



# THE IMPACT OF CHINESE NATIONAL IDENTITY ON BILATERAL RELATIONS

## INTRODUCTION

The construct “Chinese national identity” refers to narratives from China’s leadership, media, and academic spokespersons about what makes their country distinctive and how those ideas matter in relations with other nations. This is a relational concept that serves to distinguish the “self” and “other,” whose interpretation is shaped by interactions with other states. Seen from the vertical dimension of identity, these interactions are filtered through rhetoric aimed at promoting unity at home. Demonizing other nations while conveying an image of enemies or states seeking to contain China is a means to boost solidarity behind Communist Party control over a society with little means to dissent. The horizontal dimension of identity depicts bilateral relations as the result not of different national interests, but of clashing and often irreconcilable identities. Examining the way national identity on the Chinese side impacts five external relationships is the objective of this set of articles, which concentrate on Chinese rhetoric during the period of Xi Jinping.

Over the past year China’s national identity has played a prominent role in shaping its relations with the states most active in East Asia. The turnabout toward South Korea has been dramatic, interpreted in China as a realist response to the threat from THAAD but by nearly all others as a communist regime’s reversion to old streams of identity thinking. Pressure toward ASEAN, breaking the cohesion of this organization and targeting several of its states more vehemently than before, reflects a Chinese obsession with sovereignty and full control over the South China Sea, showcased as a core national identity concern. The narrative on Japan continues to emphasize its rising militarism and extreme identity, painting it as the identity outlier rather than China. The pull of Russia can be interpreted in identity terms even if Chinese and Russians insist their relationship is solely realist in origin. Insistence that all China prioritizes is “stability” in North Korea while calling too for denuclearization can, arguably, be perceived as a realist approach, but alarm over the collapse of China’s lone ally and closest partner in the history of socialism must not be separated from identity arguments. Finally, critiques of the United States—before Donald Trump validated some of them—as unable to shake free of “Cold War mentality” mirror Chinese identity narratives about why this bilateral relationship has kept deteriorating.

Chinese national identity has been aroused by the civilizational pride boosted during the run-up to the Beijing Olympics and never allowed to flag afterwards. It gathered force in the economic pride unleashed as China’s GDP swelled while the United States was seen as in decline due to the world financial crisis at a time of lingering stagnation in Japan and, before long, the EU’s fragmentation over a debt crisis and then centrifugal nationalism. In 2009-10 manifestations of a national identity departing from Deng Xiaoping’s call for “keeping a low profile, biding one’s time” became pronounced in the reversal of attitudes toward Asian multilateralism, especially ASEAN centrality. Yet, it was only after Xi Jinping introduced the notion of the “China Dream” that the new identity rhetoric came to full force. It was accompanied by tightened censorship and control over the Internet, as the media and academic community were mobilized to convey a more clear-cut image of China’s superiority—past, present, and future—on all of the relevant identity dimensions.

Sovereignty and core interests serve as lodestones in the national identity rhetoric. Rather than discuss disputes over maritime boundaries and rules in terms of naturally divergent national interests, Chinese depict them as challenges to inviolable rights. Instead of calls

to negotiate over missile defense, air defense identification zones, joint military exercises, and arms build-ups, Chinese blame others for seeking to keep their country weak. Visits of the Dalai Lama are portrayed as betrayals, showing disrespect for China. The result is deterioration of relations with Japan, the United States, South Korea, the main countries of Southeast Asia, and India. Meanwhile, the people of Hong Kong and Taiwan are less likely to identify as part of China—under Beijing. National identity arousal and the way it has affected bilateral ties have damaged relations in many directions. Those who are close to China today tend to be so for economic reasons or, in the case of Russia, due to their own enlarged identity gap with the West, not because they welcome the “China Dream,” consider China a model, or find its national identity appealing for its contents.

The chapters in this section evaluate the way China’s national identity is shaping relations with five, principal objects of its foreign policy: Japan, South Korea, ASEAN, Russia, and the United States. In this introduction, we highlight some of the arguments in the chapters before proceeding to comparisons and generalizations based on the findings. Together, this juxtaposition of analyses alerts us to the parallel construction of identity gaps and the pervasive impact of national identity themes in interpreting the external environment, leaving a trail of interpretations of why bilateral relations are proceeding poorly that will complicate diplomacy to reset ties on a pragmatic, realist foundation.

## YINAN HE, “SINO-JAPANESE RELATIONS”

Since the second half of the 1980s and accelerating in the mid-90s, again around 2009–11, and even more under Xi Jinping, China has depicted disputes with Japan as a matter of national identity much more than of conflicting national interests. Yanan He points to 2012 to 2014 as a particularly sharp downward trend, while arguing that the recovery was tenuous for a year or so before being halted by early 2016. National identity conflict has exacerbated mutual distrust, denied chances of reassurance, and generated domestic popular objections to diplomatic compromise between the two, she finds. From early in 2016 Japan became more actively involved in the South China Sea, and, in retaliation, China stepped up pressure on the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. Tensions are continuing to mount in 2017, and they are well reflected in Chinese castigation of Japan’s identity.

Abe’s 2015 70th anniversary statement on the war’s end failed to satisfy China, critical of what the statement left out or played down, and of his call to end the apology business by Japan’s future generations, argues He. Likewise, China’s military parade celebrating the victory in war against Japan caused discomfort in Tokyo, which reacted that China should show a future-oriented attitude to work on common issues faced by international society, not focusing excessively on the unfortunate history in the past. Even if the dispute about WWII memory is relatively muted in 2016–17, it lies at the core of mutual dissatisfaction. Promoting the “China Dream,” combining both traditional Chinese culture and socialist values, may shore up regime legitimacy and Xi’s personal authority, but it also justifies China’s pursuit of regional dominance and objection to interference from the West and, no less, Japan. He finds that China’s revived Confucian view of the world is premised on a cultural hierarchy in which the Middle Kingdom is the civilized center and all others are but the barbarian periphery subordinate to the center. Reinvigorating the Chinese nation is to revive the Sinocentric international order in East Asia, a China-centered hub-and-spoke system as an alternative to the existing one sponsored by the United States. This is seen as threatening in Japan.

Recent promotion of “core socialist values” sets China apart from values supporting liberal democracy and universal human rights, which Japan recently has been actively espousing. They combine past victimhood and current confidence. Xi’s mobilization of an ethnocentric national identity compels a stringent foreign policy that defies foreign objections and rejects compromise. He argues, noting that all the central themes of the Xi government’s national identity program collide with Japan’s national self-identity and aspirations. Xi’s Sinocentric order has little space for genuine multilateral collaboration with important regional players like Japan. Thinking about regionalism raises alarm.

Chinese elites interpret Japan’s recent turn towards international activism, embodied in the trend toward constitutional revision, new security legislation, military buildup, and diplomatic consorting with the United States, Australia, India, and Southeast Asian countries, as a coherent, calculated strategic move to contain China. They dismiss Japan’s national security concerns and blame the bilateral impasse solely on Japan. Because the “China Dream” is to be fulfilled through redeeming past trauma and regaining national dignity, the identity program drives the nation to take offense at any Japanese attempts to misinterpret WWII history or deny its responsibility for aggression. Chinese elites flatly reject Abe’s value diplomacy as an ideological instrument to undermine China’s image to gain moral legitimacy to advance Japan’s external expansion and contain China. Treating Japan as an enemy exacerbates its hostility to China—a self-fulfilling prophecy.

China’s new concept of morality and prioritizing national pride and core interests over economic ones, He concludes, determines that politics will trump economics in its foreign relations, evident in the fact that high-level economic dialogue between China and Japan has been put on hold since 2010. Objective coverage of Japan in textbooks and mass media is beyond reach, contributing to anti-Japanese sentiment among the public. The “China Dream” concept collides with the essentials of Japanese national psyche from cultural ego to historical memory and liberal values. It is only natural that since its advent this identity program has elicited unnecessary emotional backlash from Japan and exacerbated mutual perceptions of threat. Finally, He anticipates, as Trump brings Sino-American confrontation more into the open, China and Japan will enter, voluntarily or involuntarily, more ostensible opposition against one another.

## SEE-WON BYUN, “SINO-SOUTH KOREAN RELATIONS”

See-Won Byun sees the Koguryo history war more than a decade ago as a turning point in Sino-ROK relations since diplomatic normalization, generating enduring competition over representations of history. In 2010, China’s commemoration of its entry into the Korean War raised additional warnings in South Korea over Beijing’s hostile orientation when Xi Jinping, as vice president, showcased this historical memory after a period when China was loathe to accentuate its Cold War alignment with North Korea in such a public fashion. When Xi and Park advanced what they called the best period in diplomatic ties through seven summits in 2013-2016, there was still hope in Seoul that identity overlap would prevail. Xi spoke of a historical affinity with South Korea: “Looking at history, our two peoples’ struggle has been very similar in our quest to liberate our people.” Yet, his priority for accentuating competing identities has reinforced enduring differences over the region’s political, economic, and

cultural order. The revival of Silk Road integration links to the cultural dimension of Chinese identity, embodied in the “China Dream” of “national rejuvenation.” Rooted in the “moral strength of ancient Chinese civilization,” 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.” Byun attributes to this way of thinking an irreconcilable identity gap.

In addition to conflicting North Korea policy, unresolved territorial disputes clouded Xi and Park’s early achievements. Submission of competing claims to the UN on the East China Sea in 2013 threatened to rekindle maritime disputes that would draw in Japan. In response to Beijing’s declaration of an ADIZ in November 2013, Seoul announced a southward expansion of the Korea ADIZ. Territorial claims stem from identity rhetoric.

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. A fundamental divide exists between Park’s sense that U.S.-ROK and Sino-ROK relations are, in essence, complementary and Xi’s thinking, rooted in identity concerns, that the China-ROK partnership and U.S.-ROK alliance are opposing alternatives. For China, THAAD’s immediate impact was to reverse public perceptions. Chinese media agencies in 2015, Byun notes, had placed Park among the top ten people of the year for her “balancing” role between major powers and participation with Xi in Beijing’s military parade. Yet, even when Park’s image was largely positive, many Chinese publications were treating South Korean national identity as problematic, warning of the potential to vilify the country if it should veer from the course being depicted.

Dividing Seoul and Tokyo was a mainstay in Chinese coverage of South Korea. Much of the cooperation with Seoul centered on agreement over accentuating Japanese aggression as the essence of that country’s history with linkages to revived militarism. Xi presented a story of Japanese aggression that ignored China’s own history on the peninsula and that was clearly aimed at making opposition to Abe the identity centerpiece at the expense of South Korea’s more diverse identity thinking. While shared experience as victims of Japanese imperialism emboldened Chinese overtures of alignment with Seoul, conflicting identities across other dimensions reinforced bilateral mistrust and conflict, Byun observes. Grievances over interpretations of ancient history, territorial claims, and ideological orientations, remained buried under the surface in the honeymoon period. Finally, 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 difficulty of developing common security interests in Northeast Asia. Negative ramifications of the THAAD dispute for cultural exchanges and overall bilateral relations were pronounced. A Chinese public backlash brought images of a sharp identity gap to the forefront, reverberating as Koreans recognized that a common front against Japan served to conceal sharp divides.

Cultural and economic ties were often discussed as ways to diminish identity gaps. While the Chinese media had popularized the “Korean Wave,” recent assessments point to an “anti-Korean Wave” in China, traced not just to issues of history and ideology, but to leaders eager to rally the public against South Korea as well as to soft-power competition abroad. If earlier



cultural ties had looked promising for shifting South Koreans versus Japan, once leaders had lost that hope, they lost tolerance for the “Korean Wave.”

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, concludes Byun. Mutual “hostile” images stem from almost half a century of “East and West confrontation” on the peninsula lasting to normalization in 1992. 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. This way of thinking about the past as well as of East vs. West today leads Beijing to vilify Seoul.

## DANIELLE COHEN, “SINO-ASEAN RELATIONS”

Chinese foreign policy toward ASEAN is characterized by a desire to recreate the Sinocentric structures of the tributary system, a belief in the historical legitimacy of China’s maritime and territorial claims, and a sense that China has now “peacefully risen” and can more actively assert itself to reap the rewards, argues Danielle Cohen.

Through this Sinocentric system, China asserted its economic and cultural superiority over Southeast Asia for centuries. It viewed itself as the benevolent elder brother to subordinate regimes. Today, China’s OBOR initiative and its pursuit of a “community of common destiny” with ASEAN states evoke a return to this historical role. As national identity has spiked in Chinese narratives on foreign relations, this thinking has spread.

Cohen pays attention to how China’s historical claims have sidestepped principles of international law and the 1982 UNCLOS in its recent assertions about Southeast Asia.

Despite efforts to maintain ASEAN unity, substantial variation was evident in China’s relations with the ten ASEAN member states in 2016 as each state sought to advance its national interest and pursue a strategy toward China that took into account its bilateral relations with the United States. Bilateral relations between China and five of the ASEAN states moved in a generally positive direction, she argues. Economic rewards have tilted the balance, especially where there are no territorial disputes capable of showcasing identity gaps. The direction of China’s relations with two ASEAN states, Indonesia and Myanmar, was more ambiguous, Cohen finds. Singapore is distinctive in its identity gap, which China has widened over the broadest range of principles. Vietnam is another case where the identity gap is large despite communist party rule in both.

China’s revival of its premodern identity as the center of a tributary system, together with its newfound confidence as a peacefully risen great power, are at the core of its efforts to develop regional infrastructure in Southeast Asia under the auspices of OBOR. Chinese analysts portray China as a benevolent big brother that is willing to share its superior expertise, technology, and management capabilities with less developed Southeast Asian countries as they industrialize. Yet, a trail of broken deals suggests that OBOR projects are not always as self-evidently “win-win” as the Chinese often insist, argues Cohen.

China’s perception of the historical legitimacy of its sovereign claims in the South China Sea, together with newfound confidence in its regional and global status, has inspired it to push back against the United States, regional claimants, and the UN’s Hague Tribunal.

It succeeded in throwing ASEAN South China Sea policy into disarray, and the increased Sino–U.S. tension is complicating foreign policy for ASEAN states, which manage their bilateral relations with each power with one eye on the other. Cohen appears to see the states of Southeast Asia as targets of China throwing its weight around, especially in a sense of zero-sum competition with the United States as its identity antagonist, while the states of this region keep struggling for pragmatic balance without choosing China’s side.

The Chinese leadership’s operationalization of a particular vision of history, which emphasizes an premodern Sinocentric regional order, has greatly influenced its approach to ASEAN relations. Through OBOR, China seeks to rebuild a network of trade routes that link it to its neighbors. The PRC views itself as reclaiming its rightful position in the region, and sees its actions as those of a benevolent elder brother. At the same time, it seeks to reassert its authority over the regions that it claims were long under the control of imperial China. This idealized vision of Chinese history is combined with a set of normative expectations about the role that a regional and global great power plays on the international stage, concludes Cohen. The rise of China’s identity narrative has led it to weaken ASEAN and to challenge the U.S. role in Southeast Asia more vigorously than elsewhere. The identity critique here is less filtered by specific national themes such as with Japan, memories of imperialism, and with South Korea, the shadow of North Korea.

## GILBERT ROZMAN, “SINO-RUSSIAN RELATIONS”

Chinese and Russians are adamant that their relationship eschews ideology or any other sign of national identity in favor of pure realpolitik. Yet, as the Sino-Russian relationship continues to strengthen in ways that make it imperative to explore its roots, we must keep in mind that in the 1960s–80s the Sino-Soviet dispute was derailed by notions of identity held on both sides. When both parties prioritized orthodox communist ideology, they were driven to split, while “communist legacy” identities are proving conducive to close relations. Three aspects of China’s ideological identity have far-reaching implications for relations with Russia. Socialism has positive implications. Even though Russia is not calling itself socialist and is not governed by a communist party, narratives about it serve to reinforce Chinese identity. Socialism is a story about the Russian Revolution and the overwhelmingly positive example of Soviet history from which China borrowed. Just conveying that narrative draws an important link with Russia. Salvaging the reputation of the traditional communist periods is a common objective of Putin and Xi Jinping. The history of Russia is a mostly positive narrative despite some explanation for what led to the collapse of the Soviet Union, which is blamed on Gorbachev as a traitor and the infection of Western cultural imperialism; little of Soviet policy needs to be questioned.

The second aspect of ideology is anti-imperialism or hegemonism—military, political, economic, and cultural. Russian writings have swung heavily in this direction, reviving much of the rhetoric of the Brezhnev era, while China has kept this theme alive. The language from both is close to the ideological tracts in their countries decades ago.

The third aspect of ideology is more divisive. Called Sinocentric or Russocentric, it glorifies the centrality of one’s country in its historical surroundings. This poses the most serious identity challenge for the relationship. On the Russian side, it means fear of losing a predominant

place in areas once part of the Soviet Union, such as Central Asia, as well as lingering sensitivity to perceived signs of “quiet expansionism” into the Russian Far East. On the Chinese side, it signifies reviving centrality over areas previously in China’s tributary system. The potential for a clash has existed even as the bilateral border dispute was resolved. The obvious testing grounds for such a clash was the Russian Far East.

Most recently, the potential for a clash rose as Russia established the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) including much of Central Asia as China launched the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) across the same landscape. Yet, Putin and Xi instructed all media to laud the complementarity of these projects, allowing little language to seep into public purview to suggest that the Sinocentric and Russocentric agendas are at odds. Each side showcases this key identity agenda with emphasis on other arenas. These were oriented away from arenas where they could clash toward animosity for the U.S. role in other arenas.

Much of the criticism of U.S. policy toward China and Russia focuses on alleged designs to undermine stability. It warns against spreading ideas deemed to have the potential to prompt people to press for “human rights,” to promote “democracy” that damages “stability,” and to organize, perhaps in cooperation with NGOs, in support of the “rule of law.” Actions such as these are depicted as destabilizing not just to the regime in power, but to the essence of Chinese civilization, equated with national identity. Communist Party legitimacy is entwined with civilizational continuity. Conveying an image of beleaguered states, whose civilization is being attacked by forces plotting to weaken existing authority, Russians and Chinese leaders have reconstructed national identity around a looser ideological narrative and a more prioritized vertical dimension, which is the foundation of a narrower national identity gap, anchoring the relationship. The Xi-Putin period marks the culmination of four decades of narrowing national identity gaps following the death of Mao. Ideology is now more conspicuous. Both Russocentrism and Sinocentrism are more assertive. Anti-Western rhetoric has grown sharper. Controls have been greatly strengthened to maintain the vertical order. On this foundation, relations are closer than at any time since the 1950s without the narrow preoccupation with dogma as the core of national identity.

There remain conflicting national interests, e.g., in Central Asia, in dealing with the great powers Japan and India, and in managing some regional and global issues. Yet, China’s care in preventing any of them—deferring to Russia across Central Asia and controlling movement into the Russian Far East, for example—from rising to the level of a serious identity gap accounts for the closeness of relations. Chinese national identity may have appeared to flounder for two decades before Xi took the party secretary post, but that conclusion obscures the purposeful, top-down designs to reconstruct identity, including to minimize identity gaps with Russia—to satisfy Russians that there is no “quiet expansionism” that would set off identity alarms; to show deference in the SCO on matters of identity and security, while proceeding in an unobtrusive manner in projects that served economic objectives; to censor criticisms of Russia’s leadership and policies, keeping in mind the deleterious impact of repeated mutual attacks over two decades to 1982; and to do everything possible to boost a joint narrative on international affairs that would drown out potential conflicting accounts. Much as China’s narrative over 20 years drove the Sino-Soviet split to new lows, its narrative over the past 25 years has succeeded in minimizing awareness of a national identity gap. Keeping the SREB and EEU on track to be complementary, not contradictory, is not easy—national interests could be seen as in serious conflict—but censorship has sufficed to narrow the gap so far.



## GUO YINGJIE, “SINO-U.S. RELATIONS”

Guo traces the preoccupation in China with national identity to the loss of legitimacy of communist ideology. The impact of contact with the United States, he finds, soon played a role in the “crisis of faith” in the existing national order. During the 1980s an unofficial national identity spread by intellectuals eased relations with the United States, but it had excluded traditional Chinese themes. In the 1990s latching onto those themes, those keen on constructing an identity supportive of reasserting communist party control strove to widen the identity gap with the United States. Leaders decided that waning patriotism amongst young Chinese bred widespread discontent with China’s political status quo and “foreign worship,” and that “evil foreign forces” intent on the “peaceful evolution” of China took advantage of and encouraged the discontent through mass popular media. By forging a mutually exclusive identity with that of the United States, China’s leadership proceeded in stages to rally support, while taking satisfaction the Sino-U.S. relations are more distant. Over time, China grew more confident, demanding more from boosters of the national identity and demonizing more fully the identity at fault for U.S. containment.

Guo describes a situation where those who continued to favor better relations with the United States or promote liberalization were condemned by some as “lapdogs.” Many came to believe that the U.S. strategy was to contain China’s development and prevent its rise in international affairs, constructing a “fan-shaped” structure centered on the U.S.-Japan axis and U.S. alliances. China’s rise, thus, came at the expense of U.S. insistence on its hegemony, a zero-sum process unshakable because U.S. behavior is rooted in national identity and China’s response is the only way it can be true to its own national identity.

The Party-state included love for Chinese cultural traditions as an essential component of patriotism, in addition to love for the CCP and love of socialism, Guo explains.

Whether the target is “constitutional democracy,” the “rule of law,” “universal values,” “judicial independence,” or “color revolutions,” the refrain is becoming familiar. These are “erroneous” notions, which not only threaten Chinese civilization, their advocacy by Chinese is evidence of traitorous conduct, and their support by U.S. officials or on the Western-led Internet must be resisted for bilateral relations to proceed successfully. Such admonishments reflect the official national identity espoused by leaders and propagated in the increasingly tightly controlled media. They have had a negative impact on the Sino-U.S. relationship, and are likely to continue to do so even as President Donald Trump refrains from talking about human rights and concentrates chiefly on “America First.”

Xi Jinping has carried the identity argument much further, combining cultural and political nationalism. As the “China Dream” has become more clearly defined, the urgency has grown to contrast what is constructed as the national identity of China with what is depicted as the identity of the United States. Recently, Xi has added “cultural confidence” to the “three confidences” the CCP wishes to boost—“ideological confidence,” “confidence in the [socialist] road,” and “confidence in the [socialist] system.” A central aim of his promotion of traditional culture was to legitimize and justify China’s current political system by portraying both as a natural outgrowth of cultural traditions and history. In the past, though the CCP was not interested in American-style democracy, division of power, or judicial independence, the CCP refrained from appearing explicitly critical, but not any more. Now large numbers of critical articles dwell on the shortcomings of liberal democracy and explain why it, an

independent judiciary, and universal values do not suit China. Guo concludes, the CCP feels compelled to differentiate China from the United States in political and cultural terms, so that its grip on power will not be jeopardized, while unity and identity will be maintained. Consequently, China is becoming increasingly more inward-looking and less open politically than any other time in the post-Mao era. Sino-U.S. relations have thus encountered a more fundamental impediment than any other time since normalization.

## COMPARISONS AND GENERALIZATIONS

History pervades Chinese reasoning about Japan, not only because of memories stoked about WWII but also because of the righteous pursuit of Sinocentrism as the natural order in East Asia in civilizational opposition to the liberal U.S.-led world and regional order. In perceiving Japan as both history's prime victimizer of China and a vehement opponent of a China-led order, Chinese sources see no prospect of finding common ground over the national identity goals they embrace. South Koreans hoped to be spared similar treatment, as they encouraged Chinese to treat their country sympathetically as a fellow victim of Japan in the first half of the twentieth century—the era of paramount importance for their national identities. When the Koguryo issue emerged as a thorn in Sino-ROK relations, it became clear that Beijing would turn the historical dimension of identity against Seoul too. Three of four periods can count against Seoul: divergent views of what Chinese call the “harmonious” tributary system and South Koreans disparage as “sadae” or unequal obeisance demanded by hegemonic China; the Cold War era, which was recalled as the glorious war on behalf of North Korea by Xi Jinping as this era has increasingly been raised to the level of national identity pride; and the post Cold War era, when despite the claims by South Koreans that post-normalization ties had advanced swimmingly, Chinese insist that U.S.-led containment, abetted by South Korea, has kept East Asia in difficult straights. Only the anti-Japanese overlap keeps history from becoming an unmitigated source of a national identity gap, but Beijing has pressed Seoul to show more backbone and since 2015 found it increasingly wanting in its willingness to let Japan off too easy.

Sinocentrism serves as a common identity threat in Chinese critiques of ASEAN states, South Korea, and Japan. Linked to territorial claims and charges against U.S. designs to contain China, historical justifications prevail in narratives about Southeast Asia. They are deeply present in arguments about South Korea and the Korean Peninsula, but the Cold War era and Korean War legacy color the way Sinocentrism is presented. Even more obscured is the role of Sinocentrism in demonization of Japan, since the thrust of arguments remains centered on rejection of Japan's imperialist aggression and charges that it seeks to revive elements of this thinking. Yet, the case for Chinese territorial claims to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands is also rooted in historical justice, with some potential that this type of argument could be extended to Okinawa as illegitimately incorporated into Japan. On the surface, territorial disputes linked to realist goals and historical memories tied to Japanese colonialism and the Korean War are apparently the drivers of China's disputes with its neighbors, but in the background and coming more to the surface is Sinocentric identity placing China at the core of its own region not only economically or for security, but also as the civilization reviving its place in the region.