

Chinese Views of Korean History in the Cold War Era

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This chapter draws a rough sketch of the evolution of Chinese views on Korean history in the Cold War era in three parts. The first focuses on the formulation of Chinese views of the Korean War in 1950 and the mainstream assessment of the war after Sino-South Korean diplomatic normalization in 1992. The second focuses on China's attitudes and policies toward the two Koreas in the Cold War years. The third deals with the changes and limits of perceptions on Korean history after diplomatic normalization and their impact on bilateral relations between Beijing and Seoul.

For centuries many Chinese have firmly believed that the relationship between China and the Korean Peninsula is like that between lips and teeth, they are not only close to but also dependent upon each other. If the lips are gone, the teeth will be cold. From the middle of nineteenth century, the geopolitical proximity and interdependence between the two have become the determining factors in formulating Chinese perceptions towards Korea. Since then the national security concerns symbolized by the sense of lips and teeth had been frequently stressed by some Chinese intellectuals and officials when both China and Korea were exposed to the growing imperialist expansion and geopolitical competition in East Asia. In order to maintain the traditional tributary relationship between China and Korea, China fought the first Sino-Japanese War in 1894-95. Although it was miserably defeated, and Korea was consequently annexed to the Japanese empire in 1910, the Chinese sense of lips and teeth remained undiminished. Rather, it was further strengthened among ordinary Chinese when the Cold War began and especially when the Korean War broke out in 1950.

After the end of World War II, China faced a new situation on the peninsula. Korea was liberated from Japanese rule but soon divided into the Soviet backed socialist North Korea, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), and the U.S. backed capitalist South Korea, the Republic of Korea (ROK). As a newly established socialist country, China naturally allied itself with the Soviet Union and viewed the DPRK as a close friend while regarding the United States and ROK as hated foes. The intensified Cold War confrontation between the two camps and two Koreas triggered the outbreak of the Korean War. In order to safeguard its own political, ideological, and security interests, China quickly got involved in the war by sending the Chinese People's Volunteer Army (CPVA) to fight together with its DPRK friend against their common enemies. The war ended with a cease-fire armistice and created a friend and foe Cold War framework, which the new China was compelled to face even beyond the Cold War era. Under these circumstances, the majority of Chinese held the view that it was the capitalist enemy rather than the socialist friend who started the Korean War with a view to overthrowing not only the socialist government in Pyongyang but also the similar one in Beijing. Therefore, it was against this background that China's attitudes and policies toward the two Koreas in the post-Korean War era were doomed to be ideology-driven and DPRK sympathetic.

Throughout the Cold War period national images of the two Koreas had drawn a sharp contrast. In Chinese newspapers and magazines, the DPRK was always portrayed as politically democratic, economically prosperous, and socially stable while the ROK was always seen as a political dictatorship, in economic crisis, and in social chaos. In foreign policy, China praised almost all the arguments and policies of the North while denouncing almost everything

from the South. Thus, the contrasting descriptions of, and opposite policies toward the two made Chinese views completely fixed within the Cold War framework of friend and foe until the end of the 1970s, when China started to adopt the reforming and opening up policies and then mitigated its harsh attitudes toward South Korea from the late 1980s.

The change in China's attitudes toward South Korea accelerated around the end of the Cold War by a series of internal and external events, including China's desperate need for breaking its diplomatic isolation and the final collapse of the Soviet Union. China's redefinition of its attitudes broke the long-fixed Cold War framework of friend and foe and eventually led to the establishment of diplomatic ties between the former adversaries in 1992. The long-awaited normalization has not only made remarkable progress in bilateral economic cooperation, but also pushed overall relations to an unexpectedly high level in only one decade. In 2003, the two countries announced the establishment of an "all-around cooperative partnership," and it was further upgraded to a "strategic and cooperative partnership" in 2008.

The swift upgrading of Sino-South Korean ties not only demonstrated the strong political willingness on both sides to further strengthen their relations, but also brought about explicit changes in Chinese views of Korean history in the Cold War era. For instance, after normalization almost all Chinese publications used an "objective description" of the origin of the Korean War without accusing South Korea of being the provoker of the war. At the same time, China's national image of the ROK has generally transformed into a much more positive one in comparison to the image of the DPRK in many aspects. Although the favorable South Korea image was seriously undermined by the "Koguryo controversy" in 2004, the positive momentum in Sino-South Korean relations has been largely sustained by the swift crisis control efforts of the two governments.¹

With all these achievements, however, China-ROK relations remain unable to overcome a congenital deficiency. The contradiction between the economic cooperation centered Sino-ROK relations and the security cooperation centered ROK-U.S. relations has made South Korea's balanced big power diplomacy unsustainable. The sudden deterioration of Sino-South Korean relations caused by the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in 2016 explicitly revealed the limits of the economic cooperation centered redefinition in China-ROK ties since the end of the Cold War. Although the redefinition of China's attitudes toward the ROK and Chinese views of Korean history has made a great difference in many areas, China's disapproval of the ROK-U.S. alliance and the ROK-U.S.-Japan military cooperation remains unchanged from the Cold War years. Thus, after more than two decades of the redefinition efforts, the mainstream Chinese view of Korean history in the Cold War era remains largely unchanged, especially when it comes to the confrontational relations between China and South Korea. Even when the two sides have successfully stabilized relations through the summit between President Xi Jinping and President Moon Jae-in in Beijing at the end of 2017, it remains to be seen if the insuperable differences between mainstream Chinese and South Korean views of Korean history could be greatly narrowed in the years ahead.

The Korean War

It is no exaggeration to say that the Korean War was the most crucial event in formulating contemporary Chinese perceptions towards the Korean Peninsula, not only directly affecting attitudes and policies toward the two Koreas during the Cold War, but also having significant implications for these relations in the post-Cold War era. Chinese perceptions of the Korean War were first formulated right after the eruption of the war and were partially reshaped four decades later when diplomatic normalization was realized, and the relevant dossiers of the former Soviet Union were released from the middle of the 1990s.

On July 25, 1950, a month after the war began, Xinhua News Agency issued a crucial report entitled “On the Issues of the Korean War,” giving a comprehensive interpretation in a Q&A format about what had just happened on the peninsula. In answering the thirteen questions such as “who provoked the Korean War?” and “why did American imperialism invade Korea?” the report first provided background information about the policies of the two Koreas and the overall security situation on the peninsula, and then pointed out that “it was Syngman Rhee’s puppet troops which were instigated by American imperialism that had started the war.” The report described the details as follows. “The puppet troops launched a sudden attack from three directions all along the 38th parallel at dawn on June 25 and invaded into North Korea one to two kilometers.” With regard to the aim of the provocation, the report stressed that “the aim of the American imperialist invasion was to seize the whole of Korea, establish an anti-people puppet regime, deprive the Korean people of independence, freedom, and unification, and transform the whole of Korea into an American colony to serve as the aggressive springboard on the eastern borders of China and the Soviet Union for the United States.”² This report helped to shape mainstream Chinese views on the Korean War right after it broke out and remained largely influential throughout the Cold War years.

Although such an interpretation of the origin of the Korean War contradicted the mainstream views in the international community, the report’s description of the situation on the peninsula as a whole, especially the escalating political rivalry and military tensions between the two camps, and the anti-communist attempts taken by the South Korean authority and the U.S. forces, was much easier for the majority of the Chinese public to embrace. In fact, since the end of WWII, the Cold War confrontation between the Soviet-led socialist camp and the U.S.-led capitalist camp on the Korean Peninsula had loomed large. As the report explained, the South had long been preparing for the invasion of the North, and “from January 1949 to April 1950 Syngman Rhee’s puppet troops had already launched 1,274 attacks on the 38th parallel,” and Syngman Rhee himself had repeated his desire to conquer the North just days before the eruption of the Korean War.

Under these circumstances, the newly founded China had no option but to further strengthen its ties with North Korea and the Soviet Union, with which it already shared a wide range of political and diplomatic interests as well as security concerns. From China’s perspective, supporting the DPRK’s stance was not only a political and diplomatic necessity, but also an essential measure for safeguarding its own political and national security interests. When the U.S. Seventh Fleet was dispatched to the Taiwan Strait and a Chinese

city near North Korea was bombed, China was compelled to fight the war for not only the survival of its communist ally but also its own national security. The war slogan of “resisting American aggression and aiding North Korea, protecting our homes and defending our country” clearly reflected both the circumstances and the perceptions in which China had made the decision to send the CPVA to cross the Yalu River and head south in October 1950.

During the three years of war on the peninsula, the CPVA experienced the hardest fighting and paid a heavy price. However, from the mainstream Chinese perspective, as one Chinese high school history book described the event a half century later, the outcome of the Korean War was quite positive for China. “In the Korean War, the new China has carried out three years of war with the United States—the most powerful country in the world—and broken the myth of the invincible American army. The attempt by the U.S. to kill the Asian socialist countries through the war was a complete failure. The new China was forced to carry out the war of ‘resisting America and aiding North Korea, protecting our home and defending our country’ when the imperialist forces spread the flames of the war to its threshold. Consequently, the war has helped secure China’s national security, aided the just cause of the Korean people, and China’s international status has been greatly improved.”³

The significance of the war has been further stressed by Xu Yan, Ruan Jiixin, and Zhang Shunhong. Xu made an impassioned argument, saying that current “China’s status as a strong world military power was just created by the war, the national pride lost during the hundred years after the Opium War had been restored, and thus it became the psychological strong point for the Chinese national rejuvenation...the war of ‘resisting America and aiding North Korea, protecting our home and defending our country’ was the most glorious victory in Chinese modern foreign war history. It started from the Yalu River and repelled the world’s strongest army back for 500 kilometers and saved its neighbor. From the military point of view, the war forged a security buffer zone for several hundred kilometers and a peaceful situation for several decades. Today, looking back to the war, we feel deeply the correctness of Mao Zedong’s analysis, that is, ‘we should participate in the war, we must participate in the war, the interests of participation will be enormous, and the damages of non-participation will be tremendous.’”⁴

In his article refuting some criticisms of China’s participation in the war, Ruan criticized the argument that China had actually supported North Korea to wage the Korean War as “ill-founded,” and emphasized that China’s participation in the war was not only necessary and significant, but also “demonstrated new China’s national image and responsibility as a rising big power to the world.”⁵ Similar to Yuan’s argument, Zhang rebutted the view that “China’s participation in the war was a mistake” by raising four points to further emphasize the meaning of China’s involvement in the war, namely: 1) the United States compelled China’s involvement; 2) the spirit of the CPVA was world shaking; 3) China’s participation enormously inspired the Chinese people; and 4) China’s participation highly raised China’s international status.⁶ As mentioned above, all these enthusiastic assessments of China’s participation in the Korean War have represented the mainstream Chinese perception of the Korean War and remain influential in shaping China’s attitudes and policies toward the Korean Peninsula at the present time.

Friend and Foe

There seems no doubt that the Korean War demonstrated to the world that new China had substantially stood up as a strong political as well as military power, but it also produced an unfortunate result by which Chinese perceptions of and relations with the two Koreas were completely confined to the Cold War framework of friend and foe for nearly four decades. Within this framework, Chinese viewed North Korea as a close political friend and security ally while regarding South Korea as a hated political foe and security threat—national images of the two presented a sharp contrast.

In the early 1950s depictions of the two Koreas in Chinese newspapers and magazines were as follows. “The government of the DPRK was democratically elected by the People of all of Korea” and its political, economic and social policies have made great progress. On the contrary, “Syngman Rhee’s so-called ‘government of the ROK’ was an anti-national and anti-people regime which was supported by American imperialism by bayonets and unlawful elections.”⁷ In the late 1950s, the economy of the DPRK had made incredible achievements, its per capita production of major industries such as coal and electricity had already exceeded or would soon catch up with that of Japan by 1961.⁸ Around the same time South Korea was in a state of economic bankruptcy. Its statistics showed that in 1959 the trade deficit and the unemployment rate reached a high level, more than 70 percent of the small and medium-sized enterprises, which accounted for 99 percent of South Korean manufacturing companies, had collapsed or stopped doing business, and South Korean industrial output had fallen to only half of that at the end of Japanese imperialist rule. Furthermore, political life was in chaos. In 1960 the election fraud triggered mass protests and Syngman Rhee’s puppet government was finally overthrown by the South Korean people, this was the message transmitted to Chinese audiences.⁹

In the 1960s and 1970s similar stories appeared. A report in the early 1960s noted that in the past 15 years the DPRK had achieved two great victories—safeguarded its freedom and independence by defeating the annexing attempts of American imperialism, and successfully “built a hundred times better industrial and agricultural socialist country.” “During the recent 15 years Korean history has entered into an era of leaps-and-bounds development.”¹⁰ It has continued to march smoothly along the road of socialist construction and constantly made new achievements in both the agricultural and industrial areas.¹¹ And the people of the DPRK are “living in great happiness.”¹² South Korea, however, was reported to be under the strict control of U.S. imperialism and to have become an American colony, i.e. “American commodity market, raw material base, and military base.”¹³ Meanwhile, the American and Japanese colonization of Korean culture has become a serious social problem in South Korea,¹⁴ readers were told.

Due to two decades of economic plunder by U.S. imperialism, the economy of South Korea was not only going bankrupt, the country as a whole had turned into “a hell on earth.”¹⁵ Politically, South Korea was under the brutal dictatorship of Park Chung-hee whose fascist rule had encountered constant crisis and could collapse at any time.¹⁶

In the 1980s the positive tone of Chinese views on the DPRK remained the same. For example, a member of the Chinese governmental delegation which visited the DPRK in 1983 wrote his thoughts on North Korea as follows. “During the past 35 years the DPRK

has undergone dramatic changes. This is the most glorious time in Korean history.”¹⁷ In 1987 a Chinese reporter who revisited the DPRK after 34 years could not believe his eyes: the city of Pyongyang had not only turned into a completely new modern city, but also an unbelievably huge city of industrial arts. During his trip near the DMZ, he felt that there was one thing disastrous for Koreans—the continued division of the Korean Peninsula.¹⁸

Although China’s views on North Korea remained unchanged, its views on South Korea have shown some positive change from the late 1980s—not only had the tone on South Korean politics become less negative, but also the comments on its economy shifted completely to the positive side, partially due to China’s adoption of the reform and opening up policy at the end of the 1970s. In the increased reports and articles focusing on the economy, South Korea was for the first time in the Cold War years introduced positively by Chinese media as the top economic power among “the four dragons in Asia,” which not only created “the most recent successful story in Asia,” but also showed its strong capacity in economic competition with Japan and the United States. In this regard, “South Korea’s experience is worth learning.”¹⁹

The friend-and-foe framework had been reiterated by Chinese mainstream sources for more than three decades with serious implications for China’s foreign policy and diplomacy in the Cold War era. Attitudes and policies toward the two Koreas were consequently twisted to a great extent by those perceptions. On the one hand, China formed a “special relationship” with the North and tried hard to maintain it at any cost. On the other, China took a harsh attitude towards the South and made great efforts to denounce the South’s stances and policies. As a result of the unbalanced approach, China-North Korean relations showed signs of unusual development while China-South Korean relations made no progress until the end of the Cold War.

China’s stereotyped attitudes and policies toward North Korea stand out. Throughout the Cold War period, China had supported almost all the arguments and policies of the North even when they were pursued in an inconsistent and self-contradictory way. For instance, China had been a strong supporter of North Korea’s reunification policies during the Cold War years. In the 1950s China enthusiastically supported North Korea’s argument of withdrawing all foreign troops from the Korean Peninsula in order to achieve reunification through free elections by all Koreans. In August 1960 when North Korean leader Kim Il-sung made a reunification proposal that the North and the South should achieve their reunification by federalism, China quickly issued a statement backing the North’s stance. In June 23, 1973 when Kim Il-sung issued a five-point plan for achieving “independent and peaceful reunification,” China quickly gave its strong endorsement by saying that this proposal represented all of the Korean people’s strong desire for the reunification of their motherland, and it is not only good for reunification itself, but also conducive to easing tensions on the peninsula.

Premier Zhou Enlai expressed China’s “warm welcome and firm support” two days after Kim’s remarks were made.²⁰ Even when North Korea refused the U.S. proposal for holding three-party (North, South and U.S.) talks and instead called for bilateral talks with the United States in the late 1970s, China backed North Korea’s position by saying that the three-party talks were “unrealistic and unreasonable.” However, when North Korean leader

Kim Il-sung changed his mind and picked up the U.S. proposal years later in October 1983, China quickly followed North Korea's new position by saying that the three-party talks would be "conducive to ease tensions and also promote North-South reunification on the Korean Peninsula."²¹

All these positions reflected the unusual development of the "China-North Korean special relationship" and the weakness in China's policies toward the DPRK. As Liu Jinzhi's research suggested, China's stances and policies concerning Korean reunification were "unscientific and less objective" simply because they had been more or less affected by the stances and policies of North Korea rather than independent policies of China's own, which should be based on the objective truth and China's own national interests. Consequently, they prevented China from playing a "bigger, more positive and constructive role on matters relevant to Korean reunification."²²

On the contrary, China's attitudes and policies toward South Korea in the Cold War years were stuck with a sharp contrast. In the 1950s China viewed it mainly as a security threat because the South reiterated its intention to attack the North and reunify the Korean Peninsula. In many news reports, South Korea was portrayed as an aggressive tool for American imperialism in Northeast Asia. In the 1960s, especially when South Korea established diplomatic relations with Japan in 1965, the alliance relationships among South Korea, Japan, and the United States became the main target of Chinese criticism. China believed the signing of the Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea was a "serious step taken by American imperialism to prop up Japanese militarism to return to the Korean Peninsula, and conspire to piece together the 'military alliance in Northeast Asia' and escalate tensions in the Far East." This alliance, "which was designed and manipulated by American imperialism, would put Japan at its core and include South Korea, the Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek) bandit gang, and the Philippines as its major members, with a view to containing the socialist countries of China, North Korea, and Vietnam. In this malicious plot, the United States wanted to "turn Asians against Asians" while Japan wanted to realize its old dream of building "the Great East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere."²⁴

In the 1970s when the Park Chung-hee administration further strengthened ties with Japan and the United States, especially when the increasing number of U.S.-South Korea military exercises were condemned by North Korea, South Korea bashing in Chinese newspapers and magazines intensified accordingly. Park was depicted as a counterrevolutionary and saboteur of the independent and peaceful reunification of the two Koreas, who was not only making South Korean society more fascist, but also preparing war against the North, and escalating tensions on the peninsula. And, thus, even his assassination in 1979 was not sufficient punishment for his crimes.²⁵

In the 1980s Chinese attitudes toward South Korea were characterized by firm support of the North's reunification policies and harsh criticism of the South's "splitting attempts." Especially when South Korea and the United States refused Kim Il-sung's proposals for reunification and three-party talks, newspapers condemned South Korea's stance by saying that "the United States and Chun Doo-hwan forces were the culprits to obstruct the peaceful reunification of the Korean Peninsula."²⁶ And when North Korea criticized the visits to the South by Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro and President Ronald Reagan in 1983 as

attempts to split the Korean Peninsula and legitimize the “two Koreas” permanently, Chinese newspapers expressed their unchanged support for the North’s position by saying that the visits were not conducive to maintaining peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula.²⁷

All these views showed that in the Cold War years China’s attitudes and policies toward South Korea were explicitly restrained by the friend and foe framework. As Liu’s research concluded, in the Cold War years, “China’s policies toward South Korea were in large part a product of a Cold War mentality. China viewed South Korea as an American bridgehead trying to contain and stifle China. China had an extremely strong ideological bias towards South Korea. In the eyes of the Chinese people, South Korea was a country under the control of the United States and with the features of a political dictatorship, economic backwardness, and constant student strife and mass movements.”²⁸ It was in this context that China had opposed all of the unification suggestions from the South even when they were in line with China’s principles, while supporting every unification proposal of the North even when at odds with China’s stance throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Thus, China’s unbalanced relationship with the two Koreas not only made the early improvement of China-South Korea relations difficult, but also gave the green light to the continuation of the unusual development of China-DPRK relations.

Redefinition and Its Limitations

The rigid attitudes and policies toward the two Koreas faced a new domestic reality in the late 1970s. The reform and opening up policy required not only a dramatic domestic policy change—from a class struggle-centered policy to an economic development-centered policy—but also a profound foreign policy change to broaden contacts with the outside world. The fast-growing domestic demand for foreign trade, investment, and technology entailed improvement of relations with the advanced economies, especially with those of close neighbors. After the successful diplomatic normalization in 1972 and smooth economic cooperation in the 1980s with Japan, the “economic miracle on the Han River” became much more attractive for meeting China’s national needs. It was against this backdrop that from the late 1980s Chinese attitudes toward the ROK have shown some signs of positive change—harsh criticism of the government disappeared, meanwhile, economy-focused reports and articles increased. Nevertheless, the Cold War framework of friend and foe was so deeply rooted in Chinese society that the economic necessity alone was not strong enough to bring a redefinition of attitudes and policies toward the ROK. It was not until several internal and external historical changes, including China’s desperate need for breaking its diplomatic isolation, the ROK’s implementation of Nordpolitik toward the DPRK and its allies, the establishment of diplomatic ties between Russia and the ROK, and the final collapse of the Soviet Union, occurred at the end of the 1980s and in the early 1990s, that favorable conditions for the redefinition of China’s attitudes and policies materialized. In 1992 China and the ROK established diplomatic relations after nearly forty years of Cold War confrontation.

The hard-won diplomatic normalization between the former adversaries facilitated fast-growing economic cooperation and led to new levels of political cooperation, as in the 2008 “strategic and cooperative partnership.” From the Chinese perspective, factors contributing

to these developments were geographic proximity, similar cultural background, interlinked values, similar experiences suffering from aggression and oppression by Japanese militarism, mutual support for each other's national liberation war against Japan, and common interests at the present time.²⁹ Furthermore, in 2013, President Park Geun-hye skipped Japan and paid a state visit to China. In return, President Xi Jinping visited Seoul instead of Pyongyang in 2015.

China's expectations for Sino-South Korean relations rose to an unrealistic level. As Li Dunqiu argued in a newspaper article published in August 2015, not only should the South Korean president attend the 70th anniversary of the victory in China's resistance war against Japan in Beijing, but also the two countries should take this opportunity to transform their relations into a "destiny community," because historically such destiny community relations were long maintained between China and the Korean Peninsula in the form of a traditional tributary relationship, and the first transformation from a tributary relationship to modern diplomatic relations was realized by signing the Sino-Korean treaty of commerce in 1899. Now China and South Korea have another historic opportunity to transform their economic community into a new destiny community. "History has long proven that only if China and South Korea will be able to maintain their destiny community, will real peace on the Korean Peninsula and real stability in Northeast Asia be achieved."³⁰

Although South Korea was far from ready for building a destiny community with China, political will for broadening shared interest in history issues against Japan remained. As the symbolic showcase of their common stance on history issues against Japan, the An Jung-geun memorial located in Harbin was open to the public in 2014. And in 2015, Park disregarded the pressure from the United States and Japan and attended the 70th anniversary of the victory of China's resistance war against Japan.

Along with these developments, Sino-South Korean normalization has also brought about explicit changes in Chinese views of Korean history in the Cold War era, especially with regard to the Korean War. After normalization, almost all formal publications have adopted the "objective description" for the origin of the war by simply saying that "the Korean War broke out in June 25, 1950" without mentioning who started the war. This change reflected both political considerations for carefully handling relations with the two Koreans and the view that the Korean War was a civil war and the U.S.-led UN intervention compelled China's involvement. Although from the late 1990s as the relevant dossiers of the former Soviet Union were released, some Chinese authors started making arguments against North Korea and the former Soviet Union with regard to the origin of the Korean War and even questioned the legitimacy of China's participation in it including its negative impact on resolution of the Taiwan issue and on China's economy at that time,³¹ it seems that these academic arguments resonated weakly and have been far from being embraced by the mainstream at the present time.

The "objective description" of the Korean War has also indicated China's political efforts of trying to play a balanced role in dealing with the two Koreas after its diplomatic rapprochement with South Korea, even though the outcomes often turned out to be less positive than China had expected. For instance, when the *Cheonan* sinking incident occurred in March 2010 and the ROK-led international investigation concluded that the South Korean warship had been sunk by a North Korean torpedo fired by a midget submarine (North Korea denied that it was responsible for the sinking), China dismissed the ROK conclusion

as not credible and argued that “China will not be partial to either side” but hopes South Korea and other relevant parties remain calm and handle the incident properly. Thus, the UN Security Council issued a presidential statement condemning the attack but without identifying the attacker. It was obvious that China’s “objective and balanced” stance concerning the *Cheonan* sinking incident was a big disappointment to South Korea’s high expectations for its already established strategic partnership with China, and consequently further strengthened the existing strategic ties between South Korea and the United States. Such a result was apparently in contradiction to what China wanted to see.

If China’s redefinition of its attitudes and policies toward South Korea has made a great difference in many respects, its limitations became apparent when Sino-South Korean relations encountered a sudden downturn in 2016 caused by the South Korean decision to deploy the U.S.-made THAAD system and the Chinese response. From the Chinese perspective, the THAAD deployment in South Korea means that “the United States’ plan to incorporate South Korea into its global anti-missile system has finally made a substantial breakthrough, it has not only continued destroying both the global strategic stability and regional security environment, but also become the fuse of a new Cold War in Northeast Asia.”³² In other words, China believed that the THAAD deployment was part of a U.S. global strategy, and in the process South Korea has already become “an accomplice of the United States in containing China.”³³ Meanwhile, South Korea’s softened attitude toward Japan including reaching agreement both on the “comfort women” issue and on military information sharing, which means building military alliance relations among the United States, Japan, and South Korea, was with the aim of eventually confronting China.³⁴

Although the Cold War was formally over in Europe, it still remained in Northeast Asia especially on the Korean Peninsula. “The reason why the Korean Peninsula is unable to get rid of the Cold War is that some countries are reluctant to give up the goal of subverting the socialist country and do not want to give up their military presence in Northeast Asia.”³⁵ Therefore, in Chinese eyes the situation created by the THAAD deployment was something quite similar to the situation of the Cold War confrontation in the 1950s-60s when China and the DPRK fiercely condemned the U.S.-Japan-South Korean military alliance relations.

It seems obvious that the sudden deterioration of Sino-South Korean relations has revealed the congenital deficiency in this relationship: the political as well as mutual security distrust sustained by the remaining Cold War legacy on the Korean Peninsula, including the existing U.S.-South Korean alliance and increasing military cooperation among the United States, Japan, and South Korea. This inborn weakness in China-ROK relations manifestly emerged when the South Korean government decided to deploy THAAD in 2016, which consequently created a sharp downturn in bilateral relations some twenty years after normalization. The sudden deterioration of bilateral ties has explicitly revealed the limits of the economic cooperation-centered redefinition in China-ROK relations since the end of the Cold War. Although altered Chinese views of the relationship and of Korean history have made a great difference in many areas, China’s disapproval of the ROK-U.S. alliance and the trilateral military cooperation remains unchanged from what it was during the Cold War years. This might be the main reason that after more than two decades of redefinition efforts, mainstream Chinese views of Korean history in the Cold War era remain largely unchanged, especially when it comes to the confrontational relations between China, South Korea, and the United States.

Conclusion

During the Cold War years, Chinese views of Korean history were decisively affected by the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950. The mainstream view on the Korean War was dominated by the following arguments: the war was planned and waged by the U.S. imperialists and the puppet South Korea authority with a view to overthrowing the North Korean and Chinese governments; China, therefore, was compelled to fight for not only the survival of its communist ally but also its own national security; the outcome of the war, however, was quite positive for China—proving to the world that China has substantially stood up as a great power which had just overwhelmed the world’s strongest army on the battleground of the Korean Peninsula. The Korean War further fixed the Cold War framework of friend and foe, in which China viewed the DPRK as a close political friend and security ally while regarding the ROK as a hated political foe and security threat. China’s images of the two Koreas were in sharp contrast. In foreign policy, it supported almost all of the North’s policies while denouncing almost everything from the South. The diplomatic normalization between China and South Korea and the redefinition of China’s views and policies toward the ROK, along with the remarkable achievements in only two decades in Sino-South Korean relations, were unable to overcome a congenital deficiency—the mutual security distrust caused by the remaining Cold War legacy. China’s disapproval of the continued military alliance relationship and cooperation among the United States, Japan, and South Korea has clearly revealed the limitations in the redefinition of Chinese perceptions towards South Korea in the post-Cold War era.

Writings about Korean history construct a framework through which to interpret how ongoing developments in bilateral and international relations will be perceived. As long as the assessments of the history of the Cold War era remain rooted in arguments long familiar to the Chinese people, there will be a disposition to find continuities and doubt that the post-Cold War decades and the history of China’s relations with South Korea have brought fundamental change on matters of geopolitics or national identity.

Endnotes

¹ Jin Linbo, “Sino-South Korean Differences over Koguryo and the U.S. Role,” in *U.S. Leadership, History, and Bilateral Relations in Northeast Asia*, ed. Gilbert Rozman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 171-189.

² *Renmin ribao*, July 26, 1950.

³ *Lishi: 20shiji de zhanzheng yu heping* (Beijing: Renmin jiaoyu chubanshe, 2004), 108.

⁴ Xu Yan, “Chaoxian zhanzheng yu kangmei yuanchao shi liangge gainian,” *Huanqiu shibao*, July 27, 2013.

⁵ Ruan Jiaxin, “Liqing kangmei yuanchao zhong de jige zhongda wenti,” *Bainian chao*, no. 9 (2014).

- ⁶ Zhang Shunhong, "Kangmei yuanchao de yiyi burong digu," *Zhongguo shehui kexue bao*, June 9, 2014.
- ⁷ *Renmin ribao*, July 26, 1950.
- ⁸ Fang Wei, "Minzhu Chaoxian gan Riben," *Shijie zhishi*, no. 3 (1959): 13.
- ⁹ Yu mu, "Chunlei zhenche Nanchaoxian," *Shijie zhishi*, no. 9 (1960): 7-10.
- ¹⁰ Wang Yuzhang, "Cheng qianlima gaoge mengjin: ji Chaoxian jiefanghou shiwu nian lai de jianshe chengjiu," *Shijie zhishi*, no. 16 (1960), 27-29.
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