⁸⁶ As a Ministry of Commerce analyst indicated, it brought bilateral ties to a freezing point despite the FTA’s implementation and South Korea’s early support for the AIIB in 2015.⁸⁷ The 25th anniversary of diplomatic relations in 2017 was marked by the biggest setback to bilateral cultural exchanges since the 2003-2004 Koguryo history war.⁸⁸ A study by the Tsinghua University Institute of International Relations concluded that THAAD fueled widespread public opposition, calling it one of the most serious diplomatic disputes since normalization.⁸⁹ According to one survey, Chinese high school students’ attitudes toward Korea deteriorated and their consumption of Korean cultural products declined.⁹⁰

From another perspective, the Chinese public lacked a clear understanding of the THAAD issue.⁹¹ One follower of Korean popular music questioned the protests against Lotte: “I don’t think this is real patriotism. They just go with the flow, act impulsively and use extreme rhetoric.”⁹² Such protests were just an opportunity to exercise freedom of expression in an area that Beijing officially permitted and even encouraged. One such opportunity eroded

when organized rallies pledging to boycott Korean products spread to Chinese elementary schools, forcing government authorities to intervene.⁹³ Such interventions suggested concern over the external and internal risks of nationalist protests fed by the dynamic interaction of state and societal voices.

Rather than just restoring ties, Moon's first state visit in December 2017 raised awareness of the historical importance of the China-ROK relationship. The visit coincided with the 80th anniversary of the Nanjing Massacre, allowing the state media to amplify the lessons of history based on Moon's address remembering the victims.⁹⁴ In a series of *China Youth Daily* commentaries, Li Dunqiu of the State Council-affiliated Chinese Academy of Social Sciences pointed to a "geopolitical law" engrained in history: Korea's national fate has fluctuated with China's rise and fall since the Japanese invasions of the 16th century.⁹⁵ When China was strong, Korea was peaceful and secure; when China was declining, it was colonized and divided. According to Li, this law even underpins Xi and Moon's agreement on the "four principles" on the Korean Peninsula: never allow war, adhere to the denuclearization principle, peacefully resolve issues through dialogue, and improved inter-Korean relations support the peaceful settlement of the peninsula issue. Koreans should "never forget this geopolitical law, otherwise they will have to pay a price."⁹⁶

THAAD's important lesson was that China and South Korea have too high expectations of each other, causing mutual disappointment. Both expected the other to refrain from actions that would impede the advancement of bilateral relations.⁹⁷ According to Chinese sources, South Korea's "small country mentality" remains a major obstacle to restoring ties with China, as evidenced by South Korea's fierce domestic battle over THAAD and public outrage over Beijing's poor reception of Moon in 2017.⁹⁸ Confrontations in 2019 over Hong Kong reinforced views of China and South Korea as not just big and small powers but also divergent political systems.

Hong Kong and China's Domestic Political Identity (2019)

Public animosities over internal affairs surfaced in November when mainland Chinese students were accused of tearing down "liberate Hong Kong" banners at Yonsei University. Although the foreign ministries stepped in to pacify the public, tensions escalated across multiple Korean campuses after the Chinese embassy called the incident an expression of "indignation and opposition to words and actions that harm Chinese sovereignty."⁹⁹ China's foreign ministry also called the incident "justifiable and understandable" against attempts to "split the nation and smear China's image," while urging overseas Chinese to "express their patriotism in a rational way."¹⁰⁰ Such official reactions solidified South Korean disappointment with Beijing's perceived backing of Chinese students who confronted protestors for interfering in China's internal affairs. The confrontation quickly spread on social media platforms like Weibo, where the *Global Times* reporting on "organized" Korean protests sparked angry reactions from the Chinese public.¹⁰¹ One fan club of Korean celebrity Choi Si-won threatened to close down after Choi "liked" a news report supporting Hong Kong protestors. According to *Global Times*, "many netizens applauded their patriotism." Chinese fans agreed that Choi "had to pay the price for his mistake" of judging "another country's internal affairs."¹⁰²

As tensions simmered among students, Moon's December 2019 visit to China ended with a skirmish after the PRC foreign ministry quoted his position to Xi that "Hong Kong affairs and issues concerning Xinjiang are China's internal affairs."¹⁰³ South Korea's Presidential Office did not include the statement in its briefing of the summit.¹⁰⁴ The discrepancy in reporting unleashed hostile exchanges between Chinese and Korean media. *Global Times* attacked conservative counterparts for naming China a "fake friend" and assuming a "nationalist orientation," while *People's Daily* praised Moon for "winning the 'likes' of many Chinese netizens."¹⁰⁵

Two dominant trends emerged from the clashes over China's internal affairs. First, power differences framed assessments of South Korea's position, especially from historical perspectives of tributary relations. Korean media outlets like *JoongAng Ilbo* questioned the "destined community" envisioned in China's official interpretations of Xi and Moon's exchanges.¹⁰⁶ *Global Times* translated denouncements of Korea's "sadaejuui" doctrine of "serving the great" into "arrogant" Korean claims of Beijing's "diplomatically unreasonable" behavior.¹⁰⁷ Second, frictions at state and societal levels revealed contemporary China and South Korea's divergent political identities. To make sense of their emotional outbursts, *Global Times* accused the Korean media of "aligning themselves with Western values" to "maintain pride in the face of an increasingly stronger China."¹⁰⁸ Korean campuses and social media displayed adjacent images of protests at Chinese University of Hong Kong and South Korea's own demonstrations in June 1987 at Yonsei University, where a student who died from tear gas injuries became a national symbol of democratization.

Conclusion: A Fragile Partnership

The struggle to restore the China-ROK partnership in the Xi era underscores the enduring impact of national identity, amplified by China's increased economic leverage compared to earlier instances of identity conflict. China's major power and domestic political identities clearly frame its domestic debates on South Korea. The interaction of elite and popular reactions to THAAD in 2016-2017 demonstrated Beijing's strategic combination of economic and discursive policy tools to manage diplomatic disputes, especially by targeting cultural sectors. Beijing's denial of direct economic retaliation under the cover of public hostility conveniently blurred the lines between state-led and voluntary actions.

Rather than affirming the renormalization of ties, Moon's December 2019 visit to China only reignited public animosities over internal affairs, hardening China and South Korea's perceived identities as big and small powers with divergent political systems. These strained exchanges again demonstrated not only the persistence of national identity conflict, but also the interplay of Chinese state and societal narratives. In the earliest manifestations of such conflict almost two decades ago, clashes over Korea's identity as a tributary state drew similar attention to China's state-led national discourse and Korean civil society's resistance. By sharpening Beijing's tools of influence, South Korea's increased economic dependence on China since the history war has only magnified the identity dimensions of conflict.

At the same time, Chinese state interventions in public protests point to the dangers of nationalism as a policy tool.¹⁰⁹ Recent disputes with South Korea over THAAD and Hong Kong created opportunities for Chinese society to voice hostility in ways that official narratives supported. These nationalist responses, however, focused more on downgrading foreign counterparts than on uplifting the CCP regime. While nationalist rhetoric may typically bolster popular support for the regime, it may also have long-term counterproductive effects on Beijing's influence both at home and abroad.

Endnotes

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