

The Impact of Chinese National Identity on Sino-South Korean Relations

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How do Chinese national identity narratives affect Sino-South Korean relations? The Koguryo history war more than a decade ago was a turning point in bilateral relations since diplomatic normalization in 1992, generating enduring competition over representations of history.¹ In 2010, China's commemoration of its entry into the Korean War raised early warnings in South Korea over Beijing's hostile foreign policy orientation under Xi Jinping. Contrary to such expectations, however, the earliest summit agreements between presidents Xi Jinping and Park Geun-hye after both took office in 2013 were on history cooperation as common victims of Japanese colonialism. Most notably in 2015, Park's participation in Beijing's 70th anniversary celebrations of the end of World War II consolidated joint claims of what was called the best period in bilateral relations.² This chapter assesses the impact of Chinese national identity on China-Republic of Korea (ROK) relations under the Xi and Park administrations since 2013. It examines Chinese constructions of national identity and their implications for the security, economic, and cultural dimensions of the Sino-South Korean relationship. Rather than promoting partnership, competing identities across these dimensions reinforce enduring differences over the region's political, economic, and cultural order. These differences surfaced most saliently in 2016, following an initial period of engagement that corresponds with the downward trend in China-Japan relations since 2012. Managing them requires the very trust-building that both Beijing and Seoul have prioritized since 2013.

Accounts of international relations (IR) based on rational, unitary-state assumptions have a hard time explaining why identity factors drive states toward costly confrontation.³ The external impact of national identity is clearly evident in the IR of East Asia, but remains obscured by theoretical traditions that overstate the international structural forces of state behavior understood primarily in material terms.⁴ Viewed through the lens of great-power politics, China's current engagement of neighbors is a response to U.S. "rebalancing" in the region. From a liberal perspective, the advancement of China's "partnership" relationships demonstrates the pacifying effects of trade. Both perspectives, however, do not fully explain what Park Geun-hye in 2012 called the "paradox" of a "rising but clashing Asia" constrained by enduring bilateral mistrust rooted in identity conflict.⁵ A fuller understanding of China-ROK relations in such an environment requires tracing their interactions to normative incentives and domestic politics rather than just external power dynamics or economic interdependence. It also requires reassessing the strategic implications of China-centered asymmetric interdependence as a source of leverage in political disputes.

This chapter begins with the assumption that, like national power, identity is a relational concept that distinguishes the "self" and "other," whose construction is shaped by the state's horizontal interactions with other states to identify friends and enemies, and vertical interactions with society to promote national unity at home.⁶ It relies primarily on Chinese official, scholarly, and popular narratives to analyze China's interpretations of national identity and implications for relations with South Korea. The China-ROK case underscores three main points on the politics of national identity. First, as a projection of ideas, identity can vary by functional area of interaction. Second, the impact on bilateral relations depends on how state and other actors claim such identities through discourse and actual actions.⁷ Third, these multiple identities can generate inconsistent images that intensify the external misperceptions that state leaders initially sought to dispel in the first place.

The cultural sources of China's strategic behavior are evident throughout its history, from the dynastic period to the Maoist era.⁸ In the Xi Jinping period, Chinese national identity is manifested in three lines of discourse. On the political and security dimension, China as a "new-type of big power" rejects assumptions of inevitable conflict in favor of cooperation based on mutual benefits and respect for vital interests, including "choice of social system and development path."⁹ Raised during Xi's visit to Washington in 2012 as vice president, the concept was initially applied to the U.S.-China relationship and later extended to the international level. This portrayal of China as an emerging power emerged alongside Xi's policy discourse on regional relations, introduced at the Communist Party of China (CPC) meeting on "periphery diplomacy" in October 2013.¹⁰ Xi's regional strategy supports a broader vision of China's foreign relations that distinguishes economically-oriented "partnerships" from military alliances.¹¹ As Foreign Minister Wang Yi noted at China's 2015 National People's Congress (NPC), "Focusing on building a new type of international relations featuring win-win cooperation, we are taking a new path of external relations characterized by partnership rather than alliance."¹²

On the economic dimension, China's expanding "global network of partnerships" is embodied in its "One Belt, One Road" initiative for regional integration, Beijing's biggest foreign policy priority since it was proposed during Xi's state visits to Central and Southeast Asia in 2013.¹³ This initiative emphasizes commercial linkages between China and its neighbors that date to the dynastic period in the form of the "Middle Kingdom's" ancient land and maritime Silk Road routes.¹⁴ The revival of Silk Road integration links to the third, cultural dimension of Chinese identity, embodied in the "China Dream" of "national rejuvenation."¹⁵ Rooted in the "moral strength of ancient Chinese civilization,"¹⁶ the "China Dream" is associated with "socialist modernization," framing a national ideological campaign of promoting a "culturally advanced China" abroad as a "socialist cultural power."¹⁷ Traditional Chinese culture forms the foundation for China's pursuit of modernization against "the global mingling and clashing of cultures," with "patriotism at the core."¹⁸

SINO-SOUTH KOREAN RELATIONS IN THE XI-PARK PERIOD (2013-2016)

China-ROK relations under Xi Jinping and Park Geun-hye have developed in two phases, beginning with a period of active diplomatic engagement that peaked with the launching of a bilateral free trade agreement (FTA) in December 2015. Familiar dilemmas, however, surfaced in 2016: the U.S.-ROK alliance and approaches to North Korea, territorial issues surrounding exclusive economic zones (EEZs), and trade frictions arising from deepening asymmetric interdependence. The two leaders advanced what they called the best period in diplomatic ties through seven summits in 2013-2016,¹⁹ but also confronted unprecedented regional and domestic challenges. Pyongyang under Kim Jong-un conducted three nuclear tests in February 2013, January 2016, and September 2016, while political turmoil in South Korea ended with the parliamentary impeachment of Park Geun-hye in December 2016.

The "Best" Period in History (2013-2015)

The renewal of the China-ROK "strategic cooperative partnership" under Xi and Park was historically significant in several aspects: it marked two decades since diplomatic normalization, accompanied leadership transitions in both Beijing and Seoul, and included

a summit in Seoul in July 2014 that broke a Chinese tradition of engaging the North Korean leader first. After a period of hostility under the Hu Jintao (2003-2013) and U.S.-centered Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013) administrations, bilateral ties focused on two priorities of building “mutual strategic trust” and advancing the trade relationship.²⁰ Although Park extended Seoul’s conservative rule, her promises of economic recovery and inter-Korean reconciliation won Chinese support for favoring closer ties with China.²¹ While Beijing reciprocated such hopes for engagement, the new leaderships in 2013 faced an immediate test of responding to Pyongyang’s third nuclear test in February 2013.

China-ROK relations in 2013 showed early signs of strategic alignment against North Korea’s military provocations, with the passing of two UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions in January and March. Xi and Park’s first summit in Beijing in June centered on the further institutionalization of diplomatic exchanges, Korean Peninsula denuclearization, and conclusion of the FTA, forging a range of new agreements to strengthen the partnership over the next decade. The summit declarations produced immediate substantive results in advancing diplomatic exchanges as a means to build trust, including the initiation of a high-level security dialogue and a new working-level mechanism between foreign and defense ministries in 2013. As head of the China-ROK Inter-Parliamentary Council, Chung Mong-joon of the ruling Saenuri Party led more than 40 National Assembly members to China in February 2014, South Korea’s biggest parliamentary delegation to visit China since normalization. Park at her 2014 New Year press conference pointed to a historic high point in China-ROK relations, while Xi Jinping during his visit to Seoul in July claimed that bilateral ties were “at their best in history.”²²

Such convergence, however, masked underlying skepticism in both China and South Korea over respective policy tools for addressing North Korea as it declared its rise as a “full-fledged nuclear weapons state.”²³ Seoul’s “two track” strategy of pressure and dialogue stood in conflict with a Chinese stance that opposed not only DPRK aggression but also strengthened deterrence through the U.S.-ROK alliance. As China’s Foreign Ministry indicated in April 2014, “China is opposed to any move that may result in tensions in the region, whether they be joint drills or the threat of conducting nuclear tests.”²⁴ Chinese preferences for dialogue remained fixed on the Six-Party Talks, which for Seoul and Washington depended on tangible commitments from Pyongyang. The second Xi-Park statement on July 2014 reaffirmed common goals of denuclearization, but also revealed differences over the conditions for adding pressure and resuming dialogue.

In addition to conflicting North Korea policy, unresolved territorial disputes clouded Xi and Park’s early achievements. Submissions of competing claims to the UN on the East China Sea in 2013 threatened to rekindle maritime disputes that would also draw in Japan. In response to Beijing’s declaration of an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) in November 2013, Seoul announced a southward expansion of the Korea ADIZ, which includes the disputed submerged rock Suyan/Ieodo located in their overlapping EEZs. The fatal shooting of a Chinese fishing captain by the ROK Coast Guard during clashes in the Yellow Sea in October 2014 drove Chinese diplomatic complaints against South Korea’s “violent law-enforcement” and interrupted plans on new joint surveillance operations.

In 2015, however, the FTA was signed in June and implemented that December.²⁵ The trade deal also boosted prospects for joint negotiations with Tokyo as trilateral summit and foreign

ministerial talks resumed after a three-year deadlock. South Korea's formal joining of the AIIB in April as its fifth biggest shareholder consolidated the China-ROK trade relationship and respective strategies for regional integration under Xi's Silk Road and Park's Eurasia Initiatives, supported by Beijing and Seoul's new agreements with Russia to develop the northeast. Park Geun-hye's participation in China's 70th anniversary celebrations of the end of WWII in September 2015 symbolized Seoul's upgraded partnership with Beijing and drove regional debate over the broader strategic orientation of bilateral relations.

Old Dilemmas Revisited (2016)

North Korea's two nuclear tests in January and September 2016 prompted the adoption of two additional UNSC resolutions. However, they underscored existing weaknesses in both dialogue and pressure and forced Beijing and Seoul to confront their policy differences. U.S.-ROK actions in March—including the initiation of formal talks on Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) and new high-level talks on implementing sanctions—reignited Chinese concerns over the implications for China's strategic interests. The September nuclear test coincided with Xi and Park's final summit on the sidelines of the G20 in Hangzhou and directly challenged a nonproliferation statement adopted at the East Asia Summit (EAS).

Bilateral ties further deteriorated in November with the suspension of all high-level defense talks. The sinking of a ROK Coast Guard boat by a Chinese fishing vessel led to a series of diplomatic confrontations in October-November, including the Foreign Ministry's formal protests to China's consul general and PRC Ambassador Qui Guohong on three occasions. Chinese objections to THAAD intensified in November after the ROK Defense Ministry concluded an agreement to acquire the site for its deployment from Lotte Group. Tensions in the final year of the Xi-Park period unraveled many of the achievements in the bilateral political and security relationship, and ignited South Korean accusations over Beijing's economic and cultural retaliation against Seoul's July decision to deploy THAAD.

IMPACT OF CHINESE NATIONAL IDENTITY ON SINO-SOUTH KOREAN RELATIONS

During his sixth summit with Park Geun-hye in September 2015, a day ahead of Beijing's WWII Victory Day parade, Xi Jinping indicated China's historical affinity with South Korea: "Looking at history, our two peoples' struggle has been very similar in our quest to liberate our people."²⁶ This portrayal of history contrasted sharply with his remarks five years ago as vice president on the 60th anniversary of China's entry into the Korean War, which he called a "great victory gained by the united combat forces of China's and the DPRK's civilians and soldiers."²⁷ The image of Xi, Putin, and Park overseeing the military parade triggered similar comparisons with China's past traditions of friendship with the other Korea. As a China Daily observer indicated, "Long gone are the Cold War days when China was inclined to engage with the DPRK and estrange itself from the ROK."²⁸

Sino-South Korean history cooperation, among the first substantive achievements of Xi and Park's summit diplomacy, indeed suggested unprecedented progress in bilateral relations. But like China's official framing of WWII, most of this cooperation centered on Japanese aggression. While China seized an opportunity opened by Park to establish a memorial for Korean independence fighter Ahn Jung-geun (the 1909 assassin of Governor-general Ito

Harubumi) in Harbin in 2014, grievances over interpretations of ancient history, territorial claims, and ideological orientations remained buried under the surface. A closer examination of Chinese national identity narratives reveals that China's relationship with South Korea is shaped by multiple identities across the political, economic, and cultural dimensions of interaction. While common experiences as victims of Japanese imperialism have emboldened Chinese overtures of alignment with Seoul, especially since Abe's return to power in 2012, conflicting identities across these dimensions have reinforced bilateral mistrust and conflict.

Political and Security Implications

By contrasting China's expanding "global network of partnerships" against "alliances," Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the 2015 NPC depicted the China-ROK partnership and U.S.-ROK alliance as opposing alternatives. Scholarly debate after the CPC's 2013 meeting on periphery diplomacy similarly assessed the consolidation of U.S. alliances against emerging trilateral cooperation between China, Japan, and South Korea since the ASEAN Plus Three mechanism of the 1990s.²⁹ Such views of the regional political order challenged the trust-building process Park proposed in her "Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative," which framed Seoul's relationships with China and the United States in complementary terms.³⁰ But in addition to questioning South Korea's strategic position, it also raised debate over China's own orientation between the two Koreas at a time of escalating threats from its North Korean ally. Xi's July 2014 visit to Seoul drove much speculation in China over Beijing's shifting preferences from a "special relationship" with the North to partnership with the South.³¹ Party School journal editor Deng Yuwen's *Financial Times* column in 2013 revealed emerging domestic debate on whether "China should abandon North Korea."³² But his subsequent suspension suggested that such critical views remain outside Beijing's conventional policy line favoring North Korea's continued significance as "China's strategic shield."³³

More importantly, rather than being defined by partnership, China-ROK relations remain constrained by U.S.-China "great power relations," where a confrontation would present a major dilemma for South Korea as a U.S. ally.³⁴ The DPRK nuclear crisis in particular "is essentially not a problem between China and South Korea, but one resulting from U.S. Cold War strategies and reflecting the U.S. intent to contain China and Russia."³⁵ While proponents of broader Northeast Asian security cooperation identify South Korea as a "friend" of both China and the United States,³⁶ this historical legacy appears embedded in public assessments of the China-ROK relationship, responding to official claims of a "Cold War mentality" on the Korean Peninsula.³⁷ The puzzle of a divided Korea simultaneously aligned with two opposing forces is traced further back to the ancient Korean Peninsula, where Goryeo and Choson as core members of the Chinese tributary system relied on the protection of major powers and derived their legitimacy from the Han Dynasty.³⁸ The current deepening of the China-ROK partnership since 1992 is associated with a gradual retreat of the United States and its "full constraints" on peninsula affairs.³⁹

China's identity as a U.S. adversary on the peninsula underlies its opposition to the U.S.-ROK alliance as a source of North Korean belligerence and Beijing's own insecurities, justifying claims of limited Chinese influence on Pyongyang. At the 2014 National People's Congress, Wang Yi agreed that "only with denuclearization can the Korean Peninsula have genuine and lasting peace," but identified U.S.-DPRK mistrust as the primary source of "sustained tensions on the peninsula and several disruptions to the Six-Party Talks."⁴⁰

Although Beijing supported tougher sanctions at the UNSC in March 2016, it opposed U.S. and ROK unilateral sanctions that same month while consistently reminding the international community of Pyongyang's "legitimate security concerns."⁴¹ As the *Global Times* argued in June 2016 after talks between Xi and Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) International Department head Ri Su-yong, China "cannot make a breakthrough on North Korea's nuclear issue, but it serves as a balancing actor in the game."⁴²

Beijing's own mistrust of the U.S.-ROK alliance surfaced most pointedly in its response to Seoul's July 2016 decision to deploy THAAD, described by the state media as a "barrier to closer relations with China"⁴³ and part of U.S. efforts to create an "Asian version" of NATO.⁴⁴ A Xinhua editorial echoed official arguments that the agreement "damages the mutual trust and cooperation developed with China by threatening China's strategic security interests."⁴⁵ Such explanations for China's angry reactions were detailed in a China Institute of International Studies (CIIS) report warning that "sandwiched between the two major powers in this region, South Korea has to make a tough choice."⁴⁶ State media attacks on THAAD joined South Korean domestic protests against Seoul's decision by criticizing it as a "move to serve U.S. hegemony" and an outcome of "humiliated diplomacy."⁴⁷ These reports highlighted THAAD's immediate impact in reversing public perceptions since 2015, when Chinese media agencies placed Park among the top ten people of the year for her "balancing" role between major powers and participation in Beijing's military parade.⁴⁸

North Korea's January 2016 nuclear test not only challenged Park's policy of "pressure and dialogue" but also revived Beijing's propositions of parallel peace treaty and denuclearization talks, favoring a longstanding demand by Pyongyang that Seoul and Washington have rejected in favor of denuclearization first.⁴⁹ In addition to reinforcing immediate frictions over DPRK policy, such proposals forced Seoul to confront longer-term questions over the peninsula's future and role of the U.S.-ROK alliance. Xi Jinping as incoming president sent an early signal on Beijing's support for "independent and peaceful" unification,⁵⁰ which opened opportunities for Park to advance her regional and trilateral security initiatives with the United States and China. Her participation in Beijing's WWII events in September 2015 drove further efforts to win Chinese support for the reunification process she outlined in Germany in 2013.⁵¹ Even Chinese arguments for "abandoning North Korea" and actively promoting unification, however, are based on the expectation that unification would weaken U.S. alliances with Japan and South Korea, lift the geopolitical pressures on China, and help resolve the Taiwan issue.⁵² The core concern on both sides of China's Korea debate is the peninsula's future strategic orientation between China and the United States.

In contrast, common history grievances with Japan emerged as a strong basis for partnership ahead of China's WWII commemorations, amplifying joint opposition to Tokyo's perceived militarist orientation under Abe. After Seoul announced its plans to register "comfort women" records with UNESCO in January 2014, the PRC Foreign Ministry affirmed China's willingness to work together on "similar experiences and concerns on historical issues relating to Japan."⁵³ During his visit to Seoul in July 2014, Xi reached out to the South Korean public by reminding them that "Japanese militarists conducted barbaric wars of invasion against China and Korea,"⁵⁴ while China's state-run CCTV featured an interview with Park criticizing Japanese wartime atrocities and highlighting South Korea's cultural appeal to China.⁵⁵ NPC Standing Committee Chairman Zhang Dejiang's June 2015 visit to South Korea focused efforts on issuing the first joint statement from the two parliaments

marking the end of WWII.⁵⁶ Abe's WWII speech in August intensified Chinese calls for solidarity with South Korea emphasizing the significance of Park's visit for countering not just Pyongyang's military threats but also Tokyo's.

Efforts to promote partnership, however, were muted by China's own unresolved history and territorial issues with South Korea, and attitudes toward the U.S.-ROK alliance. Beijing's ADIZ decision in 2013 drew sharp criticism from U.S. allies, including warnings from Seoul on provoking nationalism and territorial disputes. Such consequences played out in Seoul's subsequent decision to expand the Korea ADIZ, which according to a Xinhua editorial was "grounded more on emotional impulse than on strategic thinking."⁵⁷ The primary sources of Chinese concern were U.S. "rebalancing" and Japan's "rapid slide to the right," on which Beijing sought convergence with South Korea through history, with contradictory effects of exposing bilateral differences.⁵⁸ As the South Korean media indicated in July 2014, Xi presented a story of Japanese aggression that ignored China's own history on the peninsula. Chinese reactions to THAAD catalyzed South Korean calls for greater Chinese cooperation on DPRK threats, hardened domestic criticism over Beijing's infringement of Seoul's sovereign rights, and reinforced the difficulties of developing common security interests in Northeast Asia.⁵⁹

Economic and Cultural Implications

Chinese assessments favoring the China-ROK economic partnership argue that Seoul's "middle power diplomacy" enhances China's regional environment, and emphasize the central role of the China-ROK trade relationship in promoting regional integration.⁶⁰ These implications were clearly evident in 2015 with South Korea joining the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and signing the FTA with China. Chinese media coverage of the AIIB's founding throughout 2015 centered on the successive joining of U.S. allies and apparent marginalization of the United States. For some skeptics, the regional geopolitical environment dictates the direction of China-ROK economic ties.⁶¹ Regional cooperation requires a common regional identity, on which nationalism has a profound effect. Prospects for cooperation remain challenged by a perceived new wave of nationalism in both South Korea and Japan in the post-Cold War period. Furthermore, the growing asymmetric structure of China-ROK interdependence implies greater economic vulnerability for South Korea.

The impact of national identity on both economic and cultural ties was most evident in 2016 in the form of Chinese threats of retaliation against THAAD. As a Xinhua editorial cautioned, the THAAD deal will not only "force Beijing and Moscow to take strategic countermeasures," but is also "an invitation for economic punishments."⁶³ The surge in China's rejections of South Korean food and cosmetics imports, from 5 to 26 percent of all Chinese customs rejections in July-August 2016, drove initial speculation over Beijing's raising of "nontariff barriers."⁶⁴ South Korean concerns surfaced in November when China launched a tax probe and health and safety inspections of Lotte Group units in China.⁶⁵ Accusations of Chinese retaliation have been strongest in the tourism and entertainment industries, associating tougher regulations on travel and Korean cultural content with growing anti-Korean sentiment within the PRC government.

South Korean officials publicly voiced their concerns over what they called effective "Chinese bans" on Korean cultural products, which overshadowed the China-ROK Public Diplomacy Forum in 2016.⁶⁶ The Korea Tourism Organization explicitly blamed diplomatic tensions

over THAAD for the slowing growth in the number of Chinese tourists traveling to South Korea.⁶⁷ At the closing ceremony of “Visit Korea Year 2016” in Beijing, China National Tourism Administration Chairman Li Jinzao and ROK Culture Minister Cho Yoon-sun expressed joint concerns over the negative ramifications of the THAAD dispute for cultural exchanges and overall bilateral relations.⁶⁸ Although both Chinese and Korean officials took steps to mitigate public hostilities, the Chinese public backlash against Seoul became clear by 2017. As one *Global Times* commentator indicated: “The South Korean government has seriously underestimated China’s public opinion against THAAD. Department stores in Seoul may be popular among Chinese tourists, however, these tourists haven’t forgotten their identity. Chinese people have a clear mind about the situation on the Korean Peninsula and will not sacrifice national interest for Korean cosmetics if Seoul chooses to side with the U.S.”⁶⁹

China-ROK cultural interactions under Xi and Park have been importantly driven by Beijing’s “soft power” push to shape China’s national cultural identity and international image.⁷⁰ But while the Chinese media popularized the “Korean Wave” trend in the 1990s to welcome the spread of Korean popular culture, recent assessments point to an “anti-Korean Wave” phenomenon in China, traced to not just issues of history and ideology, but also soft-power competition abroad.⁷¹ On the one hand, China’s “go out” strategy of outward investment in the cultural sector identifies South Korea as a key partner with a strong marketing base for cultural dissemination.⁷² On the other hand, South Korea is perceived as a rival in China’s global soft power campaign, aimed to promote the “construction of a core value system of international cooperation.”⁷³

While Xi’s “China Dream” envisions China’s national revival as a “socialist cultural power,” partly to bolster national unity and legitimacy at home, it also responds to current international perceptions of China’s “soft-power deficit.”⁷⁴ This deficit is reflected in patterns of China-ROK cultural cooperation, which has expanded primarily in terms of Chinese tourism flows to South Korea and South Korean cultural exports to China, including through state-led initiatives under the Joint Committee on people-to-people exchanges since 2015. Xi and Park’s “trust-building” diplomatic initiatives have diverted attention away from past clashes over interpretations of history and “plagiarism” of traditional culture, which initially inspired the production of South Korean historical dramas.⁷⁵ Since the Koguryo history war of the 2000s, the impact of national identity on bilateral cultural relations has been amplified by the rise of Chinese internet users and social media networks in China that have transformed traditional modes of communication.⁷⁶ Furthermore, Chinese criticism over the “interference” of South Korean political parties and media in exacerbating domestic forces of nationalism and influencing Seoul’s foreign policy toward Beijing has only served to further illuminate gaps in political systems and values.⁷⁷ These gaps remain evident at the international level in Beijing’s handling of North Korean refugees and human rights violations. In addition to opposing the discussion of such issues at the UNSC, China’s media outlets in 2014 published Pyongyang’s own human rights report amid EU and Japanese efforts to pass a resolution calling for the referral of DPRK rights violations to the International Criminal Court.

IDENTITY POLITICS AND THE PARADOX OF SINO-SOUTH KOREAN RELATIONS

Sino-South Korean relations in 2013-2016 from an identity perspective point to broader differences over Asia's envisioned political, economic, and social order. At the peak of China-ROK engagement in 2015, South Korea's joining of the AIIB, signing of the China-ROK FTA, and participation in Beijing's WWII commemorations, suggested a reorientation of bilateral ties toward closer partnership. But China's reactions to THAAD regenerated mutual suspicions, reinforcing Asia's enduring paradox of strong economic ties and weak political ties that Park Geun-hye promised to break as presidential candidate.

Chinese assessments of China-ROK relations in the Xi Jinping era raise two central questions about the future orientation of bilateral ties: 1) whether South Korea will align with its Chinese partner or U.S. ally, and 2) whether the China-ROK economic partnership will also promote closer political ties. The key variable in both questions is the issue of mutual trust, a common theme linking Xi's major-power model and Park's Northeast Asia Peace and Security Initiative. While Sino-South Korean policy priorities from 2013 centered on building trust, the development of bilateral ties during the Xi-Park period shows that conflicting identities have undermined this process.

According to most Chinese assessments, Sino-South Korean economic interdependence is unlikely to translate into closer political ties given fundamental differences over North Korea, territorial disputes, and cultural tensions stemming largely from history.⁷⁸ Current perceptions in South Korea of China's economic retaliation against THAAD further suggest that interdependence can instead be a source of power in political disputes. The China-ROK case in 2013-2016 highlights the broader corrosive impact of East Asian nationalism, which has weakened existing mechanisms of cooperation while retarding the formation of new ones.⁷⁹ Just a year after their resumption, China-Japan-ROK trilateral talks were again postponed in 2016 amid renewed history tensions with Tokyo, the THAAD dispute, and Park Geun-hye's impeachment.

Washington's potential isolationist orientation under President Donald Trump may further propel Chinese leadership in reshaping the post-2008 regional and global order, as suggested by Xi's remarks at the January 2017 World Economic Forum supporting "economic globalization."⁸⁰ But South Korea's domestic political vacuum after the impeachment of Park Geun-hye in December, upheld by the Constitutional Court in March 2017, overshadowed the immediate prospects for reorienting bilateral relations. Acting President Hwang Kyo-ahn did not indicate plans to introduce change in Park's controversial policies including THAAD deployment, the "biggest issue affecting China-ROK relations" according to PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the March 2017 NPC session.⁸¹ Peninsula security issues will remain framed by the direction of U.S.-China relations under Trump, whose early engagement of Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen hardened Chinese views of North Korea's strategic significance to Beijing in what has been called the "Kim Jong-un era" since the May 2016 WPK congress.

Defense Secretary James Mattis in February signaled the Trump administration's continued engagement of U.S. allies in Asia. Korean Peninsula security was a priority concern during Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's Northeast Asia trip in March, following a new round of North Korean ballistic missile tests and the initiation of U.S.-ROK talks on finalizing

the terms of THAAD deployment.⁸² Pyongyang's military threats and the advancement of THAAD plans have been met with continued Chinese disapproval, feeding an intensifying domestic debate in South Korea at a time of leadership transition in 2017. Claims of China's economic retaliation have had real diplomatic repercussions, including Seoul's appeal to the WTO after Beijing's imposition of travel restrictions on South Korea, announced by the National Tourism Administration on March 2 at the start of U.S.-ROK THAAD talks. Defense officials associated Chinese intrusions into the Korea ADIZ in January with tensions over THAAD, which has fueled broader debate over core issues of sovereignty. The U.S. House of Representatives in March introduced a resolution condemning China's retaliatory actions and calling on Beijing to "cease its diplomatic intimidation and economic coercion" against South Korea.⁸³ Defense Secretary Mattis during a Senate hearing in March pointed to China's "tribute-nation" approach as a source of regional distrust, criticizing both Russia and China for "seeking veto power over the economic, diplomatic, and security decisions of nations on their periphery."⁸⁴

CONCLUSION

Chinese assessments of current China-ROK relations reveal understandings of China and South Korea as Asian partner and U.S. ally, Middle Kingdom and tributary state, and socialist cultural power and capitalist democracy. These interpretations reinforce differences with South Korea over the peninsula's political future, regional economic integration, and cultural and ideological values. The Xi-Park period can be placed within China's broader foreign policy discourse as an emerging power seeking "national rejuvenation." As Xi summarized at a CPC Central Committee Political Bureau meeting in December 2013, China is committed to building its image as an "Oriental power with honest and capable political administrations," a "responsible great power that is committed to peaceful development," and a "socialist power opening its door wider to the outside world," based on a long history of Chinese civilization.⁸⁵

But as Xie Guijuan points out, China and South Korea's mutual "hostile" images stem from almost half a century of "East and West confrontation" on the Korean Peninsula from the ROK's founding to normalization in 1992.⁸⁶ Such a history of antagonism as Cold War enemies is rooted far deeper in the dynastic era and the Middle Kingdom's tributary state system. Bilateral relations have progressed from "partnership" to a closer "strategic cooperative partnership" through interactions since 1992, but mutual suspicion remains.⁸⁷ The post-global financial crisis period since 2008 is associated with a heightened period of regional tensions between China and U.S. allies in Asia. As Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) experts suggested in 2009, Chinese and South Koreans appeared to be "fed up with each other" by the end of the decade.⁸⁸

China's current engagement of South Korea reflects a longer-term trajectory of regional relations since Jiang Zemin, when the 1997 Asian financial crisis intensified its pursuit of various partnership relationships.⁸⁹ Domestic debates under Xi Jinping continue to advance China's image as a friendly partner committed to peaceful development.⁹⁰ On the other hand, the Xi era suggests a new phase in China's international relations characterized by efforts to reshape the global normative order, where constructions of national identity will have an increasingly important impact on China's regional relationships.

ENDNOTES

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