

Resetting the South Korea–China Relationship: The THAAD Controversies and Their Aftermath

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Despite 25 years of unprecedentedly friendly ties between South Korea and China, the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) disputes and China's ensuing sanctions against South Korea have forced the bilateral relationship into an unprecedented standoff. Given South Korea's growing dependence on China in economic and North Korean affairs, commentators always assumed that the South Korean government would "manage" this relationship. China has maintained a close relationship to keep South Korea within its orbit, restraining Seoul from further efforts to strengthen the U.S.–South Korean alliance. However, the Park Geun-hye government's decision to respond to North Korea's incessant provocations by deploying the THAAD system in South Korea caused China to implement economic retaliation. The ensuing paralysis of bilateral relations has lasted for over a year. A key problem for the future of the bilateral relationship is the fact that both countries have lost trust in each other. China views South Korea's decision to deploy THAAD as a betrayal of its support, while South Korea objects to China's relentless economic bullying. Consequently, post-THAAD South Korea–China relations are likely to reflect South Korea's efforts to reduce its dependency on China and to manage its development in a more balanced way.

Keywords: THAAD controversy, South Korea–China relations, Victory Day, economic retaliation, post-THAAD

Introduction

Throughout a quarter-century of bilateral ties between South Korea and China, there has never been a more dramatic and diplomatically volatile period in the government-to-government relationship than the one under former South Korean President Park Geun-hye and current Chinese Chairman Xi Jinping. In an altered form, this has continued

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under the mandate of South Korean president Moon Jae-in. At the inception of their respective administrations in 2013, Park and Xi actively sought to improve bilateral relations under the aegis of a “strategic cooperative partnership.” This included the initiation of various cooperative schemes: high-level dialogue; the conclusion of a bilateral Free Trade Agreement (FTA); and South Korea’s admission to the China-led Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). President Xi saw these measures as steps toward the bilateral relationship becoming “the best-ever national relationship in history.”¹ In particular, Park’s participation in China’s 70th Anniversary Commemoration of the end of WWII in September 2015 was symbolically important, reflecting the maximally upgraded Seoul–Beijing partnership. This increasingly close South Korea–China relationship even hit a sweet spot of international acceptance, as the United States understood Park’s attendance at the parade as indicative of benignly positive ties between South Korea and China, rather than a strategic “tilt” toward China.²

However, North Korea’s fourth nuclear test in January 2016 precipitated a rapid degradation of the brief Seoul–Beijing strategic partnership, as bilateral relations devolved into an unprecedented diplomatic and economic standoff. The proximate cause of the dispute was a decision by the U.S.–South Korea alliance to install Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) in South Korean territory, supporting the U.S. Forces in South Korea. China rejected the stated South Korean and U.S. rationale for deploying the missile-defense battery, namely, that it promoted South Korean security and protected alliance forces from the growing threat of North Korean missiles. Beijing criticized the South Korean government’s decision as a threat to its own national security,³ claiming that the THAAD’s radar system could penetrate deeply and effectively enough into China to compromise its strategic deterrence.⁴ For their part, South Korea’s leaders were initially upset about three related aspects of China’s position. First, although Xi, at the Victory Day summit in Beijing, had committed to cooperating with South Korea if North Korea offered further provocations, China remained silent after Pyongyang’s fourth nuclear test, despite Park’s repeated contacts with Beijing. Second, this silence, in part, convinced South Korea to install THAAD, a decision it had postponed in previous years, despite U.S. pressure.⁵ Third, Seoul perceived China’s fury as disingenuous, an attempt to circumscribe Seoul’s sovereign right to self-defense. South Korea rejected China’s argument that the THAAD radar compromised China’s strategic deterrence, viewing China’s complaint as a preliminary objection to any potential future U.S.–South Korea (or U.S.–South Korea–Japan) cooperation on missile defense.⁶

Following tense diplomatic negotiations, the Chinese government imposed economic retaliatory measures to pressure South Korea into abandoning THAAD. China’s sanctions against South Korea’s businesses, entertainment industry, and tourism took a severe toll on the country’s economy. This economic coercion, coupled with growing diplomatic pressure that China imposed on various governmental meetings and people-to-people exchanges, brought South Korea–China relations to their lowest ebb since diplomatic normalization in 1992.⁷

The clash revealed an underlying fact: the neighboring countries shared “a common misconception about the[ir] growing relationship.”⁸ Since the turn of the century—

when bilateral interdependence, in economic, diplomatic, and cultural terms, became more substantive—South Korea and China have approached each other with unstated strategic motivations. South Korea expected close South Korea–China relations to induce a strategic shift, weakening China’s ties with North Korea and ultimately leading to peace on the Korean peninsula. China expected the growing intimacy of bilateral economic, cultural, and diplomatic interactions to place South Korea within China’s orbit, weakening the U.S.–South Korean alliance, a major Chinese desideratum.⁹ However, in the aftermath of Pyongyang’s fourth nuclear test, Beijing’s lukewarm reaction demonstrated to a disillusioned Seoul that its expanding ties with China did not extend as far as a Chinese policy shift toward North Korea. Frustrated by the subsequent deployment of THAAD on South Korean territory, Beijing also concluded that its charm offensive toward Seoul had failed to undermine the U.S.–South Korea alliance. This situation triggered a vicious cycle effect, whereby Beijing doubled down on its economic sanctions against Seoul, which then felt justified in pursuing greater cohesion with the United States, both to defend itself against North Korea in the near-to-medium-term and to build a strategic security hedge against China in the long-term.¹⁰

Since May 2017, when Moon Jae-in replaced Park Geun-hye, a series of official attempts have been made to end the THAAD dispute and restore South Korea–China ties. On October 31, 2017, South Korea’s new administration and the Xi government officially declared a mutual agreement to settle the THAAD controversies and put bilateral relations back on track. This was followed by a South Korea–China summit meeting in Danang, Vietnam on November 11, where both leaders reemphasized intentions to “swiftly restore exchange and cooperation in all areas to a normal track.”¹¹ In December, President Moon pledged a “new start” for South Korea–China relations during his first official visit to Beijing for a summit meeting with Xi. However, despite official commitments and efforts to improve bilateral contacts, South Korea–China relations have not significantly improved. Far fewer Chinese group tours visit South Korea. Major South Korean businesses embedded in China (such as the consumer-goods hypermarket chain Lotte) have never resumed full operations since their coerced closure; in some cases, they have exited the Chinese market entirely. The Korean entertainment industry is struggling to regain Chinese market share.¹² Furthermore, such tepid bilateral relations seem to continue in a foreseen future, like the previous couple of years.

This article raises two questions: is the strategic nature of the THAAD disputes so important that South Korea and China cannot resolve their relationship problems through diplomatic or economic pathways? How will the THAAD disputes impact South Korea’s security policy going forward?

First, this article argues that the THAAD disputes cannot be resolved, but only subdued, as they are symptomatic of strategic competition between the United States and China. South Korea and China must move their relationship forward within this rivalrous context. Unsurprisingly, issues of resolve and trust also play a role. The THAAD system is fully deployed; Seoul has given no indication of any possible withdrawal. The dispute thus cannot end unless China backs down, which entails losing face. On the economic side, South Korean businesses have lost trust in the Chinese market and are

repositioning themselves to reduce dependence on China. It is therefore clear that, in the aftermath of THAAD, South Korea and China face a new environment. They must build new structures of diplomatic and economic interaction within a strategic context in which South Korean hedging between Beijing and Washington will be a more fraught endeavor.

South Korea and China: Same Bed, Different Dreams

Beginning with normalization in 1992, South Korea and China developed their bilateral relationship with speed, scope, and enthusiasm. The key to this successful development was mutual economic cooperation, combined with friendly people-to-people relations. As of 2018, the value of bilateral trade was \$268.6 billion, forty-two times larger than in 1992 (\$6.37 billion), with an average annual growth of 15.7 percent. FDI also increased significantly: South Korea's FDI in China has grown twenty-four-fold, from \$0.14 billion in 1992 to \$4.8 billion in 2018, while China's FDI in Korea over the same period has soared an astonishing 1,900-fold from \$1.05 million to \$2.7 billion. In terms of human exchange, the number of visitors from both sides has expanded sixty-seven-fold, from 130,000 in 1992 to 8.8 million in 2018.¹³ Although South Korea's growing economic dependence on China's market has raised concerns in Seoul, the dynamic economic and cultural cooperation and growing economic interdependence between South Korea and China have, for twenty-five years, served as a major rationale for maintaining friendly and cooperative bilateral ties.¹⁴

As the concept of the "Asian Paradox" indicates, over the last three decades there has been a discrepancy between accelerating economic interdependence and retrograde political–security cooperation among the regional states in East Asia.¹⁵ This discrepancy has been particularly conspicuous in South Korea–China relations; despite unprecedentedly intensive growth in bilateral economic interdependence, South Korea and China have developed very limited political and security cooperation. As a military ally of the United States, South Korea is constrained in its defense and security cooperation with China, a rising competitor to the United States. Additionally, North Korea's incessant military provocations and China's reluctance to punish this belligerence have served as obstacles to more developed South Korea–China political–security and defense ties.¹⁶ Although China, facing an ever-deepening rivalry with the United States, has embraced an optimistic perspective on weakening the U.S.–South Korea alliance, the alliance has not been weakened much. Therefore, China continues to complain that the U.S.–South Korea alliance represents a critical barrier to South Korea–China cooperation on political, defense, and security affairs.

The (limited) space available for recent Sino–South Korean exploration of better strategic relations is a consequence of combined theoretical perspectives. That is, efforts to achieve strategic rapprochement have been overdetermined theoretically. Under Park, a strong pro-Washington partner, South Korea's conservatives faced little opposition to their attempts to develop strategic common ground with China. Progressive Democrats,

who were less enthusiastic about the South Korea–U.S. military alliance, were in the wilderness, unable to enact the typical pattern of progressives coming to power after conservatives (the party of Lee Myung-bak, Park’s predecessor) lost the presidency. In this situation, alliance bargaining theory would predict that the ruling party would have domestic political space to experiment with its alliance relationship.¹⁷ This is exactly what happened, albeit in a counter-intuitive way. A typical form of policy experimentation in this situation would involve conservatives moving toward marginally deeper involvement in the alliance partnership. However, the theory also opens up the possibility that the ruling party partner could explore options inconsistent with previous alliance behavior (the “only Nixon could go to China” effect). This was indeed the case for Park, who took advantage of domestic political strength, a weak opposition, and the relatively calm situation with North Korea in 2013–2015 to attempt to bring China onside using forms of strategic outreach previously closed off to other conservative administrations (and usually off-limits to progressive South Korean administrations too vulnerable to criticism as “pro-communist” to stray far from the U.S. strategic line).

As for China, starting in the early 2010s, China’s increasingly close ties to South Korea were opportunistically driven by one strategic aim, the desire to probe whether South Korea was open to some degree of strategic autonomy that could weaken the U.S.–South Korea alliance. China chose a propitious time to explore this possibility. From a theoretical perspective, U.S.–China regional competition can be understood through power-transition theory, which would predict that a rising China would enter a period of pronounced potential conflict with the United States, once the power differential between the two rivals fell to 20 percent or less.¹⁸ Once within that power-differential window, China and the United States could enter into open conflict. Although China is currently within that power-differential window, in East Asia, it is not ready to initiate open conflict and must tread lightly when attempting to pry South Korea out of the U.S. strategic orbit. This was one reason why Xi chose the early to mid-2010s to attempt to coax Seoul into a closer partnership with Beijing. North Korea’s open threats had subsided, following attacks on South Korea in 2010 and nuclear and missile/SLV tests in 2012–2013. Economic connections had acquired enormous significance for both China and South Korea. The United States wanted its rebalanced relationship with Asia to appear non-threatening to China; it therefore allowed its allies to experiment with rebalancing their own economic and security relationships. Thus, Xi’s attempt to woo Park came at an advantageous time, when it was least likely to raise threat levels in Washington.

Park Geun-hye and Xi Jinping were more enthusiastic about security cooperation than any other South Korean or Chinese leaders had been for twenty-five years. Most importantly for mutual stability, they behaved in a way that was consistent with South Korea’s need to hedge its relationships with the United States and China, and China’s need to approach security relations with South Korea without driving an obvious wedge between the United States and South Korea. The backbone of this cooperation was a solid inter-state understanding, which enabled the neighbors to extend bilateral cooperation beyond the economic realm.

The friendship between Park and Xi demonstrated “a new solidarity” by reaching consensus on a number of security issues, including denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.¹⁹ In addition, memories of diplomatic aloofness between their predecessors, Lee Myung-bak and Hu Jintao, provided an impetus for closer cooperation. Lee and Hu never reached genuine cooperation on regional security issues, in contrast to the rhetorical and substantive upgrade to Park’s and Xi’s “strategic cooperative partnership” between South Korea and China. Various crises, including unexpected North Korean military provocations in 2010, the sinking of the South Korean corvette *Cheonan* in March, and the November shelling of Yeonpyeong Island, revealed that Seoul and Pyongyang were habitually forced to draw on bilateral alliance structures to manage regional security upheavals.²⁰

With previous experiences in mind, Park and Xi worked together to strengthen the bilateral relationship, with particular focus on demonstrating how cooperation would benefit the other party. Park’s primary diplomatic concern was North Korea, and she expected closer China–South Korea ties to help persuade China to support North Korean denuclearization.²¹ Beijing’s estrangement from Pyongyang, due to a growing frustration with its belligerence and nuclear ambitions, led Park to pursue South Korea–China strategic cooperation on a coordinated North Korean policy.²² Xi also had a strong rationale for improving the relationship with South Korea: consolidating China’s strategic position on the peninsula *vis-à-vis* the United States. This had long been China’s security focus; Beijing generally exerted enough influence on Seoul to keep it from strengthening the U.S.–South Korea alliance at China’s expense. Furthermore, South Korea’s burgeoning economic dependence on the Chinese market increased Beijing’s ability to pressure Seoul using economic levers.²³

To build strategic and political ties, Park and Xi frequently held summit meetings in bilateral and multilateral settings. Between 2013 and 2016, Park and Xi convened a total of eight meetings; they also made joint visits to four bilateral summit meetings *inter alia*.²⁴ These frequent summits reflected increasingly warm relations between Seoul and Beijing and gave the leaders a platform to promote their common interests and confirm mutual cooperation on sensitive security issues. At the meeting during her first state visit to Beijing in June 2013, Park not only attempted to revitalize South Korea–China relations and strengthen the strategic cooperative partnership, but also to secure China’s commitment to end North Korea’s nuclear capabilities. As indicated in a joint statement, both sides confirmed the importance of denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula, maintaining peace and stability, and making joint efforts to achieve those ends. For Park, in particular, Xi’s agreement to stop tolerating the North’s possession of nuclear weapons “under any circumstances” was a great success.²⁵

However, Park’s perceived masterstroke—albeit one that eventually became a diplomatic misplay—derived from the fact that Xi met with her before his meeting with North Korea’s new young leader, Kim Jon Un. This was partially due to circumstance, as a potential visit to Beijing appeared impossible at the time, largely due to Kim’s missile launch and third nuclear test in early 2013, executed despite Beijing’s protests. Nonetheless, Park played her hand well to achieve the meeting with Xi, taking advantage

of Beijing's frustration with Pyongyang and the debate on "abandoning North Korea" taking place within Chinese academic and policy circles. However, Park may have misperceived the summit meeting as reflecting a fundamental shift in China's strategic priorities from Pyongyang to Seoul.²⁶

Park's sense of diplomatic acumen was further reinforced when Xi visited South Korea in July 2014, becoming the first Chinese head of state since ROK–China normalization to visit South Korea without traveling to the North first. Xi's unusual visit to Seoul both marked a departure from China's diplomatic tradition of visiting Pyongyang first and was a strong sign of Beijing's displeasure with Kim's perceived unwillingness to show deference to China, his country's main ally, aid donor, investor, and trade partner.

Park also appeared to triumph diplomatically through her participation in China's celebration of the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II in September 2015. Her decision to attend the commemoration occurred as a result of China's hard lobbying of South Korea. At the time, pundits and experts in both South Korea and the United States were concerned by her administration's potential "tilt" toward China at the expense of the United States. However, by attending the parade, Park apparently secured China's cooperation in dealing with North Korea more actively and aggressively.²⁷ Park's success at the Beijing summit was confirmed by her short interview with South Korean journalists on the plane back to Seoul. She emphasized the importance of close communications between Seoul and Beijing, confirming that she intended to continue cooperating closely with China to prepare for future North Korean provocations.²⁸

As bilateral relations grew closer, Xi misperceived the relationship with South Korea. He believed that closer ties would help weaken the U.S.–South Korea alliance and prevent formation of a U.S.–South Korea–Japan alliance. Given the burgeoning trade relationship between Seoul and Beijing, which exceeded the combined value of South Korea's trade with the United States and Japan, Xi hoped that Seoul would come to prefer Beijing over the United States and Japan.²⁹ Park's decision to dispatch a group of special envoys to China before the United States, as soon as she was elected in 2013, may have reinforced Xi's misconception. Although her "good-will gesture" illustrated her strong intention to enhance the China–South Korea relationship to an unprecedented level, it also suggested that Park might deviate from Seoul's traditional diplomatic path, which focused overwhelmingly on Washington, placing top priority instead on improving relations with Beijing.³⁰ Xi's first state visit to South Korea in July 2014 also served indirectly to chip away at the U.S.–South Korea alliance. Taking advantage of Park's frosty relations with Japan, Xi attempted to draw South Korea away from Japan by emphasizing an anti-Japan coalition with Seoul, which would ultimately play a positive role in Beijing's ambition to undermine U.S. influence over the peninsula.³¹

Xi's overestimation of South Korea's "tilting" toward China at the expense of the United States was reinforced by Park's participation in China's "Victory Day Parade" in September 2015. Among all of the attendees, Park had a unique status, as a leader allied with the United States. U.S. efforts could not dissuade her from joining the commemoration in Beijing. Consequently, Xi believed that Park's participation

presented a “big catch” for Beijing, signaling Seoul’s seemingly positive response to the growing centripetal pull of Beijing’s orbit.³² However, Park’s presence alongside Xi was less about Park being snared by Beijing than about her wish to consolidate China’s support for Korean unification in the context of unprecedentedly weak ties between Beijing and Pyongyang. South Korean relations with China and the United States have often been framed in zero-sum terms, both in China and in South Korea. However, President Park intended to pursue a strong relationship with both China and the United States and showed no interest in weakening the U.S.–South Korea alliance. Her presence should have been perceived less as a big catch for Xi than as the bait with which Seoul hoped to finally hook Beijing.

Disenchantment: Losing Trust in Each Other

The high-water South Korea–China relationship between Park and Xi entered a period of fundamental challenge when North Korea conducted its fourth nuclear detonation in January 2016. North Korea’s supposed “miniaturized hydrogen bomb” test presented not only a threat to South Korea’s peace and stability, but also a strong challenge to regional security in Northeast Asia. To condemn North Korea’s provocative detonation and employ decisive measures in a bid to forestall additional nuclear development by Pyongyang, Park sought to promote diplomatic coordination among the regional states, including the United States, China, and Japan. In particular, immediately after the nuclear test, she attempted to hold prompt phone consultations with regional leaders to discuss potential UN sanctions. In contrast to her successful phone communications with President Obama and Prime Minister Abe, however, Park was not successful in reaching Xi. Without giving any detailed explanation, Xi Jinping refused to take phone calls from Park for a month. For Park, this failure to communicate with Xi was both shocking and disappointing, as she had maintained a good relationship with China, beginning with her inauguration, mainly to promote the joint management of North Korea-related issues.

By the time Xi finally did call Park, a month later, phone communication between the two leaders was scarcely possible. Both leaders’ statements merely reiterated a routine conversation about North Korea. Having lost her enthusiasm for jointly managing North Korean issues with China, Park attempted to promote South Korean security by introducing the THAAD system to South Korean soil. In fact, it was no secret that the U.S. government had been calling for a THAAD deployment in South Korea since 2014.³³ Previously, the Park administration had been reluctant to openly approve the deployment because of strong Chinese opposition and the claim that it could threaten China’s security. To avoid unnecessary confrontation and maintain a cordial relationship with China, the Park government used the pretext of the “Three Nos:” there was to be no request to the United States, no deliberation with the United States, and no decision made about the THAAD deployment.³⁴ In essence, this policy was intended to prolong the period of uncertainty, in accordance with the concept of “strategic ambiguity.” However, Pyongyang’s fourth nuclear test and China’s subsequent lukewarm attitude

toward the North forced Park into the decision on THAAD deployment.

China's leaders and most of its experts, observers, and commentators opposed the deployment of the THAAD system in South Korea. In contrast to South Korea's claimed rationale of defending itself from further North Korean provocations, Beijing's official statements presented THAAD as a regional security concern and a threat directed at China.³⁵ Chinese observers claimed that the THAAD deployment signaled the expansion of the U.S. allied ballistic-missile-defense architecture in the Asia–Pacific; it weakened China's nuclear deterrence and confirmed long-standing fears of U.S. containment of China.³⁶ For China, therefore, the only way to resolve bilateral controversies and restore Seoul–Beijing relations was the withdrawal of THAAD from South Korea. Denying the causal relationship between North Korean provocations and the deployment of the THAAD system, and without even commenting on the failure of Park–Xi phone communications in the wake of Pyongyang's fourth nuclear test, China swiftly ascribed all responsibility for the controversies to Seoul's "arbitrary" decision to deploy THAAD. Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi's comments reflected China's stance on the issue: "Korea should take practical measures to remove the thorn stuck in the throat of ROK–China relations as soon as possible," and "Whoever started the trouble should end it."³⁷

In response to South Korea's decision to install THAAD, the Chinese government launched an aggressive retaliatory economic campaign against South Korean businesses, groups, and individuals. Given Seoul's dependence on Beijing's economy, China's main objective in deploying economic coercion was to compel South Korea to abandon the THAAD deployment. Beginning in July 2016, when the South Korean government announced the deployment of the THAAD system, China restricted market access to South Korean goods and services across a range of sectors, including entertainment, consumer products, and tourism. South Korea's economic losses, resulting from China's THAAD retaliation, have been tremendous. Despite scant official data, the losses exceeded \$7.5 billion in 2017 alone, according to a report from the Hyundai Research Institute, a South Korean think tank. This report indicated that tourism was the industry hit hardest by China's punitive actions, while South Korean exports to China suffered less impact.³⁸

The Lotte Corporation, a conglomerate with significant retail operations, became a symbolic target of Chinese economic retaliation. The Chinese decided to retaliate against Lotte in particular because the Lotte group allowed one of its golf courses to become a host location for THAAD, in exchange for military-owned land. The Chinese authorities launched a punitive investigation of Lotte retail operations in various Chinese urban centers, including Shanghai, Beijing, Shenyang, and Chengdu. By May 2017, Lotte Mart reported that 74 out of its 99 stores had been forced to shut down following "fire inspections," while 13 had closed temporarily in the face of anti-Korea protests. Nearly 90 percent of the hypermarket Lotte Mart outlets in China halted operations; the rest continued to operate with far fewer customers. After more than a year of retaliation from the Chinese authorities, Lotte Mart, suffering nearly \$2 billion in lost revenue, decided to close its 11-year-old business and exit China.³⁹ Along with Lotte, South Korea's other businesses in China, including automobile manufacturers (Hyundai and Kia Motors),

confectionary producers (Orion and Nongshim), cosmetics companies (Amore Pacific), and car battery suppliers (LG Chem), also suffered from Chinese retaliation.⁴⁰

Since May 2017 and the South Korean leadership shift from Park Geun-hye to Moon Jae-in, there have been a series of official attempts to end the dispute over THAAD, ease China's "anti-Korea" ban, and restore the bilateral relationship. The dispatch of Lee Hae-chan as President Moon's special envoy to Beijing was the first step in addressing the THAAD issue dividing Seoul and Beijing. During Lee's visit, both sides recognized the need to improve bilateral ties; they agreed to hold working-level discussions on the issue of THAAD deployment.⁴¹ The South Korea–China mutual agreement on October 31, 2017 was another attempt to settle the THAAD dispute in a diplomatic way. Although neither South Korea nor China made any apparent shift in its position, both countries announced that they would put aside their differences and resume normal relations. Underpinning this agreement was South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha's announcement of the so-called "Three Nos:" no additional THAAD deployment, no use of further missile-defense systems, and no Korea–U.S.–Japan military alliance. Although Seoul had said that no real concessions would be offered on this issue, the government in Beijing interpreted this announcement as a promise that must be followed by action.⁴² It was followed on November 11 by the China–South Korea summit meeting in Danang, Vietnam, on the sidelines of the APEC Summit. At that meeting, both leaders reemphasized their intention to "swiftly restore exchange and cooperation in all areas to a normal track."⁴³

President Moon's first state visit to China on December 14, 2017 represented the culmination of South Korea's efforts to accelerate the rapprochement between Seoul and Beijing. One major objective of this four-day visit was surely to rebuild trust, restore bilateral ties with China, and lift the economic sanctions imposed by Chinese authorities in response to the THAAD system deployment. To this end, Moon had drawn up an agreement to move beyond the year of diplomatic strain and economic pain, and to "advance bilateral relations to ensure long-term stability" during a summit meeting with President Xi. Moon even called for a "new era," hoping to signal a thaw in diplomatic and business relations in the South Korea–China relationship.⁴⁴ Despite these efforts, Moon's China trip was considered largely a failure. Xi's reiterated comments on THAAD, expressing his hope that South Korea would address the issue adequately, disappointed both the Moon administration and the Korean public. In addition, a number of unfriendly incidents occurred during Moon's visit, including a welcome from a low-ranking official, the lack of the customary lunch with the Chinese prime minister, "rude" Chinese media coverage, and a violent assault on Korean journalists by Chinese security guards; all of these gestures aggravated public opinion in South Korea.⁴⁵

In contrast to a flood of rhetoric from Chinese leaders, including Xi Jinping, Li Keqiang, and Yang Jiechi, who have all made firm commitments to end economic sanctions and reset the South Korea–China relationship, few tangible results have been realized in the marketplace.⁴⁶ Consequently, the bilateral relationship remains damaged beyond any direct economic consequences. The real concern is that failure to overcome the THAAD dispute has further undermined trust between South Korea and China.

South Korea's resolute decision to deploy the THAAD system disappointed Chinese citizens, whose government had raised clear and consistent objections, while China's staunch imposition of economic sanctions on South Korea to enforce the withdrawal of THAAD made South Korean businessmen doubt the value of the Chinese market. At this juncture, it remains unclear whether the THAAD dispute will play out as a fundamental impediment to South Korea–China relations, or merely represent a temporary disturbance in bilateral interactions. However, it is certain that both South Korea and China, trapped in prolonged THAAD disputes, are not only losing mutual economic benefits but also damaging mutual trust.

New Relations?

More than two years have passed since the Chinese government imposed retaliatory measures on South Korea in reprisal for THAAD. Thus, the question arises: will Chinese authorities end their economic sanctions against South Korea? If so, can China–South Korea relations be restored to their prior state of intimate economic interdependence? A review of the recent situation on the Korean peninsula suggests that China has no intention of ending its economic sanctions against South Korea.⁴⁷ Most Chinese citizens believe that the continuing existence of the THAAD system in South Korea is a structural impediment to the restoration of South Korea–China relations. As the Chinese government has often declared that the issue can only be resolved by removing the THAAD system from the Korean peninsula, most Chinese citizens believe that the Chinese government should maintain economic sanctions against South Korea as long as THAAD remains on the peninsula, imposing additional retaliatory measures whenever any issue threatens to strengthen the U.S.–South Korea alliance. Having noted President Trump's reference to suspending U.S.–South Korea joint military exercises at the press conference following the U.S.–North Korea summit in Singapore on June 12, the Chinese government recognizes the growing possibility that THAAD could be withdrawn and the U.S.–South Korean alliance dissolved. For this reason, instead of lifting economic sanctions, the Chinese authorities have ratcheted up diplomatic pressure on the South Korean government to withdraw THAAD.⁴⁸

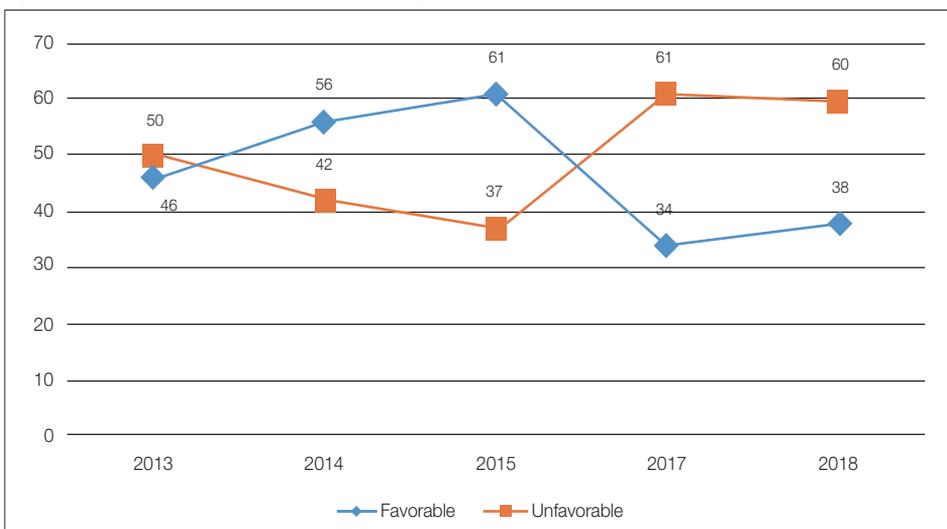
For South Koreans, too, it seems difficult to restore the relationship with China to its pre-THAAD intimacy. As Figure 1 indicates, South Koreans first demonstrated growing favorability toward China in 2013, when Park Geun-hye initiated a new era of government. South Korean public approval of China peaked in 2015, when Park attended China's Victory Day. Since the THAAD controversy emerged in 2016, however, South Korean approval ratings for China have declined, dropping by almost half their 2015 level.⁴⁹ Although China has partially eased its sanctions against South Korea since October 31, 2017, when both countries agreed to end their dispute, South Koreans now feel even less favorable toward China.⁵⁰ These statistics indicate how seriously the South Korean public views China's retaliation against South Korean businesses. As some members of the South Korean media have documented, a growing

number of South Korean citizens claim to have seen the “true face” of China in its economic retaliation. Observing that China has remained mute in the face of North Korea’s relentless provocations, on the one hand, while, on the other, imposing full-fledged economic sanctions against South Korea for deploying the purely defensive THAAD artillery, the majority of South Koreans have lost trust in and expectation of fair treatment from China.⁵¹

As approval ratings for China have declined, South Koreans have also changed their view of the United States. As Figure 2 shows, a growing percentage of South Koreans now consider the United States a friendlier potential partner for future cooperation than China, particularly since the THAAD disputes. Since the turn of the century, the United States and China have been considered key partners in ensuring the security and prosperity of South Korea. South Korea has enjoyed a close relationship with both global powers, strengthening its security through the U.S.–South Korea military alliance, and promoting its economic prosperity through growing connections with (and dependence on) the Chinese market. Although the last thing that South Koreans wanted was a U.S.–China confrontation, the THAAD dispute represented just such a confrontation; it forced South Korea to face the critical dilemma of choosing between the two giants. Given this context, Figure 2 illustrates an important point. Since 2014, the South Korean public has consistently preferred the United States over China as a potential cooperation partner. As the data demonstrate, the percentage of people choosing China (32.6 percent) was less than the percentage choosing the U.S. (59.5 percent), even in 2016, when China–South Korea relations peaked; this data reveals the inherent trust of and preference for the United States that exists among South Koreans.

Furthermore, since 2017, when the THAAD disputes began to hit South Korean

Figure 1. South Koreans’ Sense of Favorability toward China (unit: %)

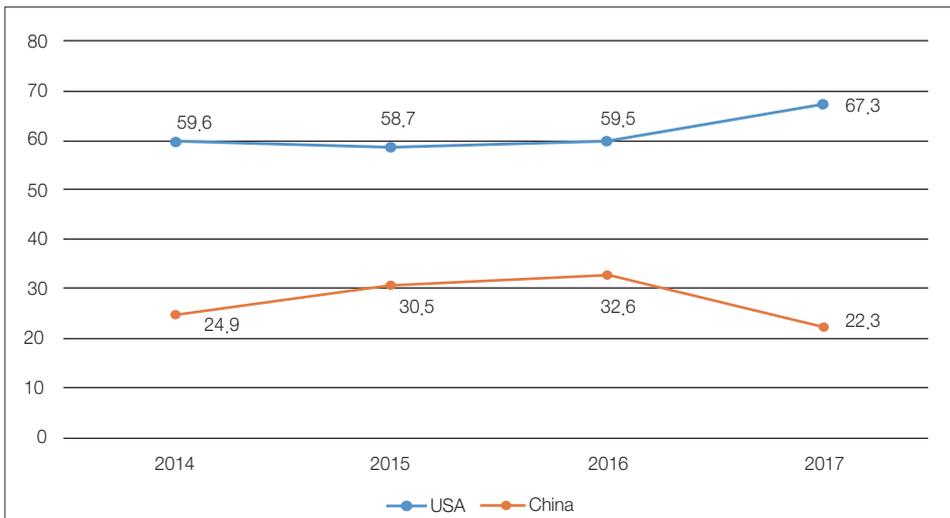


Source: Pew Research Center (2019).

society hard, the gap between the United States and China has widened further, resulting in an even larger swing away from China and toward the United States. The fact that this gap remained almost the same in 2018 suggests that most South Koreans would prefer the United States as a future partner for cooperation, despite China’s partial relaxation of THAAD retaliation since the end of 2017.⁵² These statistics reflect the fact that, following the THAAD disputes, at least two-thirds of South Koreans preferred to reduce both South Korea’s chronic economic dependence on China and China’s role in mediating South–North Korean affairs. Although not a direct consequence of the THAAD disputes, President Moon Jae-in’s summit meetings with Kim Jong Un in 2018 and the subsequent high-level contacts between South and North Korea have diminished South Korea’s dependence on China with regard to North Korean affairs.⁵³

South Korea’s dependence on China has decreased most conspicuously in the area of economic relations. Since 2017, a growing number of South Korean companies have left the Chinese market. The majority of South Korean businesses have begun to appreciate the risk and the dangers of doing business there. They are also ramping up investments in other countries, which will crowd out potential investment in China. For example, South Korea’s retail conglomerates, including Lotte Shopping and E-mart, withdrew from China because of mounting losses caused by souring relations between South Korea and China over the THAAD deployment. Other conglomerates, including Hyundai Motors, LG Chemical, Samsung SDI, SK Innovation, and Amore Pacific, have either stopped reinvesting in the Chinese market or are redirecting new investments into Southeast Asia and Europe.⁵⁴ Once they have moved out of China or diversified into new investments, it would seem very difficult for these South Korean companies to return to the Chinese market. From this perspective, China–South Korea relations are proving difficult to restore.

Figure 2. South Korea’s Future Cooperation Partner (unit: %)



Source: Program for Public Opinion Studies (2017).

Conclusion

After a quarter century of bilateral relations, the THAAD disputes and China's retaliatory sanctions against South Korea have entered history as negative demarcations of the diplomatic and economic relationship between Seoul and Beijing. Before the THAAD dispute began, South Korea and China had maintained unprecedentedly friendly and cooperative relations. Given South Korea's growing dependence on China in terms of economics and North Korean affairs, it was taken for granted that the South Korean government would seek to manage intimate relations with China. Likewise, China needed a close and cooperative relationship to keep South Korea within its orbit, restraining Seoul from further strengthening U.S.–South Korea alliance relations. However, the Park Geun-hye government's decision to deploy the THAAD system in South Korea in response to North Korea's incessant provocations, which have included nuclear tests, caused China to retaliate against South Korean businesses with Chinese links. The ensuing paralysis of bilateral relations has lasted for several years, extending now into the successor administration of Moon Jae-in. Despite a limited relaxation of Chinese retaliatory measures, China's economic sanctions against South Korea will remain, unless the South Korean government withdraws THAAD from its territory.

However, even if China eases its economic sanctions and opens up an opportunity for restoring bilateral relations, South Korea–China relations may not fully recover in the foreseeable future. There are several reasons for this. First, the South Koreans and Chinese have both lost trust in each other. China perceives South Korea's decision to deploy THAAD as a betrayal of China's genuine support, while South Korea objects to China's economic bullying of South Korean businesses. China's imposition of economic sanctions, exploiting South Korea's massive economic dependence has seriously undermined the South Korean business community's long-held trust in the Chinese market. Furthermore, most South Korean citizens struggle to understand the contrast in China's behavior between its passive acceptance of North Korea's incessant and belligerent provocations (carried out against China's wishes) and its aggressive imposition of punitive economic sanctions against South Korean businesses, simply because the government agreed to deploy THAAD, largely in response to North Korean provocations. This mutual distrust is now so deep that the relationship will be very difficult to repair.

Second, most South Koreans have lost confidence in the Chinese market and want to seek a new format for economic cooperation with China. Consistent with hedging behavior that realism would predict in such a situation, South Korea is attempting to reduce its dependence on China. Even if the United States under the Trump administration were ready to soak up additional South Korean imports (which it is not, given that Trump singled out South Korea for FTA renegotiation precisely because of the U.S.–South Korea trade deficit), the need to hedge would require Seoul to stay firmly onside with Washington in security terms, without becoming overly dependent on American trade. Seoul must find other global partners for enhanced economic relations; it is doing this primarily by exploring opportunities in Southeast Asia and the European

Union. Successive South Korean governments have consistently done their best to manage South Korea–China relations in ways that avoid unnecessary trouble. However, China’s quick-trigger economic retaliation against South Korea for implementing THAAD revealed China’s intention to exploit South Korean economic dependence to achieve its own linked strategic aims. The THAAD controversies made South Korean exporters’ move more quickly toward diversifying their export destinations. This shift is happening slowly, both because of the trade volume to be re-routed (an average of 26 percent of South Korea’s exports had been destined for China in recent years, while 42 percent of its trade surplus has come from China) and also because Southeast Asia and Europe are both highly competitive markets.

Finally, the North Korea factor plays into the complex calculus by which South Korea assesses its dependence *vis-à-vis* China. Since China has been a major source of economic assistance for and diplomatic protection against North Korea, Pyongyang cannot guarantee the survival of its regime without Beijing’s assistance and protection. South Korea recognizes this. As North Korean affairs are the top priority for South Korean governments, having caused a decade of inter-Korean confrontations, therefore, it has been a core South Korean goal to secure indirect influence over North Korea by maintaining close ties with China. This approach is no longer evident. Post–THAAD, South Korea’s relations with China are also hedged in relation to North Korea. South Korea is reducing its dependence on China for North Korea issues, in favor of fostering a more independent and balanced mode of development. Indeed, since the beginning of 2018, a series of bilateral summit meetings—involving South and North Korea, North Korea and China, and the United States and North Korea—have upended the South Korea–China relationship by altering the South–North relationship. This change has opened up new pathways for both cooperation and strife, with unclear outcomes. Although inter-Korea relations are in their most cooperative phase since the presidency of Roh Moo-hyun, the jury is still out on the possibility of successful denuclearization talks between Washington and Pyongyang. It is anyone’s guess how that story will end, but South Korea must prepare to embrace success, while also hedging against failure.

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