The continuous but rocky developments of Sino-South Korean relations: examined by the four factor model

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**ABSTRACT**

Since the establishment of “friendly and cooperative relations’ in 1992, relations between South Korea and China have been continuously elevated almost every 5 years. The two countries have achieved great advancements in expanding civil exchanges, bringing economic relations closer, finding common ground in foreign policy and security and elevation of political relations. Despite the honeymoon period that the two countries experienced after they established diplomatic relations, however, conflict is now arising due to differences in opinion and interests in various fields such as politics, economy, society, culture, diplomacy, and security. This paper will examine Sino-South Korean relations using the four factor model, which is based on four approaches, starting with economic relations, followed by perception and emotions, diplomacy and security and lastly, these factors’ influence on domestic politics. Following this analysis, this paper will argue that despite their continuous but rocky developments, Sino-South Korean relations will sustainably maintain their development. Considering the synergy effect of bilateral relations, two countries are standing on the opportunity to build a New Type of Sino-South Korean relations which would allow for resolution of conflicts and misunderstandings through dialogue and communication.

**KEYWORDS**

China; South Korea; politics; economy; security

1 Introduction

August 24\textsuperscript{th}, 2020 marked the 28\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the establishment of Sino-South Korean diplomatic relations\textsuperscript{1} On that day in Beijing in 1992, the two sides established friendly and amicable relations based on reciprocal equality and peaceful coexistence and signed a joint statement mutually confirming the “One China” principle as well as a “peaceful reunification of the Korean Peninsula,” ushering in a new era. The establishment of Sino-South Korean relations is remarkable from historical and civilizational perspectives, in that Seoul and Beijing settled long-standing antagonisms, reconciled and resolved ideological and inter-systemic confrontation, and heralded the end of the Cold War in Northeast Asia. China and Korea have seen great advancement in almost all areas, encompassing politics, economy, society, culture, diplomacy and security.

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\textsuperscript{1}Hwang and Choi, “Re-thinking normalization between the ROK and the PRC,” 557-78; Northeast Asian History Foundation ed., Chinese-South Korean relations, 1-478; Sunkyun Institute for China Studies ed., 25 Anniversary of Korea-China Diplomatic Establishment, 1-327; Lee, “A Study on the Negotiation Process,” 121-52.
In the last 28 years, Seoul and Beijing have seen a rapid development of relations, during which bilateral trade increased 40-fold and people-to-people exchange by 100-fold. In 2018, people-to-people exchange between the two countries reached 10 million, and the bilateral trade volume was at US$300 billion. An institutional mechanism to facilitate economic cooperation was also put in place with the conclusion of the China-South Korea Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and the launching of a won-yuan direct exchange market. These developments show just how close Korea and China are now as economic partners. In terms of North Korea policy, both sides share the perception that a “freeze-for-freeze” approach, in which both North Korea’s nuclear and missile tests and ROK-U.S. joint military exercises would be simultaneously halted, must be maintained under any circumstance to create opportunities under the “dual-track” approach of simultaneous denuclearization and peace treaty talks. Additionally, on November 26th, 2020, South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha and Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi met for talks in Seoul where it was decided to prepare for the South Korea-China year of cultural exchange (2021–2022) and to form the “Korea-China Relations Future Development Committee” for the laying of a roadmap for the development of bilateral relations. Both of these were decided to mark the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations.

Nevertheless, the current reality of the two countries is being shaped by a host of issues, from the Northeast Project, the origin of kimchi and Hanbok, the traditional Korean attire, to Chinese economic sanctions on South Korea following the deployment of THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense), South Korea’s anxiety regarding its declining economic competitiveness stemming from the narrowing technology gap between the two countries, and the anti-Chinese sentiment resulting from this anxiety. Moreover, the worsening U.S.-China relations during the past four years of the Trump administration have reduced Seoul’s diplomatic wiggle room and have put it in a dilemma in which it has to choose between the U.S. and China. Though things are slowly being restored following President Moon Jae-in’s December 2017 state visit to China and President Xi Jinping’s reception, it is difficult to be optimistic about the future of the two countries.

With the background laid in the section, the main body of the study evaluates and analyzes how Sino-South Korean relations have developed since the two countries established diplomatic relations in 1992 and the challenges that the two countries are currently facing. The following paper is a sub-task as part of a four-factor model research project at the University of Tokyo, the purpose of which is to analyze and compare the

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2. Press release of Korea-China Foreign Ministers’ Meeting, November 262,020.
3. THAAD is an American anti-ballistic missile defense system. China and Russia have expressed their opposition to the THAAD since the USFK Commander mentioned the need to deploy the system in South Korea in June 2014. The deployment of THAAD has created a strategic dilemma for South Korea in terms of its need to conduct diplomacy between the US and China and the fact that THAAD is a necessary measure to respond to North Korean missiles that may carry nuclear warheads. Immediately after the North Korean nuclear test in January 2016, President Park Geun-hye was disappointed that China did not support South Korea and hinted at the possible deployment of THAAD. This led to increasingly severe friction between South Korea and China. China put economic pressure on South Korea, which sparked a strong pushback, and until the Moon Jae-in administration came into power, the relationship between the two countries was at its worst since they established diplomatic relations in 1992. By agreeing to the “Three No’s” policy of no additional deployment of THAAD batteries, no South Korean integration into a U.S. led missile defense system, and no trilateral military alliance with the United States and Japan, the ministries of foreign affairs of both countries had decided to “suture” the THAAD issue. For an analysis on the military function and utility of THAAD, see Kim, “Military Effectiveness of THAAD Deployment and the Future of the Korean Peninsula,” 291–327.
factors that influence Asian neighbors’ bilateral relations with China, with South Korea as case study. Based on the initial research plan, it is based on four approaches, starting with economic relations, followed by perception and emotions, diplomacy and security and lastly, these factors’ influence on domestic politics.

2 Economic relations

The area with most notable success between the two countries is economy and trade. During the 10 years following the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992, both countries enjoyed a win-win division of labor, in which Korea was a relatively advanced economy and China a late-comer developing state. Korean technology and investments, combined with China’s cheap manpower and raw materials created mutual benefits. Taking advantage of the two countries’ geographic proximity, Korea was able to create an international division of labor system that combined Chinese labor with Korean exports of intermediate goods and investments by its companies. The economic crisis in the beginning of the 21st century accelerated the trend toward economic integration in East Asia, and the mutual recognition for the necessity of an FTA shared by both sides resulted in the finalization of the negotiations in November 2014.

Trade volume between the two sides has grown almost 39 times from US$6.3 billion in 1992 to US$243 billion in 2019. With exports to China reaching US$136.2 billion and imports from the country totaling US$107.2 billion, Korea’s trade surplus with China amounts to US$29 billion. In late 2019, China was Korea’s biggest trading partner. Likewise, Korea was the largest exporter for China, the 3rd largest importer of Chinese goods, as well as its 3rd largest trading partner, excluding Hong Kong. The cumulative amount of Korea’s investment in China up to 2019 is at US$70.8 billion. This accounts for 13.7% of South Korea’s foreign investment globally, and since 2008, China has been the second largest recipient of Korean investment after the United States. The FTA between the two countries has become the backbone of their economic relations, and a currency swap agreement has also been concluded.

But recently, the nature of Sino-South Korean relations is beginning to change, which is largely attributable to the development of the Chinese economy. The impact of Chinese economic competitiveness is already being felt globally. There are even some analysts who say that a new Cold War between the U.S. and China is upon us, with the West, including the United States, holding China responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic in addition to the de-Sinicization of supply chains and China’s isolation from technology and finance. For developing countries to become developed countries, it is necessary to secure technology, and as China has successfully made great strides in 5G, a key technology of the fourth industrial revolution, the U.S. has started to implement a strategic decoupling with China. It is expected that China will surpass the U.S. and become the world’s largest economy by the year 2030, at the earliest.

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[4] Economy and Trade Information of the Korean Embassy in China, [http://overseas.mofa.go.kr/cn-ko/wpge/m_1226/contents.do](http://overseas.mofa.go.kr/cn-ko/wpge/m_1226/contents.do).

[5] On February 252,015 the Sino-South Korean FTA was initialed, which was officially signed on June 1. It was ratified in the National Assembly on November 30 and it came into effect on December 20.

[6] Development Research Center, a think tank affiliated with the State Council of China, predicted that despite the escalating conflict between the U.S. and China, China will develop with its domestic market and overtake the U.S.
China’s industrial upgrading is not only affecting the division of labor structure between South Korea and China, but is also causing Korea much worry in terms of its competitiveness within the Chinese market and if it will be able to maintain its trade surplus with China and its technological superiority\(^7\) In particular, the greatly reducing technological gap between Korea and China has been giving rise to concerns throughout the Korean economy. The industrial and export structures of both countries share considerable similarities, making competition in the global market inevitable. The technological gap between Korea and China is said to have been narrowed to only a couple of years. Except for semiconductors, displays and wireless communications, only a few areas remain in which Korea maintains technological advantage over China. Even Korean semiconductors already seem to have lost some of their competitiveness against Chinese products\(^8\). China’s economic sanctions on Korea following the latter’s deployment of THAAD have particularly shrunk Korean corporate activities within China\(^9\). In addition, various economic policies have been proposed under Xi Jinping, such as the Chinese Dream, Xin Chang Tai (new normal), supply-side structural reform, and Made in China 2025. Due to U.S.-China trade friction and the COVID-19 pandemic, external conditions have also worsened, leaving China’s export-driven economic growth model to reach its limit.

Dual Circulation, which became a new buzzword in 2020 after President Xi Jinping had mentioned it several times, refers to a strategy of pursuing economic growth through the expansion of the domestic economy and international trade, while also creating synergy between the dual axes of domestic circulation and international circulation. China’s Dual Circulation policy may be an opportunity for Korea’s economy, but it may also be a threat. In the process of promoting its Dual Circulation policy, the Chinese government is likely to strengthen its state-led economic system. China’s strengthening of its state-led economic system does not bode well for East Asian economic integration, including integration with the Korean economy. The strategic competition between the U.S. and China in the Trump era was bilateral in nature\(^10\). And like under Trump, U.S.-China relations under Biden are also predicted to be more competition-focused than cooperation-focused, meaning the future of economic relations between Korea and China are not looking optimistic.

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\(^{7}\) Yang, “Trade and Investment,” 107, 121.

\(^{8}\) Technological gap between Korea and China narrowing rapidly… Even semiconductors not safe from competition in a couple years,” Chosun Ilbo, December 9 2017.

\(^{9}\) A good example of Chinese economic retaliation due to THAAD is the case of Lotte Mart in China. The Chinese retaliation targeting Lotte began in September 2016 after the announcement by the South Korean government that Lotte’s golf course in Seongju, North Gyeongsang Province was chosen as the site for THAAD. There were already talks about Lotte Mart’s withdrawal from the Chinese market amid strong competition from domestic suppliers, but after the deployment of THAAD at the Seongju golf course, political pressure also began to be applied. Additionally, it is widely accepted within South Korea that Chinese retaliation for THAAD also occurred less overtly in the culture, tourism, and “Hallyu” (Korean Wave) sectors. Jung, “[A year of THAAD retaliation] This ordeal is not over… Lotte Group’s losses alone add up to 2 trillion won,” Yonhap News, March 4 2018.

\(^{10}\) Wang, “Expert Opinion: The meaning of China’s dual circulation growth strategy and Korea’s response,” KIEP Expert Forum.
3 Perception and emotions

Throughout their long histories, Korea and China have continuously interacted, but following the Korean War in 1950, exchange was cut off, and both sides lost interest in each other. Only after diplomatic relations were established in 1992 were humanitarian, social, and cultural exchanges reinstated. Social and cultural exchange is also a growing area. As of 2018, people-to-people exchanges between Korea and China have increased by 69-fold from 130,000 in 1992 to 8.99 million in 2018. In addition, 70,000 Chinese students take up the largest share among international students studying in Korea. The number of airline flights amounts to 1,240 per week. So the craze over the Korean wave and the Chinese Wind remain intact. But with the rapid development of relations, negative aspects have also followed.

A series of events that took place since the establishment of diplomatic relations have spurred the outburst of anti-Chinese sentiments in Korea. Such sentiments refer to tendencies to dislike and hate China. It goes beyond the hostility solely against the Chinese government due to contentions in issues of politics and history, but it has spread to hatred toward China itself and its people. One of the first events that triggered such sentiments was the ‘garlic crisis’. After the Korean government imposed tariffs on Chinese garlic, Beijing responded by imposing a great sum of tariffs on Korean-made cellphones. Subsequently, China’s Northeast Project, starting in 2004, attempted to distort Korea’s ancient history, and in 2005, Beijing protested after Korea registered the Gangneung Dano Festival as a UNESCO World Intangible Heritage. In addition, the fine dust issue, illegal fishing by Chinese boats and China’s imitation of Korean products and the Korean wave are also factors that aggravate the hateful sentiments toward China. Since 2020, the mutual attacks by netizens of both countries regarding the origin of hanbok and Korean food have been intensifying.

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11In 2020, due to the influence of COVID-19, the number of Chinese citizens visiting South Korea stood at 650,000 from January to May, showing a significant decrease (~73.1%) from the previous year. South Korea-China relations, cultural and people-to-people exchange, Chinese Embassy in the ROK, https://overseas.mofa.go.kr/cn-ko/wpge/m_1228/contents.do.

12According to the Ministry of Justice in 2016, there were approximately 10,017,000 Chinese nationals staying in Korea including Chinese-Koreans. The number of Koreans in China was estimated at 800 Thousand (Beijing China Korean Association). Ministry of Foreign Affairs, general information on China.

13Information on economy and trade of the Korean embassy in China, http://overseas.mofa.go.kr/cn-ko/wpge/m_1226/contents.do.

14Jung and Han, “South Korean Attitude toward China,” 242–64.

15Chung, “From a Special Relationship to Normal Partnership?” 549–68.

16The Northeast Project is a large-scale project launched by the Chinese Academy of Social Science, a key think-tank of the Chinese government, in partnership with three provinces in the northeast region. It is an academic research pursued with the purpose of strengthening the unity of socialist China by stabilizing the frontier regions and bringing together the peoples of a country which is a unified multiethnic state. Korea has criticized since 2003 that the project was an attempt on a national scale to dispossess Korea of its ancient history, including Goguryeo, and to permanently claim Mt. Baekdu and Gando. Korea and China crafted a five-point verbal agreement in August 2004, which settled the disputes for the time being. The agreement stipulates that both sides seek a fair resolution of Goguryeo history issues and take necessary measures to prevent political complications, and that China shall, at the central and local government levels, be understanding toward Korea’s interests in Goguryeo history and take necessary measures to prevent further complexities, and that both sides seek resolution through swift academic exchange. Cha, “History, Culture,” 188–192.

17It is because Dano, like Qingming, Hanshi and Chuseok, originated from China. In the West, “Chuseok” is referred to as “Chinese Thanksgiving”, and lunar new year as “Chinese New Year”. Dano is one of the Korean holidays, which falls on May 5th in the lunar calendar. It is the early summer before the hot season comes, when Koreans wish for a fruitful harvest after planting the rice.
After the establishment of diplomatic relations, the mutual perception of the two countries has gone through three stages. 1992 to 2003 was a honeymoon period, then up until 2008 was a period of deepening cultural conflict, and then following the 2008 financial crisis, political and diplomatic conflicts caused by China’s aggressive, Sinocentric rise led to a negative shift in public perception. During the 2013–2016 Park Geun-hye administration, there was a brief period of improved South Korea-China relations thanks to President Park’s 2015 visit to Beijing for China’s Victory Day celebrations. But then following the controversy surrounding the deployment of THAAD in South Korea in 2016, anti-Chinese sentiment among Koreans was raised to extreme heights. 18

Korea’s cultural and psychological perceptions and emotions toward China are complex. 19 The psychological basis of Koreans’ disdain for China is the dual feeling of fear of China’s rise along with Korea’s sense of superiority regarding its economy and political system. This sort of sentiment is in line with Korea’s unwillingness to acknowledge the changes that China is going through, and it also shows that Korea’s perception of China is still stuck in the 1980’s. 20 For thousands of years of history, with the exception of the kingdom of Goguryeo, which saw the greatest territorial expansion by a Korean state in history and was able to hold its own in confrontation with the powerful Chinese Sui and Tang dynasties, Korea has had to yield to China. It is because of this history that Korea has an inferiority complex toward China and why Korea tends to implicitly flaunt its superiority.

Bilateral relations have been largely negative since the establishment of the Republic of Korea due to differences in ideology and political culture, as China was seen as the main contributor to the fratricidal conflict that was the Korean War in 1950. China being a socialist state and events like the Cultural Revolution also affected the perception. China was also economically backwards, so up until the early 2000s, there was a belief that Korea was superior in terms of economy and culture. There is still a strong perception of China being an “emerging nation” or a “human rights abuser” yet to become a developed country, but as an emerging power, “national power of China, a G2 nation on par with the U.S.” are also accompanying labels. Accordingly, Koreans are not very much fond of China. They perceive China as more of a threat, although it is at the same time a necessary partner to cooperate with for the reunification of the Korean Peninsula, alleviation of North Korean threats 21, and for economic gain. But Beijing’s passive stance in the issues of reunification and denuclearization along with increased economic competition between the two nations have led Koreans to be more wary.

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18 This was shown in the rapidly declining favorability toward China among Koreans. After the decision by the USFK to deploy THAAD, Chinese economic retaliation accelerated, and favorability toward China among Koreans dropped lower than that toward Japan, despite the “comfort women” and Dokdo issues. According to the results of a monthly poll published by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies in March 2017, the favorability toward China among Koreans in March was 3.21 out of 10. The closer to 10, the higher the favorability toward the country. This is 0.12 points lower than Japan’s favorability rating among Koreans (3.33 points) in the same month. Kim et al., “Changing Tides”.
19 Lee, “China’s National Image in Korea’s Newspapers,” 191–219.
20 Min, “Mutual concept,” 237.
21 Han, “Korean People’s Perception of China and Security Cooperation between Korea and China.”
4 Security and international environment

The establishment of diplomatic relations between Korea and China took place in the context of changing international affairs, namely the collapse of the Cold War system. In the late 1980s the Roh Tae-woo government (1988–1992) introduced a progressive foreign policy vis-à-vis the Eastern Bloc countries such as China and the former Soviet Union. This so-called “Nordpolitik” eventually led to the opening of diplomatic relations with China. And it was the Kim Young-sam government (1993–1997) that laid the foundation for Sino-South Korean relations, and subsequent governments under Kim Dae-jung (1998–2002) and Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2007) that expanded cooperation with China while prioritizing strategic values. During the presidencies of Lee Myung-bak (2008–2012) and Park Geun-hye (2013–2016), relations deteriorated and accumulated tensions erupted. The current Moon Jae-in government (2017-) is attempting to seal the THAAD issue and to create a new breakthrough in relations.

Sino-South Korean relations have been continuously elevated phase by phase. It started out as a “Friendship and Cooperative Relationship” in 1992, which then was elevated to “ROK-China Collaborative Partnership for the 21st Century” in 1998, followed by a “Comprehensive Cooperative Partnership” in 2003, and a “Strategic Cooperative Partnership” in May 2008. In June 2013, the “Strategic Cooperative Partnership” was fortified with more substance, which, in 2017, came into effect. This can be seen as the highest point of the bilateral relations, which had been elevated almost quinquennially.

Notable is also the fact that, for the first time, a Chinese leader made a visit to South Korea before going to the North. President Park attending the Victory Day parade in 2015 marked a high point in Sino-South Korean relations, but the subsequent THAAD deployment brought it down to its lowest, leading Beijing to turn to the strategic value of North Korea once again. Nevertheless, under President Moon bilateral relations are changing for the better, despite the bumpy start. In particular, when the COVID-19 outbreak first began in Wuhan, China, the Korean government did not ban Chinese citizens from entering South Korea and made friendly political gestures, such as sending masks. Thanks to this, both governments were able to significantly reduce the after effects of the THAAD controversy. COVID-19 is also considered a new area of cooperation between South Korea and China.

In actuality, South Korea is a fair and reasonable partner for China when it comes to mutual economic benefit, mutual security gains and international order, but the Korea-U.S. alliance and North Korea’s denuclearization remain as conflict factors. North Korea is not the only constant variable in Sino-South Korean relations. The U.S., an ally of

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22Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha expressed the message directed to China regarding the “Three No’s” policy at the Foreign Affairs and Unification Committee of the National Assembly on October 302,017. “Government to China, ‘will not be an outpost of the U.S.’ …. THAAD dispute to be ‘sealed’,” Hankyoreh, October 302,017.
23The two leaders adopted the “Joint Statement for the Future Vision of South Korea and China” and agreed on building a comprehensive, multilevel strategic communication system in areas of politics and security, institutionalization of economic cooperation basis, expansion of cooperation areas as well as facilitation of various exchanges between the two peoples.
24“ROK-China Summit, ‘Sharing of Corona19 Clinical experience …. Cooperation on strengthening quarantine’,” YTN, February 202,020.
25Regarding the argument that understanding the dynamic of the North Sino-South Korean alliance can give meaningful implications in establishing directions for South Korea’s China policy, see: Lee, “China’s Policy Toward North Korea and Dynamics of the Alliance between North Korea and China in Cold War era,” 125–154.
South Korea, is also a variable with much more weight than North Korea. America’s commitment as an ally, the protection it provides, and the price of that protection are factors that influence Sino-South Korean relations. The deployment of middle-range missiles or Korea’s participation in the U.S.’s Indo-Pacific Strategy, along with the issue of additional deployments of THAAD, could emerge as other sources of conflict between Seoul and Beijing in the future within the context of intensifying U.S.-China confrontation. Therefore, China hopes for a Korea more independent from the U.S., capable of voicing its own stance more assertively.

One must pay attention to the strategic implications on Korea’s security arising from the dynamics of the U.S.-China relations. The dichotomous logic of “relying on the US for security and on China for the economy” puts South Korea in a strategic dilemma. Whenever an issue arises, Korea is often forced to choose between the U.S. or China. When the U.S.-China relationship is stable, it can facilitate inter-Korean dialogue and reduce tensions; but it can never guarantee Korea’s national interest. China will attempt to secure its own influence in the issues of denuclearization and a peace agreement, for which it will set out a strategic roadmap. It is important that Korea’s position be sufficiently reflected in it. One should also realize that the expectation toward North Korea for sincerity could be different in China. China will take into account not only Sino-South Korean relations, Sino-North Korean relations and inter-Korean relations, but also the bigger context of U.S.-China relations.

5 Correlation with domestic politics

The domestic politics of Korea exhibit a number of characteristics. The most prominent one is that the personality of a leader counts more than the political party. To put it simply, the Peace Democratic Party in 1987, the Democratic Party in 1992, and the National Congress for New Politics in 1996 were all essentially Kim Dae-jung’s party. His followers remained around the central figure Kim Dae-jung. A party is like an outfit that can be changed at will, and the names of the parties are also easily altered. Other politicians, including the incumbent President Moon, are no exceptions to this. But the overall power landscape remains unchanged, which can be divided into conservative and liberal. It is not easy for moderate politicians to gain a footing between these two forces. Politics is very fierce and is one of the most dynamic in the world, to put it mildly. It is almost antagonistic, to put it more bluntly.

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26 Medeiros, “The Changing Fundamentals of U.S.-China Relations,” 93–119.
27 As mentioned above, THAAD is a good example. Recently, the United States has been asking for South Korea’s participation in US pressure on Huawei. Even if South Korea participates in the US-led anti-Huawei pressure campaign, South Korea’s relationship with China, with which it maintains close economic cooperation, will suffer. Therefore, South Korea is trapped in a dilemma in which it cannot strengthen relations with Huawei or China as it pleases. Choi, “[IT Curation] Huawei all alone; South Korea must walk the tightrope to the very end,” Economic Review, October 312,020.
28 For a perspective on the utility of the Korean peninsula as a cooperative aspect instead of the usual competitive aspects in U.S.-China relations, see: Sutter, “Relations with Japan and Korea,” 192–193.
29 For a study on the correlation between domestic politics and foreign policy, see: Kang, “How does domestic politics influence foreign policy?: System and leaders?” Chiozza and Goemans. “International Conflict and the Tenure of Leaders: Is War Still Ex Post Inefficient?” 604–19.
30 Kim Dae-Jung was the 8th president of South Korea (1998–2003). For his contributions to the improvement of human rights and progress in inter-Korean relations, he was the first Korean ever to receive the Nobel Peace Prize during his term in office in 2000.
31 For a study on the correlation between the decision-making process of a foreign policy and democracy, see: Kim, “Korean Foreign Policy and Problems in the Democratization Era,” 271–92.
According to one research, the ideological tendencies from progressive to conservative have a significant impact on perceptions toward China. The role of ideology in the sense of the perception toward China has been strengthened. In this context, the impact of liberal ideology on recognition of China is weaker than conservatives, on the other hand, their preference for China is relatively higher than the conservatives. Furthermore, this perception toward China is formed with overlapping traditional crack of “anti-communist vs pro-North Korea” and “pro-ROK-U.S. alliance vs self-reliance.” This crack eventually influences the domestic division.\(^{32}\)

The importance of Korea’s China policies has continuously increased since the opening of diplomatic relations in 1992. There have been four conservative governments including those of Roh Tae-woo, Kim Young-sam, Lee Myung-bak, and Park Geun-hye; and three progressive governments under Kim Dae-jung, Roh Moo-hyun, and Moon Jae-in. It was Roh Tae-woo who established diplomatic relations with China, which he considered to be the pinnacle of his Nordpolitik. Establishing relations with China followed by Russia after the breakup of the Soviet Union allowed South Korea to gain the diplomatic upper hand over North Korea. Under President Lee Myung-bak, priority was given to the Korea-U.S. alliance while focusing solely on economic benefit with China. Park Geun-hye, even as a conservative, achieved the best relationship with China since 1992, attending China’s Victory Day Parade and signing the FTA, but on her watch, relations also plummeted to their worst with the THAAD deployment and the disappointment at the lack of Chinese support on the denuclearization issue.

Sino-South Korean relations generally remained stable under liberal governments. China thought highly of Korea during the Kim Dae-jung presidency as he was able to make strategic decisions in the midst of America-centered diplomacy, keeping reunification in mind. Moreover, his Sunshine Policy helped enhance rapport with China. President Roh Moo-hyun had to go through the Goguryeo historical disputes, but he constantly sought a close partnership with China. Although Moon Jae-in inherited from the previous administration frosty South Korea-China relations due to the THAAD issue, relations were able to normalize thanks to consensus on North Korea policy and through cooperation on COVID-19.

Against this backdrop, three observations can be made. Firstly, friendly attitudes toward China become more likely depending on the individual personality of the South Korean leader. The clearest example is that of President Park Geun-hye. She was able to directly and indirectly show goodwill to China by expressing her sympathy for President Xi Jinping’s family background and the changes that occurred throughout his life, and by doing so was able to bring Sino-South Korean relations to their highest point ever. Second, Sino-South Korean relations do not wholly depend on the political orientation of the Korean leader and his or her political party affiliation. It was during Roh Moo-Hyun’s presidency that the ROK-U.S. alliance was strengthened, for example, by sending Korean troops to Iraq. And it was President Park that concluded the FTA with China and attended Beijing’s Victory Day Parade in 2015. Third, positioning between the U.S. and China remains an inevitable dilemma for all South Korean governments. Korea’s foreign policy will likely spur much heated debates in domestic politics in the future.\(^{33}\)

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32 Cha, “The Role of Ideology in Korean Perception toward China,” 46–80.
33 For Korea’s China-dilemma in a situation of increasing U.S. pressure on China, Hwang, “The US Strategic Rebalance and South Korea’s Dilemma,” 121–135.
6 Conclusion

Since the establishment of “friendly and cooperative relations” in 1992, relations between Seoul and Beijing have been continuously elevated almost every 5 years. There is a considerable overlap of interest which goes beyond cultural affinity, geographical proximity and economic interdependence, including peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. Accordingly, the development of bilateral relations is a historical trend, which is why one should not be preoccupied with each particular situation nor overreact at each conjuncture. Considering the synergy effect of bilateral relations, two countries are standing on the opportunity to build a New Type of Sino-South Korean relations which would allow for resolution of conflicts and misunderstandings through dialogue and communication.

A New Type of Sino-South Korean Relations can be defined as follows. There had been too much expectation placed on each other in the course of the rapid development. Both sides anticipated support and understanding from the other, and this state of vague expectation led to misunderstanding and disappointment. The differences in the interpretation of the strategic cooperation agreement is such an example. In Chinese terms strategy refers to something of a middle and long-term, whereas for Koreans it means security and military support.

The current administration has already proclaimed a substantive strategic cooperative partnership with China, but in order for reality to match this proclamation, a few types of strategic cooperation must be possible. First, both countries should cooperate to create a safer security environment. In other words, they can work together for peace and stability in Northeast Asia and especially for the future of the Korean Peninsula. Second, both countries should cooperate to create a more developed economic environment. That is, joint economic development may be achieved on the basis of rational and comprehensive agreement on sustainable economic cooperation. Third, they should cooperate to create an improved human security environment, i.e., they may cooperate on transnational and nonmilitary security issues such as disease, disaster, crime, environment, and terrorism. Continuing, there should be 3 mechanisms in need. First, the crisis prevention and management mechanism in the Blue House level, second, 2 + 2 diplomatic and economic high-level strategic dialogue mechanism at government level, and third, military trust mechanism through non-traditional security cooperation in military level.

However, as the four factor model examination has shown, China, once an economic opportunity for Korea, has now become a threat to the Korean economy, and competition between the two sides is intensifying in the global market. The Moon Jae-in government has been improving political and diplomatic relations with China, but when we look at the case of THAAD, it is evident that strong economic ties do not necessarily guarantee a stable relationship. And during the remainder of the Moon Jae-in administration and going into the post-Moon era, tense Sino-South Korean relations will persist in every field, including politics, economy, society, and culture. Nevertheless, the governments of both South Korea and China must adopt and develop the ideas discussed above for the future development of their bilateral relationship. Once this kind of cooperation becomes possible and its mechanism is set into motion, the two countries will be able to make their strategic cooperative partnership “substantive” in the truest
sense of the word. Strategic cooperative partner should not remain an empty slogan, but be translated into action.

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