

South Korea–China Relations:
At 30, Is the Party Over?
A Korean Perspective

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Abstract

This article dwells on the uncertainty that lies in the future of South Korea–China relations. The deep economic complementarity that previously characterized the close South Korea–China relations is no longer there. Accusations of cultural and historical appropriation have significantly undermined confidence between civil societies. The anti-China sentiment among South Koreans has been unprecedentedly high since the THAAD dispute. Especially among young South Koreans, a sense of incompatibility with China’s political system is widening. In the security realm, South Korea’s high hopes for China to render a constructive role in containing North Korea’s nuclear and missile belligerence are becoming less tenable, as China regards the United States, not North Korea, as a bigger existential threat. The pull and push of the intensifying U.S.–China rivalry is set to severely constrain South Korea’s choices, including semiconductor supply chains, while posing fresh challenges such as the tension building in the Taiwan Strait. South Korea’s political leadership has been traditionally primed for domestic turf fights and is not well equipped to deal with the outside geopolitical shift, precipitated by the “rise of China.” The year 2022 marks the 30th diplomatic anniversary of Seoul–Beijing relations. At age 30, the Seoul and Beijing’s earlier infatuation is over. Their future is uncertain.

Keywords: South Korea–China relations, China–Korea relations, THAAD, anti-China sentiment, China and the Korean Peninsula, China–North Korea relations

“Distant Neighbors”

Upon the election victory of Yoon Suk-yeol as the new South Korean President in March 2022, his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping sent a congratulatory message. The first sentence reads, “China and South Korea are *banbuzou* neighbors and inseparable partners.”¹ The Chinese expression *banbuzou* 搬不走 literally means “cannot move away.” It is a common expression by the Chinese politicians to describe the two neighbors’ geographically fated relationship. Yet, quoting from the same expression, a South Korean scholar commented, “An alternative interpretation could be that if possible, we *actually* want to move away [from China].” It reveals complex and tangled sentiment underlying the Seoul–Beijing ties. The comment was made at a conference, held on August 31, at the Korea National Diplomatic Academy, as part of a series of events to celebrate the two nations’ 30th anniversary. A news report, occasioned for the same anniversary, carried a similarly disheartening title that illustrates how South Koreans feel their relationship with China: “Distant Neighbors” (Yonhap News Agency, August 24, 2022).

Three decades ago, when South Korea (Republic of Korea, ROK) decided to establish diplomatic relations with its Cold War adversary, the People’s Republic of China (PRC), it had two primary hopes. The first was North Korea (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, DPRK). In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Seoul believed that knotting formal ties with the PRC would inspire Beijing, which is a friend to the DPRK, to contain North Korea’s military adventurism. Seoul hoped that China would also play a constructive role in the eventual reunification of the Korean Peninsula, led by Seoul. In addition, China’s untapped market potential also drew attention. “If you just sell chopsticks in China, you can still become very rich because you have 1.4 billion customers,” so went a popular saying in South Korea at that time.

On China’s part, the attraction was mutual too. It also had both political and economic components. China thought establishing diplomatic ties with the ROK, a formal military pact ally of the United States, would mean weakening

¹ Original sentence in Chinese: “中韩是搬不走的永久近邻,也是分不开的合作伙伴。”

U.S. influence in the region. It would also mean China's expanding its footprints to both Koreas, not just North Korea. China also calculated that doing so would further isolate Taiwan diplomatically, as China demanded South Korea sever ties with Taiwan as a primary condition. China also correctly determined that South Korea, a geographical neighbor, would serve as an easily accessible model for China's economic transformation without the usual Western ideological strings attached. China is 95 times larger than South Korea and the latter is unlikely to pose an existential threat to China's security. In addition, as both being Asian nations, there was less cultural barrier between them. China and Korea have lived side by side and interacted with each other for thousands of years. The cultural similarity, South Korea thought, would serve as a "shock absorber" in their relationship. For instance, if a conflict would erupt, their cultural legacy would be able to cushion the shock and repair the dent in their relationship, the logic went. Over the years, they found out, that was not the case. To the contrary, their cultural similarity often became a liability, rather than an asset.

For the past 30 years, both China and South Korea have made tremendous progress respectively. China has become the world's second largest economy and now competes with the United States for global order. As Chinese leader Xi Jinping put it, China is entering a time of opportunity when "the East is rising and the West is declining"² (*New York Times*, September 9, 2021). In China's contemporary political discourse, "the East" refers to China, while "the West" is often a euphemism for the United States. During the same period, South Korea has also become the world's 10th largest economy and the sixth largest military power (Global Fire power 2022; World Bank 2022). But South Korean achievements look pale, next to China's more spectacular growth, resulting in an increased "asymmetry" in their relational dynamics. China no longer treats South Korea with the same kind of respect it attached to 30 years ago. This has been increasingly incurring frustrations on the part of South Korea in its dealings with a much larger, powerful, and often high-handed neighbor. It was conspicuously illuminated when Xi in 2017 arranged South

² In Chinese, "dongxing xijiang 东升西降."

³ For the background of this incident, refer to Yonhap News Agency 2017.

Korean President Moon Jae-in's special envoy, Lee Hae-chan, to sit at a lower-tier seating during their meeting in Beijing, going against international diplomatic decorum.³ For some, it was seen as a reminder of China's imperialistic nostalgia from the Qing dynasty. The seating arrangement "mishap" created quite a public clamor and media commentaries in South Korea, but the Moon government didn't lodge an official complaint with their Chinese counterpart. It, itself, also drew further criticism.

In fact, the issue of "respect" matters a lot in Asian cultural discourse. The matter became especially controversial in South Korea after China's retaliation against the latter over the THAAD dispute, and also amid the rising anti-China sentiment in South Korea. South Koreans have been increasingly disillusioned by its larger and powerful neighbor who have been displaying an increasingly overbearing attitude in its dealings with smaller neighbors. South Koreans' sense of "disrespect" by China became such a contested issue during the recent presidential campaign that a key pledge by candidate Yoon Suk-yeol (who won the election) was that he would establish a "relationship with China based on mutual respect."

⁴ The official title of the report is "Hanjung kwan'gye miraebaljŏn wiwŏnhoe kongdong pogosŏ" [Joint report of the Korea-China Relations Future Development Committee].

⁵ The full-day conference, held at the Korea National Diplomatic Academy, is available at the following video link: <https://www.ifans.go.kr/knda/ifans/kor/bbs/IfansNoticeView.do?csrfPreventionSalt=null&bbsSn=106&bbsMastrSn&koreanEngSe=KOR&searchCtgrYCode&searchKeyword&pageIndex=1>.

⁶ This author doesn't cite any government report this author previously prepared or co-authored. Nonetheless, the findings from the 30th anniversary committee largely resonate with the author's own findings and experience.

This article reviews the 30 years of Seoul–Beijing relations since they normalized diplomatic relations in 1992. It does so from the political, economic, and cultural aspects, not attempting to be comprehensive. Rather, it curates some of the major sources of tensions, with more focus on recent events, from South Korea's perspective. In doing so, it significantly utilizes the key points raised at the joint South Korea–China 30th anniversary committee report in August 2022.⁴ As of this writing, the report itself has not been made public. However, its major points were publicized in the media, and the contents of the relevant academic and policy discussions are publicly accessible.⁵ This article incorporates the author's own observations too.⁶ Regarding THAAD, the article also includes aspects in Seoul–Beijing ties during the dispute that are not widely known or not examined in detail in other publications. It concludes with some future implications.

Rising Anti-China Sentiment in South Korea

China and Japan are Korea's two geographical neighbors. Due to South Koreans' experience of the Japanese colonial rule, in South Korea Japan was the country with the greatest antipathy by the public. However, recent opinion polls show that "anti-Chinese sentiment" has surpassed "anti-Japanese sentiment." This new phenomenon warrants attention. It was such a significant change that New York Times even carried a prominent title on this matter: "South Koreans now dislike China more than they dislike Japan" (August 20, 2021). South Koreans' favorability toward China is at an all-time low. This is largely due to concerns about the assertive expansion of influence by China with an increasing authoritarian streak. According to a 2021 survey by the East Asian Institute (EAI) in Seoul and the Japanese non-profit think tank Genron NPO, Koreans' negative impressions of China were overwhelming at 73.8 percent. On the other hand, only 10.7 percent answered in positive. As the reason for dislike for China, "China's oppressive actions such as THAAD retaliation" ranked first (65.2 percent). Interestingly, 43.8 percent of respondents also cited "China doesn't respect South Korea" as the reason. The survey also shows that China's "wolf-warrior diplomacy" played a part in generating unfavorable sentiment on China.

In another survey conducted by Seoul National University's Asia Center in April 2022, China was selected as the "most unfavorable" among the 20 countries surveyed. This category also included North Korea and Japan. Yet, the survey added that the unfavorable sentiment toward China in Korean society has reached a "severe" level that could cause a "psychological crisis." In yet another survey, conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2022, 80 percent of the South Korean public have unfavorable views toward China, which was up 3 percent from a year earlier in 2021, which was again up 2 percent from 2020. In the 2021 survey, 83 percent of South Koreans also said they have no confidence that the Chinese Communist Party leader Xi Jinping will do the right thing regarding world affairs. The sentiment became worse especially in the aftermath of the outbreak of the Covid-19

pandemic that started in China. The Chinese government's attempt to silence early-warning whistleblowers and its draconian measures for quarantine, as well as media censorship were also cited as the causes for their unfavorable perception of China. Even though China's extreme measures were "successful" in containing the virus, there has been a growing cynicism about the Chinese political system among the Korean public, who felt disenchanted by China's rigid Leninist conformity and totalitarian information control during the Covid-19 crisis.

Beijing's increasingly assertive global behavior also left a negative impression in South Korea too. Beijing's crackdown on Hong Kong protesters came as a shock for many South Koreans who were reminded of South Korea's tumultuous 1980 democratic uprising in the city of Gwangju. News reports about the Chinese government's handling of issues such as the South China Sea, Taiwan, and the Xinjiang Uygur region didn't help much the image of China among the South Korean public. Some Koreans also believed that Beijing's retaliation against South Korea over THAAD would not have transpired if China's political system had been a democracy.

China is keeping a close eye on the unprecedented trend and direction of the anti-Chinese sentiment that is taking place in South Korea. Anti-China sentiment has further deteriorated to the extent that it affects economic relations between Korea and China. Previously, there was an atmosphere in South Korea to the effect that 'even though we don't like China, but we need to cooperate with China in the economic sector.' But now, the so-called the "MZ generation" (Millennials and Generation Z) has even formed a view of not wanting to have anything to do with China, an extreme preference for South Korea's dissociation from China.⁷ However, South Korea's business community still sees China as its most important market. Against the backdrop, the issue of "What China means for Korea?" and the question of "How should we deal with China?" have become a polarizing issue in South Korean society, while the overall public sentiment toward China have been dramatically turned negative.

Being geographical neighbors and sharing culture and history have been increasingly turning out to be a liability,

⁷ Author's interview with a South Korean scholar, who previously lived in China for nearly 20 years.

not an asset, when the two neighbors are in quarrel, accusing each other of cultural and historical appropriation. The latest incident happened during the summer of 2022. There was an uproar in South Korea when the National Museum of China wiped out the ancient history of Korea at an exhibition. Korea's two ancient kingdoms of Goguryeo and Balhae were missing in a chronological table of ancient Korean history on display at an exhibition at the National Museum of China in Beijing (*Korea Herald*, September 14, 2022). What was also unfortunate was that the exhibition was a part of a series of events to celebrate the 30th anniversary of diplomatic ties between South Korea and China. When South Korea protested, the Chinese government said that academic issues were to be solely dealt with by the academic community and should not undermine the bilateral ties. That, actually, enraged South Koreans further. It was like a thief playing the moral high ground game with the victim. China employed the same tactic before. The incident was the latest in China's attempts to distort history.

Similarly, back in 2002, China launched the so-called Northeast Project and has since sought to incorporate Korea's ancient kingdoms as part of China's regional history. The project caused rows between South Korea and China to the point of jeopardizing bilateral ties. Even 20 years after the incident, 72 percent of South Koreans said this matter remains important (KNDA 2022). Concerning this and other historical and cultural disputes, the Chinese side proposed not to politicize the cultural and historical issues, suggesting that the matter to be dealt with by academia. "What is worrisome is that this is the typical Chinese tactic," said Nari Pyo of the Korea National Diplomatic Academy. "The Chinese propose to 'put aside' an issue and buy time. The South Korean side agrees on it. Then China makes a new move from there again." Pyo said China is good at salami tactics, changing the status quo and making it "a new normal," and then starts from there again. "After achieving the new status quo, China erases previous historical records from the foreign ministry website, as well as from the Internet," adding, "Avoidance and omittance are the core of Chinese strategy." South Korean government is not well prepared to respond to such Chinese

tactics, despite the concerns raised by experts.

China maintains that all the history in its current territory belongs to the history of the Chinese nation. Historical distortions that were initially concentrated in Goguryeo and Balhae (the two ancient Korean kingdoms there are now partly in China's territory today) have been also widened to include much earlier history of Gojoseon, just like the salami tactics Pyo mentioned above. Beijing and Seoul came to an agreement in 2006 that stated that friendship and cooperation between Korea and China should not be damaged by historical issues. Reviewing this series of incidents, an editorial of South Korean newspaper *Hankook Ilbo* concluded: "The spirit of the agreement was already tarnished by Chinese own acts" (September 15, 2022).

South Koreans, the biggest victim of the Korean War, also felt gravely hurt by Chinese leader Xi Jinping's remarks on the Korean War that disregarded history of North Korean invasion to the South. In 2020, Xi gave a 38-minute speech in a one-hour ceremony at the Great Hall of the People, in Tiananmen Square, claiming that China "won" the war (Xinhua News Agency, October 13, 2020). Xi also called Americans as *qinluezhe* 侵入者 (invader). In a bold summary of the war, Xi concluded, "The great war against the U.S. deterred the imperialist aggression, defended the security of New China, safeguarded the peaceful life of the Chinese people and stabilized the Korean Peninsula, and protected peace in Asia and the world." Xi's historical revisionism clearly goes against the pronouncement by the international historical scholarship that concluded, long time ago, that it was North Korea that invaded South Korea and that's how the war started.

The Day after THAAD

During the 30-year diplomatic relations between Seoul and Beijing, no issue has derailed the bilateral ties in such a profound and unexpected way than the issue of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD). The THAAD has been

haunting three presidencies of Park Geun-hye, Moon Jae-in, and now Yoon Suk-yeol. Therefore, it warrants a closer look. There were many moments when South Korea mistakenly thought it was over. But China's tenaciousness with THAAD has been demonstrated even during the latest visit by China's top legislator, Li Zhanshu, to Seoul. During his meetings with President Yoon and other top officials, Li emphasized "the need for improvement in communication" to address the THAAD issue (*Korea Herald*, September 19, 2022), confirming that THAAD remains source of conflict with Beijing.

THAAD is an American missile-defense system, deployed in South Korea to counter North Korea's missile threats. It has angered China and become a contentious issue. China objects it, saying the deployment undermined its own missile defense abilities. In its 2019 Defense White Paper,⁸ Beijing stated that the U.S. has "severely destroyed the strategic balance of the region by deploying the THAAD system in South Korea." THAAD was officially announced in July 2016, under President Park Geun-hye (term: February 2013–March 2017) and was deployed in April 2017, just one month before President Moon Jae-in took oath of office (term: May 2017–May 2022). As we will examine, the manner President Moon handled the THAAD issue became a big controversy on its own, apart from China's heavy-handed retaliations. Together, they formed an integral part of the larger THAAD story that wrecked the Seoul–Beijing relations in a fundamental way. Some scholars go so far as to say that the THAAD issue became a "demarcation line" in South Korea–China relations, namely there are only two periods in South Korea–China ties: "Before THAAD" and "After THAAD."

Moon Jae-in: The "Pro-China" South Korean Leader

A common description of former President Moon's foreign policy goes that he tried to seek "balance" between the U.S. and China. The former is South Korea's most important military ally. The latter is South Korea's largest trade partner. In South Korea's vernacular media reports, Moon's such stance is also often referred to as standing "neutral"

⁸ In Chinese: "美国在韩国部署“萨德”反导系统, 严重破坏地区战略平衡, 严重损害地区国家战略安全利益" (Refer to Chinese Ministry of Defense 2019).

between Washington and Beijing, or as a policy of “strategic ambiguity.” But that was not the view from the Chinese side, and even less so from the American side. When South Korea, an ally of the United States, chose to be “neutral” between the United States and China, both the U.S. and China regarded it as being “pro-China.”

China early on determined the Moon Jae-in administration’s diplomatic character as “pro-China,” in contrast to South Korea’s conservative governments (they are “pro-American”). So, China held high, if not unrealistic, expectations for Moon to inch closer to the Chinese side. In doing so, Beijing also attempted to discipline Seoul when Seoul behaved in a way that deviated from China’s expectations. THAAD became the prime example. After the Chinese economic retaliations, South Korean media condemned China for not acting in a way to benefit Beijing’s self-styled “responsible great nation” (*fuzeren daguo* 負責任大國). However, other details that indicate the poor handling of the matter by the pro-China Moon government that sowed distrust are not well known.

Even after the THAAD conflict, distrust continued to stagnate South Korea-China relations throughout the Moon Jae-in administration’s tenure. The reason why South Korea-China relations nose-dived to the lowest period during the Moon Jae-in administration, which was said to be the “most pro-China-leaning government” in recent South Korean history, lies in as much as the political “structure” created by the THAAD discord as the matter of the “agent.” In other words, there were human mishaps in the way South Korea conducted diplomacy with China in handling the THAAD issue. China launched a spate of retaliations. They included withdrawing Chinese group tours to South Korea and obliterating the China business of South Korean supermarket giant Lotte, which had provided land for the THAAD missile system. Furthermore, China also stepped on the brake on popular Korean cultural products of the “K-wave,” which included K-drama, K-pop, K-movies and Korean online games. The irony was that the Chinese government never acknowledged it launched the retaliations.

In the end, the THAAD crisis was vaguely sealed without a clear resolution. The Chinese government all along denied

any involvement in slapping economic retaliations against South Korea, attributing the retaliation to the Chinese people's "voluntary" act of patriotism. Since the Chinese government denied carrying out retaliation, there was "technically" no retaliation, and since there was no retaliation, therefore there was no assignment of responsibility on the part of the Chinese government. In the end, no one was responsible in China. It was akin to dealing with a crime scene without a perpetrator.

Since then, South Korea–China relations became listless. The relationship was like lukewarm water, neither hot nor cold. This led to the loss of momentum for much expected Xi Jinping's visit to South Korea. Moon had been seen very eager to host Xi Jinping in Seoul. There was also quip that Moon was prone to Chinese manipulation as he believed China's role was essential to resolving the North Korean issue and eventual unification of the two Koreas. Moon had invited Xi several times. It was never fulfilled. The Covid-19 global pandemic set in and international travels stopped, including diplomatic visits. The pandemic served as a convenient excuse to justify "social distancing" between the two nations. Even today, China continues to deny the presence of retaliation over THAAD. Since the THAAD dispute and resulting Chinese retaliations were a major event in the history of Seoul–Beijing relations, Seoul wanted to include the matter in the joint 30th diplomatic anniversary report. Facing the Chinese reluctance in acknowledging the retaliation, the South Korean side instead reportedly proposed to use a lesser incriminating wording, to express it as "de facto retaliation," in the joint report (KNDA 2022). However, in the final report, the wording was omitted.

Looking back, in South Korean government's dealing with the THAAD dispute with China, there was a lack of preparations, including the fact that each Korean visiting team to China spoke differently and the resulting inconsistency in South Korea's positions on THAAD. In one instance, a South Korean interlocutor told the Chinese to the effect that 'South Korea does not want THAAD. But the U.S. insists it.' Such remarks were unhelpful, undermining the ROK-U.S. alliance. Worse, it strengthened China's logic that, 'since South Korea itself does not want THAAD, then South Korea as

a sovereign state could withdraw it.’ A Chinese interlocutor who attended many of these closed-door meetings got very frustrated with the lack of preparations by the Korean side and told this author: “Please come prepared better next time.” The situation protracted for nearly one and a half years, testing China’s patience. China’s initial frustration gradually turned into its distrust of the Moon government. There was even a saying within the Chinese government that went: “It is impossible to do business with Moon.”

Washington’s Uneasiness with Moon Jae-in’s China Tilting

Meanwhile, the United States became increasingly uneasy as South Korea’s Moon Jae-in was tilting towards China (*Financial Times*, June 9, 2017). Washington-based Korea expert Gordon Chang (2021) even called Moon as “the most anti-American president in South Korea’s history.” Moon, a son of a North Korean refugee family from the Korean War, was also well known for his zeal for engagement with North Korea. During his summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, for instance, Moon was seen very keen to form a personal bonding with Kim. When South Korea held local elections in April, 2021, a conservative American journal, *The American Conservative*, commented: “The citizens of one of the United States’ closest allies went to the polls for an election with profound implications for the region and the world.” It then counseled South Korean citizens not “to follow the lead of current president Moon Jae-in into the arms of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea and, worse, the People’s Republic of China.” On the popular online Q&A platform Quora, it’s easy to find questions regarding Moon’s ideological orientations. One question went: “It seems like South Korea’s president Moon Jae-in has strong, communist tendencies. Why isn’t there a public outrage?” Another asked: “Why does Moon Jae-in of South Korea act closer to China and North Korea (enemies) than to the U.S. (ally)?” Moon has never overcome suspicions of being “pro-China” and “pro-North Korea.”

Moon’s presidency was also a period when South Korea, as a middle power, was exploring ways for more autonomy

in its foreign policy. China tapped into Moon's aspiration and sensed that it was a good opportunity to pull Seoul away from the ROK-U.S. alliance and induce Seoul to inch closer to the Beijing's side. America was concerned that South Korea's pro-China tendency would lead to a corresponding downward trend of the ROK-U.S. alliance, as well as the estrangement of South Korea-Japan relations. Seoul and Tokyo are the two pillars of Washington's alliance network in East Asia. At that time in Washington's diplomatic chatter, Moon was expectedly described as a "pro-China" (*ch'injung* 친중) politician in South Korea⁹ Although the Moon Jae-in administration's pro-China leaning was unusual in that it never became an official agenda in the South Korea-U.S. policy consultations, but it was none the less an unofficial agenda that Washington pundits were eager to question in private. Unfortunately, while South Korea under Moon was being distrusted by Washington as "not acting as an ally" (*Nikkei Asia*, April 30, 2021), the Chinese side also didn't give a red-carpet treatment to Moon either; to the contrary, Beijing continued to maintain economic sanctions against South Korea over the THAAD dispute.

⁹ In Washington's policy community, President Moon was also characterized as being "pro-North Korea" (*chongbuk* 종북).

Moon's "Three No" Concessions to China over THAAD

Although China knew that South Korea's deployment of THAAD, a defensive not offensive asset, did not pose a military threat to China, it noted that the THAAD issue could be a useful means of putting pressure on South Korea, especially after watching the South Korean government's lack of negotiating finesse. This was a candid assessment of a Chinese security expert in China who was well versed in military technology.¹⁰ Security issues become an "issue" when a powerful nation *decides* to take an issue with it.

¹⁰ Author's interview, Beijing, 2017.

Even though THAAD, in the end, still continued to remain in South Korea under the Moon Jae-in administration, but China's own assessment went that the THAAD pressure tactic achieved its intended success. According to this view, first, South Korea made the so-called "three no's" concessions.

The “three no’s” refers to no additional THAAD deployments, no joining of a broader U.S. missile defense system and no South Korea–U.S.–Japan trilateral military alliance. Second, by imposing economic and diplomatic stress on South Korea, it imprinted diplomatic trauma on Seoul. In case Korea has similar frictions with China in the future, this will make Seoul think twice and try its best to be nice to China. Third, China was able to warn other countries in Asia that may also seek “balance” between the U.S. and China, and take advantage of the rivalry by posing as “neutral.” China interprets it as an “opportunistic” behavior that should not be tolerated. South Korea served as a “case example” of Chinese wrath and also as a public warning to other nations in the region. It is akin to a Chinese tactic to “kill the chicken to frighten the monkey” (*shaji jinghou* 殺雞儆猴).

Interestingly, just as China used the THAAD crisis as a means of pressure on South Korea, the Moon Jae-in administration of South Korea also seemed to have had the intention of using THAAD as a strategic card, in its own way, at the beginning of his tenure. It was first to “buy time” by delaying the deployment of THAAD under the rationale of conducting an “environmental impact assessment,” a required procedure, Moon’s plan then was to improve inter-Korean relations in a dramatic level and then use the inter-Korean unity as a “leverage” to broaden Seoul’s strategic position in the U.S.–China rivalry chess game. Moon being a novice to international politics, this idea was reportedly from his advisors. Moon took it.

However, international politics, especially the power politics of big powers, did not proceed according to the manual of a weaker and smaller nation. When South Korea tried to use the THAAD deployment as a “card,” China took a much more adamant and firmer posture against South Korea. Meanwhile, the U.S. on its own also pressured South Korea. Pentagon spokesman Gary Ross at that time said, “The U.S. trusts the [South Korean] official stance that the THAAD deployment was an alliance decision and it will not be reversed” (*Washington Post*, June 7, 2017). In the end, South Korea’s “going alone” and taking strategic ambiguity between Washington and Beijing did not give South Korea a strategic

leverage. Rather, it made Korea's strategic position further squeezed between the U.S. and China.

China Launches Public Opinion Warfare against South Korea

During the THAAD standoff, China mobilized government scholars to spread the so-called “President Xi Jinping lost face” narrative. South Korea gave China the plausible rationale. On June 29, 2016, South Korean Prime Minister Hwang Kyo-ahn visited Beijing and met with President Xi Jinping in Beijing. Regarding THAAD, Hwang reportedly said, “There is no request [from the United States], discussion, or decision on the deployment of THAAD” (*Hankook Ilbo*, September 11, 2022). But merely ten days afterwards on July 8, 2017, Seoul made the THAAD deployment official, making Xi lose face, the rumor mill claimed. Later when this became a controversy, Hwang denied saying so, “It is not true at all.”

China never said this was the official reason for retaliations or its hardened attitude, but it was conceivable that some in China saw a value in using the popular speculation against South Korea to add pressure. What was worse, some Korean scholars also carried the “Xi loses face” chatter, helping strengthening China's position. China also marketed a narrative that Xi Jinping could not pedal back from his stated stance because he had already clearly and publicly expressed his opposition to THAAD at his summit meeting with President Park Geun-hye during a G-20 summit in Hangzhou in 2016.

In addition, China put pressure on South Korea by launching an unprecedented public opinion warfare and psychological warfare, including printing an opinion column in Chinese state media, penned by a former South Korean Blue House official, who advocated the withdrawal of THAAD. China also published a photo of South Korean protesters who opposed THAAD and who were in a standoff with the police near the U.S. military base where THAAD was scheduled to be installed. The protesters were holding each other's hands, while chaining their bodies to truck vehicles, in display of visible determination not to budge. China used these as “evidence” that the Korean public themselves didn't want

THAAD. Concurrently, back in Beijing, Chinese media outlets were gagged and all news reports on THAAD were only gatewayed by the officially sanctioned Xinhua News Agency that solely ran articles in support of the Chinese government's positions. It demonstrated the meticulousness of ensuring consistency in the Chinese government's narrative war to spin the THAAD narrative. In a way, China was at an advantage reaping from its state-controlled media because such kind of media control is inconceivable in a democratic country.

The THAAD tension between South Korea and China entered a somewhat eased stage after the Moon Jae-in government expressed the “three no’s” position, mentioned above. Communications between South Korea and China then resumed and speculations regarding President Xi Jinping's possible visit to South Korea surfaced. A clear sign for a diplomatic thaw, if materialized. Incidentally, the Chinese side put the THAAD issue under the rug for a while. South Korean officials took China's “silence” as the “closure” of the THAAD dispute, and there was an atmosphere within the South Korean government that ‘we would be better off by not bringing up the matter either,’ hoping that the Chinese would forget about THAAD. This passive “keeping quiet” attitude gave China a convenient leverage to summon back the THAAD issue whenever and wherever it wanted to—even to the present day. It revealed South Korean Moon administration's lack of understanding of the Chinese strategic culture.

Moon's Appeasement Policy for China

Already battling China's unexpectedly harsh stance, while dealing with simmering anti-China sentiment at home, President Moon Jae-in landed in trouble again after his “pro-China” remarks during his visit to China. During his speech at Peking University, Moon said, “China is a high mountain and South Korea is a small nation.” The words greatly shocked many South Koreans back home, as it reminded them of the past Sino-centric hierarchical order. Moon's speech went against the spirit of the UN Charter that codifies the major principles of international relations, including sovereign “equality” of states, no matter how large or small they are.

Some regarded Moon's words as amounting to South Korea's affirmation of China's binary "big country vs. small country" (*daguo* 大國 vs. *xiaoguo* 小國) worldview.

Similarly, Moon's words in the speech that "I applaud President Xi for his statement of "building a community with a shared future for mankind" and "I hope that the Chinese dream becomes a dream shared by all mankind" resulted in huge repercussions in South Korea for Moon's naïveté parroting the Chinese state propaganda line. "Chinese Dream" is the slogan of China's national rejuvenation project that aims to reclaim the socialist China in the 21st century. Moon was seen sympathetic to China's pursuit of rebuilding the China-centric world order. It was not an appropriate statement for a state leader of a democratic nation to make. Moon was also seen as wide-eyed for praising Xi's concept of "building a community with a shared future for mankind," without understanding its true connotations. China uses the term in its competition with the United States for global public goods, such as how much one could provide more Covid-19 vaccines to developing nations. As the official Xinhua News Agency confessionally put it, China's growing ambition for global governance was "in response to a global deficit of governance," a thinly veiled criticism to U.S.-led global order (*Xinhua*, September 22, 2020). When Moon returned home, his critics accused him of "submitting to China." Despite Moon's unusual appeasement policy with China, South Korea-China relations remained stagnant during the remainder of Moon's term.

Looking back, in the process of stalemated negotiations over THAAD, the South Korean Moon Jae-in government acted in a way that could be characterized as passive and increasingly diffident. Moon did not withdraw the THAAD system, nor did he take any steps to make counteroffers to gauge Beijing's intentions and explore room for diplomatic settlement. "It was like a timid attitude that was merely studying China's face to see if China was still angry. There was a lack of strategic thinking about what could be done," a government official with the knowledge of the matter told this author. "Other than that, the Moon government was solely interested in the North Korean issue. Such a mindset, in the

end, amounted to doing nothing, actually, about the THAAD issue. It was a wasted time,” he added. Due to the lack of consistency in communication and progress in negotiations, the Chinese side also lost enthusiasm for communicating with the Moon administration, resulting in a very peculiar doldrums period in Seoul–Beijing ties.

Economy: From Mutual “Win-Win” to Increasing Dependence on China

After clinching diplomatic ties in 1992, South Korea and China immediately jumped into a maddening infatuation in trade. China has been South Korea’s largest trading partner since 2003. For China, South Korea is its third largest trading partner (4.5 percent of China’s total imports)—after the United States (17.2 percent), and Japan (5.0 percent). When it comes to China’s imports, South Korea has been its number one source from 2013 to 2019, and has been number two from 2020.¹¹ Likewise, China has been South Korea’s number one import-source country; imports from China accounted for 22.5 percent of its total imports in 2021 (KITA 2022). The same year of 2021, their bilateral trade for the first time surpassed 300 billion U.S. dollars. Due to the tremendous bilateral trade volume, economy has been most frequently cited as the growth engine of their relationship. Some scholars even went so far as to say that economy served as “the stabilizer” that prevented the relationship from drifting apart (KNDA 2022).

Those who look at the economic ties between South Korea and China tend to highlight the large volume of trade, and how both sides are closely connected. For them, therefore, the kind of “decoupling” in U.S.–China relations is something unrealistic in South Korea–China relations, given the deep mutual interdependence in trade and in global supply chains. Amid the deepening U.S.–China rivalry, this feature ironically has gotten only more pronounced. For instance, in 2019, Chinese IT company Huawei alone took 7 percent of South Korea’s entire exports to China (KITA 2022). Soon South Korea, however, has since been banned from its exports to

¹¹ In 2021, Taiwan replaced South Korea.

Huawei due to the U.S. sanctions. Huawei was placed on the U.S. government trade blacklist (called “entity list”) in May 2019 under the Trump administration, citing national security threats. But the very fact that Seoul–Beijing bilateral trade still reached such a high level, despite the U.S. sanctions, suggests that if there was no U.S.–China trade war, the South Korea–China trade could have been even larger.

Those who view South Korea–China ties affirmatively also conjure up the memory of the 2008 global financial crisis when South Korea and China worked closely to jointly cope with the fallout from the “quantitative easing” monetary policy taken by the United States. South Korea and China, at that time, were more in common position in responding to the financial moves, led by the U.S. and Europe. Given the close interlocking nature of Seoul–Beijing economic ties that also include semiconductor supply chains, some observers anticipate tension in Seoul–Washington alliance in terms of coordinating industry initiatives such as “Chip 4.” The “Chip 4” initiative is part of a U.S. strategy to strengthen its access to vital chips and weaken Chinese involvement. But, as mentioned, it’s difficult for South Korea to decouple China any time soon. Ahn Duk-geun, South Korea’s trade minister candidly admitted that there were disagreements between Seoul and Washington over the latter’s continued export restrictions on semiconductor tools to China. “Our semiconductor industry has a lot of concerns about what the U.S. government is doing these days,” he said (*Financial Times*, September 18, 2022). China is the largest market (41 percent) of South Korean semiconductor chips, and if Hong Kong (21 percent) is also included, then the “Greater China” region takes 62 percent of South Korean chips (Yonhap News Agency, September 15, 2020). For South Korea, China remains as the unparalleled single most important market.

The landscape is shifting though, due to China’s meteoric economic rise and resulting in “asymmetry” in the bilateral economic relationship. At the time of establishment of diplomatic ties, China’s GDP was 1.3 times that of South Korea. But it has grown rapidly since the mid-1990s, widening the gap with South Korea to 6.5 times in 2011. In 1992, China’s per capita GDP was 363 U.S. dollars, which was only 4.8

percent of South Korea's (7,555 dollars), but it soared to 5,432 dollars in 2011, trailing 24.2 percent of South Korea's (22,422 dollars) (*Korea Economic Daily*, August 23, 2011). Today, South Korea is still ahead in terms of the per capita GDP due to China's population of 1.4 billion, but the gap is narrowing. Globally speaking, according to data from the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), in 2021, China's foreign exports amounted to 191.5 trillion dollars, ranking first in the world. China accounted for 15.1% of global goods exports in 2021, higher than in 2019 (13.2%) before the pandemic.

Today, China's economic growth is also facing headwinds. Its first quarter economy in 2022 recorded 4.8 percent, but then its second quarter recorded a dismal 0.4 percent, largely attributable to the Chinese government's draconian adherence to the "Zero-Covid" policy. Nonetheless, Chinese trade surplus in July 2022 alone reached a record \$101 billion dollars. This was the first time that China's monthly trade surplus has exceeded 100 billion dollars (CNN, August 8, 2022). Contrary to all the talk of the Western countries about "reducing dependence on China," the *Wall Street Journal* said, "China has solidified its position as the world's largest industrial supply base over the past two years" (*Wall Street Journal*, August 21, 2022).

Given the resilience of the Chinese economy and South Korea's close economic ties with China, there are two very conflicting views about China in South Korea today. One is very negative, seeing China as a primary challenge for global universal values. People who are supportive of this view feel moral obligation to safeguard the universal values against the Chinese attempt to undermine them. The other side is to look at China as the prime market for South Korea's economic survival. With China's increasing economic share in the world, they see South Korea should "live with China" into the future, despite the THAAD dispute and other skirmishes.

But betting on China's market works until it doesn't, especially when South Korea loses its market competitiveness. China's increasing export competitiveness now poses a significant challenge to South Korea's economy, as they both increasingly compete for the same industrial and market

sectors. In the display market, for instance, South Korea overtook Japan in 2004 to occupy the No. 1 market share in the world, but it handed over the throne to China in 2021. According to the Korea Display Industry Association, the share of Chinese products in the global display market was 41.5 percent, surpassing that of South Korea (33.2%). The same goes for the electric vehicle market. According to the Federation of Korean Industries, China has overtaken South Korea by raising its export market share of Battery Electric Vehicles (BEVs) from 4.2 percent in 2020 to 13.7 percent in 2021. On the contrary, South Korea's market share fell 0.8 percentage points to 9.5 percent during the same period. When it comes to the mobile phones, China's home-grown companies are rapidly upgrading its technological prowess and has now nearly elbowed out South Korean tech giants. For instance, Samsung's market share in China accounted for only 0.6 percent in the first quarter of 2021, while the figure in 2013 was some 20 percent (*China Daily*, March 2, 2022). The situation with Korea's auto giant Hyundai is similar. In 2021, it sold 477,282 units in China, 28 percent fewer than in 2020, with its market share at 2.7 percent, or 12th among carmakers. Back in 2011, Hyundai had 6 percent of the market and was No. 3 (*Korea JoongAng Daily*, January 20, 2022). Taken together, due to the sheer size of Chinese market capacity as well as China's leapfrogging advancement in its home-grown technology, there has been an increasing asymmetry in South Korea–China trade and economic relations. The kind of deep mutual interdependence is a thing of the past.

Reimagining South Korea–China Relations

On August 9, 2022, in the Chinese coastal city of Qingdao 青島 that faces its Korean sister city of Incheon, South Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi 王毅, sat down. Although the two met each other a few times before at other international settings, it was their first meeting wholly dedicated to discussing bilateral issues since the inauguration of President Yoon Suk-yeol three months before.

Park proposed three overarching principles for developing ROK–PRC relations. They deserve attention because they reveal the strategic thinking by the Yoon administration in their diplomatic approach to China, which can be defined as follows.

First, South Korea will promote common interests with China based on mutual respect. Second, South Korea will not make compromise when it comes to matters related to the national security and sovereignty. Third, South Korea and China shall seek *hwaibudong* 화이부동¹² in their relationship.

¹² The expression by Park was aired and available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AcbliZoVdc>. However, the expression is not included in the official foreign ministry document that explains the meeting (see Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “South Korea-China Foreign Ministers’ Meeting” August 9, 2022.”

The expression *hwaibudong* is from the *Analects of Confucius*. The original Chinese “*heerbutong* 和而不同” means “be friendly and cooperative but not at the expense of one’s principles.” Although ideology, society, goals are different between different human communities, it is the duty of *junzi* 君子 or gentleman to think about how to embrace them and minimize confrontation each other. By quoting from the Chinese sage, Park hit the bull’s eye regarding the key message South Korea wanted to convey to the Chinese: South Korea and China have our differences, but let us strive to have an amicable relationship based on mutual respect. The Confucius teaching counsels that reconciliation in relationship requires acknowledgement of “the other,” whose position is uniquely different from that of “I.” It is similar to Martin Buber’s “I–Thou relationship” of having a genuine relationship based on mutual respect. Alas, if South Korea and China could have a *junzi*’s relationship, then there’s nothing more to be desired. But, the reality of international relations does not necessarily follow the way of a *junzi*.

This study adopted a critical review approach to the South Korea–China relations as the two nations celebrated the 30th diplomatic anniversary in 2022. In doing so, it curated some of the major sources of tensions, with more focus on recent events, such as THAAD, representing the South Korean perspective. Future research should include the story from the Chinese side, so as to connect the missing dots. It is unfortunate that this study confirmed the profound

uncertainty that lies ahead in Seoul–Beijing relationship yet did not offer concrete operational solutions. That is also the limitation of this study. The reason for caution, partly, comes from the uncertain trajectory of U.S.–China relations and how they will unfold in the future. What is certain is that they will have a tortuous effect on Korea–China relations.

Seoul–Beijing Ties in the Era of U.S.–China Rivalry

In 2013, Xi Jinping told Barack Obama that the Pacific Ocean is big enough to hold both the United States and China, and therefore the two superpowers could coexist peacefully. It took a while for U.S. to realize that what Xi actually meant was that the U.S. should give up the half of the Pacific Ocean and concede it to China. Had the United States followed Xi's proposal and renounced the Western Pacific where Asia is located, then Taiwan and even South Korea today would have been well within the Chinese sphere of influence, because China's First Island Chain, which is China's de facto territorial defense line (vis-à-vis the United States), includes them.

Xi has been showing that he is a different leader than his immediate two predecessors, Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin. Both of them tried to work with the United States. Xi does not hesitate to enter into conflict with the U.S. In a September 2021 speech at the Central Party School, Xi diagnosed that the great revival of the Chinese nation had entered a “critical period” and said, “Not wanting to fight is unrealistic. You must abandon the illusion and fight bravely” (*People's Daily*, September 9, 2021). It's still debatable whether the age of U.S.–China cooperation is over. However, there is no reason to discount Xi's ambition. In 2021, Xi told the Communist Party cadre: “The world is undergoing rapid changes unseen in a century and the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation has entered a critical period.”¹³ It reflects Xi's worldview that China must reclaim its rightful place as a global power. Xi's sense of historic opportunity for China's rise is likely to continue and it could put China at odds with the United States for the foreseeable future.

For South Korea, the main foreign policy challenge for its

¹³ “世界百年未有之大變局加速演進，中華民族偉大復興進入關鍵時” in Chinese.

newly minted President Yoon Suk-yeol will still come from China. If he could talk to China so that China would follow the way of a *junzi* and treat South Korea, based on “mutual relationship” (which he pledged), there would not be a problem. Yet, it’s easier said than done. Unlike his predecessor Moon Jae-in, Yoon has been swiftly aligning his country more closely with the United States, upon his election. Throughout his term, Moon was embroiled in a “pro-China” controversy. Moon ended up appearing that South Korea was sympathetic to China’s bid to carve out a “Sino-centric Asia.” Moon’s pro-China leaning turned out unfruitful and didn’t reward South Korea with real economic or political gains. On the contrary, China launched political and economic punishments on South Korea when the THAAD dispute erupted. The “strategic ambiguity” of the Moon Jae-in government, which distanced itself from the U.S., its primary ally, damaged the credibility of the South Korea–U.S. alliance rather than broadening the scope of Korean diplomatic horizon. As a result, both South Korea–China relations and South Korea–U.S. relations regressed under Moon. Perhaps, that’s why Yoon wants to be different.

Upon election, Yoon has been making pains to articulate that he is not Moon. “I will pursue predictability, and South Korea will take a more clear position with respect to U.S.–China relations,” he said in an interview with *The New York Times* (September 18, 2022). When he was a presidential candidate, he was less circumspect. “Most South Koreans, especially younger people, don’t like China even though the administration of President Moon Jae-in has pursued pro-China policies,” Yoon said (*Korea Herald*, December 28, 2021). Yet displaying a tough posture toward China itself is not a strategy. And there may be also limits to how far he can go without angering China. For instance, amid increasing tensions in the Taiwan Strait, there are questions about the role of South Korea, as an ally of the United States: If China were to attack Taiwan and whether South Korea will support the United States coming to Taiwan’s military defense? There will be increasing number of hypothetical questions South Korea needs to practice how to answer, as the U.S.–China rivalry is expected to deepen and those smaller countries

“stuck in the middle,” like South Korea, will be inevitably pressured to choose sides.

Xi Jinping said China and South Korea are “inseparable partners” (*fēn bù kāi de hézuò huǒbàn* 分不開的合作伙伴) (Chinese Foreign Ministry, August 24, 2022). If that is the case, then Seoul and Beijing must learn how to manage their differences. The first order of business is to strengthen crisis management communication. There are predictable flash points. They include Ieodo, which China calls Suyanjiao 苏岩礁, is a maritime science base built and operated by South Korea, and there is always potential for conflict. Until a maritime demarcation between Korea and China is finalized, the possibility of a territorial dispute could persist. In addition, Chinese aircraft have been more frequently entering the Korea Air Defense Identification Zone and is accruing security concerns from the Korean side. This needs to be communicated. Globally, the debate of “choosing sides” between the United States and China is likely to intensify in the future. South Korea’s political leadership has been traditionally primed for domestic turf fights and is not well equipped to deal with the outside geopolitical shift. Moon’s diplomatic downfall was also partly attributable to the same reason. Moon tried to understand international relations through the prism of the North Korean nuclear issue. It should have been the other way around.

As examined, many of the Seoul–Beijing bilateral issues are cultural in nature (kimchi, hanbok, etc.) or territorial (illegal fishing, maritime border dispute, and China entry to KADIZ). These issues are inherently difficult to solve because it has to do with their national identity and sovereignty. So, the efforts should be made to mitigate, not eliminate, their differences. In doing so, the premise that communication is better than isolation, has an enduring appeal in international relations, especially between two neighbors, such as South Korea and China.

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