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The Geopolitics of South Korea–China Relations

Implications for U.S. Policy in the Indo-Pacific

As Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific increases, U.S. allies and partners, such as Australia, India, and Japan, are adapting their strategic posture to develop stronger intra-Asian security partnerships and try to maintain independence from Chinese influence.¹ However, even as a key U.S. ally, South Korea seems different; as observed in a 2008 RAND report, “By geography alone, sensitivity toward Chinese interests will remain a characteristic of South Korean policies.”² How are Beijing’s growing influence and assertiveness in regional affairs affecting relations between South Korea and China? What effect do they have on U.S. policy in the Indo-Pacific? This Perspective focuses on South Korea’s evolving relations with China to explore whether China is emerging as a viable strategic alternative to the United States for South Korea, especially amid persistent concerns about Washington’s commitment to alliance relationships.

The Perspective explores the conditions under which South Korea and China have sought to deepen their strategic ties, from the aftermath of the Korean War and the Cold War era to today. These past attempts have been fraught with

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unmet expectations because of the divergence of South Korea and China's geopolitical interests. The history of bilateral relations between South Korea and China is not very long; diplomatic normalization only occurred in 1992. In this short period of time, the two sides have continued upgrading their relations—from “Friendly Cooperative Relations” at the time of normalization to 1998’s “Cooperative Partnership Toward the 21st Century,” 2003’s “Comprehensive Cooperative Partnership,” 2008’s “Strategic Cooperative Partnership,” and 2014’s “Enriched Strategic Cooperative Partnership.” However, these upgrades have had mixed results at best. To this day, the primary foundation of Beijing-Seoul ties is commercial and economic.

Escalating U.S.-China competition in the Indo-Pacific is making it increasingly difficult—if not impossible—for South Korea to maintain economic ties with China without redefining the nature of their bilateral strategic and political relations. After Seoul’s 2016 decision to deploy

Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) in South Korea, China used economic tools for strategic purposes to leverage and influence South Korea’s national security decisions. This signals that China has begun to use coercive tactics in its relations with South Korea on regional security issues and is approaching Beijing-Seoul relations as a mechanism for competing with Washington indirectly. China’s short-term goal appears to be to control South Korean behavior so that Seoul does not act in ways that augment the power and influence of the United States against what China perceives as its core interests. South Korean policymakers’ desire to achieve their own geopolitical goals—especially the denuclearization of North Korea and reunification—remains a powerful reason for Seoul to continue to show sensitivity to Beijing and seek friendlier political relations with Beijing.

The following section presents the four distinctive phases of South Korea and China’s political and security relations and examines the factors that drove the two sides’ strategic decisions toward one another at critical junctures. The next section reveals three patterns in Beijing-Seoul ties and what they mean for the future of U.S. policy in the Indo-Pacific. The geopolitical argument of this Perspective was developed through two analytical processes. An overview of the literature on South Korea–China relations aided in the identification of critical junctures, and a further literature search elucidated the driving forces behind Beijing and Seoul’s foreign policy behavior during those critical junctures. Policymakers’ statements, government documents, statistics, and daily news articles are used where possible.

Four Phases of South Korea–China Relations

To understand why Beijing and Seoul moved to tighten their strategic ties at certain times and not at others, it is useful to divide South Korea–China relations into four phases. Three landmark moments represent the changing nature of the bilateral relationship in the strategic and political realms—the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1992, the “Strategic Cooperative Partnership” designation in 2008, and South Korean President Park Geun-hye’s attendance at Chinese President Xi Jinping’s commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II in 2015. Each of these new beginnings was followed by a series of developments that revealed that Beijing and Seoul’s strategic interests still diverged at a deeper, structural level.

Phase One: From War to Separation of Politics and Economics (1950–1992)

The first critical juncture in China–South Korea relations was the Korean War, in which China aided North Korea’s attempt to unify the Korean Peninsula under Kim Il Sung’s Communist regime. This experience set the tone for the next four decades. With the signing of the 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty with the United States, South Korea became part of the U.S.-led hub-and-spoke alliance system in Asia, which emerged in the process of external balancing against the Soviet Union, China, and North Korea. In 1961, China and North Korea concluded the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance, which committed Beijing to the aid of Pyongyang if North Korea was

attacked. South Korea–China relations have since operated largely within the bounds of these two alliances.

In contrast with China’s normalization of relations with the United States and Japan in the 1970s, Beijing and Seoul did not normalize diplomatic relations until after the end of the Cold War. This timing had much to do with the remarkable continuity of China’s North Korea policy, which was tied to Pyongyang’s strategic value in the context of the 30-year Sino-Soviet rivalry.³ After the Korean War ended, Beijing’s foreign policy toward North Korea aimed to safeguard the 1953 Armistice Treaty and to prevent North Korea from entrapping China in another military conflict on the Korean Peninsula.⁴ Beijing also sought to ensure that North Korea would not side with the Soviet Union against China because Chinese leaders felt increasingly threatened militarily and politically by Moscow.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, relations between Beijing and Seoul were characterized by hostility. Beijing maintained a policy that recognized North Korea as the sole legitimate government on the Korean Peninsula and viewed the U.S.–South Korea alliance as part of Washington’s encirclement strategy—a web of alliances and/or military assistance programs that the United States had with Japan, the Republic of China, South Vietnam, Thailand, and the Philippines, among others.⁵

During the 1970s, two significant developments enabled Beijing and Seoul to shift their positions closer toward adopting a policy of separating politics from economics in the 1980s. First, the rapprochement and normalization of diplomatic relations between China and the United States set the stage for Beijing to calculate that the United States and Japan could help check Soviet power, which led to a less critical view of South Korea’s alliance

with Washington.⁶ In 1973, South Korean President Park Chung Hee called for the opening of relations with socialist countries in his Foreign Policy Statement Regarding Peace and Unification, a move designed to adjust South Korean foreign policy to this new international mood.⁷ In a 1978 press conference with U.S. delegates, China announced that it would not oppose U.S. forces in South Korea as long as that was acceptable to South Koreans.⁸

Second, China's domestic situation changed with Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening policy. China began to pay attention to South Korea's rapid economic development model in the late 1970s.⁹ During this time, the two countries opened up to trade and travel. This new approach to pursuing economic development from 1978 onward accentuated Beijing's desire for stability on the Korean Peninsula, with Deng Xiaoping making it clear to Kim Il Sung that China would not support Pyongyang if it were to provoke a conflict and use force against South Korea first.¹⁰

By 1980, Chinese Foreign Minister Huang Hua characterized Beijing's policy toward Seoul as one in which "the door is closed but not locked."¹¹ When a Chinese commercial airliner with 105 people on board was hijacked to South Korea in 1983, Seoul and Beijing held their first ever official negotiations, after which sports diplomacy and the expansion of economic relations led to the further blossoming of bilateral contacts. In 1983, South Korean Foreign Minister Lee Bum-suck expressed Seoul's desire to realize *Nordpolitik*—a policy under which South Korea sought to normalize relations with the Soviet Union and China, transcending differences in ideology and social systems.¹² By 1986, indirect trade between South Korea and China was approximately \$0.8 billion–1.7 billion—2 percent of all Chinese foreign trade and more than China's

\$500 million trade with North Korea.¹³ In 1988, Seoul and Beijing agreed to establish trade offices in each other's capitals. During this period of growing economic relations with Seoul, Beijing was cautious not to give an impression to Pyongyang that China's relationship with South Korea and the United States was to the detriment of its socialist ally. Beijing sought to persuade North Korea on the need for North-South dialogue to reduce tension on the Korean Peninsula, but it had little success.¹⁴

Phase Two: Normalization of Diplomatic Relations, Honeymoon, and Deepening Suspicion (1992–2008)

According to Deng Xiaoping, "improved China–South Korea relations are good for China, first because they bring economic benefits to China, and second, because they could sever Seoul's relations with Taipei."¹⁵ South Korea's *Nordpolitik* continued into the 1990s, and Seoul normalized relations with the Soviet Union in 1990. However, despite the Roh Tae-woo government having made proposals for diplomatic normalization through various channels since 1988, China did not decide to proceed with negotiations for normalization until 1992.¹⁶

What accounts for this specific timing? First, the end of the Sino-Soviet conflict in 1989 and the disintegration of the Soviet Union two years later substantially reduced the need for Beijing to accommodate Pyongyang's preferences at the expense of the benefits that Deng saw in relations with Seoul.¹⁷ Second, in 1991, South and North Korea separately and simultaneously joined the United Nations as members, a position that Pyongyang had long opposed but one that paved the way for Beijing to recognize South

Korea. Relatedly, the fact that there was only one China in the United Nations justified Beijing's insistence that Seoul should sever diplomatic relations with Taipei, especially in the face of Taiwan's diplomatic offensive at that time.¹⁸ Third, China's trade dispute with the United States was intensifying. On August 21, 1992, the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative determined that the United States would sanction \$3.9 billion worth of Chinese exports over China's restrictions of imports and unfair trade practices unless an agreement was reached by October 10 of that year. China's signing of the normalization agreement with South Korea sent a signal to the United States that China had alternative trade options.¹⁹

After the diplomatic breakthrough in 1992, South Korea–China relations enjoyed a honeymoon period during much of the 1990s, with bilateral economic interdependence and cultural ties expanding and deepening dramatically. At the same time, the two sides avoided dealing with hard political and strategic differences. This second phase—from 1992 to 2008—coincided with an era of American unipolarity, during which speculation about the future of a rising China was rampant. As U.S. policy-makers debated and reaffirmed the stabilizing role of U.S. forces in post–Cold War Asia, Chinese policymakers adjusted China's foreign policy to the reality of the United States as the sole superpower, while pursuing measures that promoted multipolarity globally. In the mid-1990s, Chinese leaders introduced the concept of partnership to reassure other major powers by highlighting mutually beneficial relations. From Beijing's point of view, these partnerships were officially described as intended to form high-level, cooperative, bilateral relationships with other countries, without targeting or balancing against any third party.²⁰

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Beijing's emphasis on diplomacy arose from its grand strategy after the end of the Cold War, which aimed at managing great power tensions by countering perceptions of “China threat” while continuing to integrate with the global economy.²¹ In Northeast Asia, China's decision to improve relations with Seoul in the early 1990s was meant to enable China to have leverage sufficient to shape the affairs of the Korean Peninsula vis-à-vis the United States and Japan.²² It was in this international context that in 1998, Chinese President Jiang Zemin and South Korean President Kim Dae-jung declared that South Korea and China would upgrade their relations to the “Cooperative

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Partnership Toward the 21st Century.” In 2003, Chinese President Hu Jintao and South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun further upgraded the relationship to a “Comprehensive Cooperative Partnership.” Both upgrades were meant to expand bilateral exchanges into every sphere beyond the economic realms. Under the partnership framework, China and South Korea increased opportunities for trade and investment. In addition, China’s hosting of the Six Party Talks in the mid-to-late 2000s helped improve Beijing’s image as a responsible power in the region.

In South Korea, the 1998 domestic political change from conservative to progressive rule (which lasted until 2008) brought the positions of Seoul and Beijing closer on North Korea. This, in turn, led to concerns both in the United States and South Korea about Seoul pursuing an independent foreign policy to the detriment of a strong alliance with the United States. To this day, South Korean progressives and Chinese leaders tend to share the view that Pyongyang’s nuclear and missile development

programs should be understood as stemming from North Korea’s insecurity vis-à-vis the United States, thus requiring inter-Korean engagement and dialogue. Under Kim Dae-jung, South Korea pursued a dual engagement strategy toward China and North Korea, holding the first ever inter-Korean summit in 2000;²³ unlike Tokyo and Taipei, Seoul declined Washington’s request to join a theatre missile defense (TMD) program.²⁴

South Korea’s 1999 decision against joining the TMD and the tensions that arose between the Kim Dae-jung administration and the incoming Bush administration were precursors to the current situation on THAAD deployment in South Korea. Broadly speaking, these developments—a U.S. missile defense designed to deter North Korea, China’s negative view of TMD, and the dilemma of South Korean choices—explain why it is very challenging for South Korea to have good relations with both the United States and China due in large part to structural reasons that concern North Korea. The Kim Dae-jung government’s desire to proceed with inter-Korean reconciliation and economic cooperation clashed with the Bush administration’s emphasis on progress toward North Korea’s denuclearization. Similarly, the rocky relationship between the Bush and Roh Moo-hyun administrations came down to the diverging views of Washington and Seoul on the issue of North Korea.

Chinese policymakers came to believe that the U.S.–South Korea alliance was undergoing a fundamental change and that South Korea would lean closer to China in the years ahead. To Beijing, President Roh Moo-hyun’s emphasis on independent diplomacy signaled that South Korea was further loosening its ties with the United States. China regarded the Roh Moo-hyun administration’s

approach to Northeast Asian security—especially its quest to play a role as a balancer and its emphasis on regional integration—as a sign that Seoul sought to weaken the U.S.-centered alliance system itself.²⁵ Roh Moo-hyun’s vision that “[t]he map of power in Northeast Asia could shift, depending on what choice we [South Korea] make” received much criticism from those who supported the U.S.–South Korea alliance both in Seoul and in Washington.²⁶ However, the “balancer” argument grew out of Roh Moo-hyun’s desire for autonomy and regional leadership in Northeast Asia, which emphasized South Korea’s central role bridging between China and Japan.²⁷

Meanwhile, China kept a close eye on how the U.S. strategic flexibility concept was applied to U.S. Forces Korea. China was interested in the future of U.S. Forces Korea and whether they could be deployed for broader regional and global missions beyond the defense of the Korean Peninsula. On the economic front, during 1999 and 2000, the so-called garlic war—China’s ban on the import of all South Korean mobile handsets and polyethylene over South Korea’s imposition of a 315-percent tariff on Chinese garlic following a surge in cheap imports—provided a precursor to China’s use of economic retaliation over the 2016 decision to deploy THAAD in South Korea.²⁸ Overall, after two upgrades of their bilateral ties in 1998 and 2003 during this phase, it became clear that the terminologies of partnership would not necessarily reflect the realities of the bilateral strategic ties.

More importantly, the 2004 dispute over the historiography of Koguryo (*Gaogouli* in Chinese)—an ancient Korean kingdom that occupied Manchuria and the northern part of the Korean Peninsula from 37 BCE to 668 CE—was the first instance in which South Korea’s leaders and general

public viewed China as a potential threat. The Chinese side claimed that Koguryo is part of Chinese history, a change in the narrative from its earlier position.²⁹ Given the symbolism of this ancient kingdom for Korean national identity, this issue triggered an intensely negative reaction from South Koreans, perhaps to China’s surprise. There were clear differences before and after this dispute in South Koreans’ attitudes toward China’s rise. For example, in April 2004—before the Koguryo controversy erupted—63 percent of South Korea’s elected ruling party members viewed China as South Korea’s most important diplomatic partner. By August 2004, 5.7 percent of South Korean National Assembly lawmakers held this opinion.³⁰ The intention behind China’s Northeast History Project came under scrutiny, raising suspicions that China was making a revisionist move toward ethnic Koreans in Manchuria in case of unification of the Korean Peninsula.³¹

Phase Three: “Strategic Cooperative Partnership” and Disappointments (2008–2013)

In 2008, the inauguration of President Lee Myung-bak brought conservatives back into office in South Korean politics; the new president declared the restoration of the U.S.–South Korea alliance as his top foreign policy priority. China became more eager to upgrade South Korea–China relations to counter the move toward the strengthening of Seoul’s relations with Washington.³² The “Strategic Cooperative Partnership” designation of their relationship raised their expectations toward each other, with Lee Myung-bak explaining the significance of this step as moving in the direction of expanding the areas of

Seoul-Beijing bilateral cooperation into the political and security domains.³³ However, China was disappointed that Seoul “had emerged as the United States’ closest ally in East Asia,”³⁴ while the alliance was hailed as a “linchpin” of Asian security, a role that had traditionally been played by the U.S.-Japan alliance.³⁵ On the eve of Lee Myung-bak’s meeting with Hu Jintao in May 2008, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson stated that “the Korean-U.S. alliance is a historic relic. . . . We should not approach current security issues with military alliances left over from the past Cold War era.”³⁶ This phase marked the first official occasion in which China openly expressed its unhappiness with South Korea’s alliance with Washington. Although Chinese officials downplayed the remark while Seoul debated whether to issue a formal protest,³⁷ the episode reflected a growing unease in Beijing about the U.S.–South Korea alliance.³⁸

For Seoul, Beijing’s reserved responses to North Korea’s two major provocations in 2010—the sinking of the *Cheonan*, a South Korean Navy vessel, and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island—went against expectations of Chinese support for pressuring Pyongyang at the United Nations, stirring dissatisfaction and heated debate about China’s policy toward the two Koreas. South Korea–China relations deteriorated after each North Korean provocation, revealing their differences over how to deal with North Korea, while the Washington-Tokyo-Seoul tripartite security cooperation grew stronger as all three countries coordinated policy closely to deter North Korea. In the face of North Korea’s actions, which killed South Korean civilians as well as Navy sailors, South Korean public support for the U.S.–South Korea alliance rose in rough proportion to the deepening mistrust of China.³⁹ During this phase, in addition to the central role of this alliance for defense

and deterrence against North Korea, the idea that “[s]trong U.S.-Japan-[South Korea] ties enhance Seoul’s leverage in dealing with China” gained currency.⁴⁰ In the aftermath of the *Cheonan* sinking and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island, Japan was quick and firm in supporting South Korea’s position along with the United States, which resulted in the strengthening of coordination among the three countries.⁴¹

Beijing’s reluctance to condemn North Korea’s actions can be explained by its policy objective of maintaining stability on the Korean Peninsula and concerns about the possibility of North Korea’s collapse. In addition, North Korea held strategic value in China’s rivalry with the United States, not unlike the dynamics during the Sino-Soviet rivalry. Throughout the 2000s, Chinese experts came to a stronger consensus that Washington’s true intention was to contain China to maintain American hegemonic power.⁴² For the United States, the relative decline of U.S. power vis-à-vis China after the 2008 global financial crisis made the strengthening of existing alliances in Asia, especially with Japan and South Korea, increasingly important to the longtime U.S. strategic objective of preventing the rise of any other hegemonic power.⁴³ In contrast with its subdued responses to the *Cheonan* sinking and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island, China had a strong reaction to a planned U.S.–South Korea naval exercise in the Yellow Sea, motivated by the need to respond to perceptions of renewed U.S. efforts at containment of China.⁴⁴

Phase Four: The Military Parade, THAAD, and the Three Nos (2013–2020)

If mutual economic benefits had previously papered over tensions surrounding South Korea’s alliance with

the United States, after 2013, politics and strategic issues emerged as dividing factors in China and South Korea's bilateral ties and economic activities. During this phase, China sought to stop Seoul from becoming a force multiplier for U.S. power,⁴⁵ while both the Obama and Trump administrations endeavored to enhance interoperability and information-sharing among Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo. Beijing's confidence as a great power and its aspirations for global governance became evident with President Xi Jinping's proposals for the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Chinese influence was growing in both North and South Korea, centering on issues related to the economy and North Korea. President Park Geun-hye believed that China's North Korea policy was changing and that Seoul could warm up political relations with Beijing so that China's policy would move toward supporting unification on the side of South Korea. This expectation proved wrong.⁴⁶

At the start of the conservative Park Geun-hye government in February 2013, many experts felt that China–South Korea relations had reached their lowest point since normalization. By 2015, however, relations were thought to be at their highest point since normalization, to the degree that concerns were voiced in Washington and Tokyo about South Korean foreign policy, which culminated in Park Geun-hye's attendance at China's World War II Victory Day military parade in September. This concern that South Korea was leaning toward China was magnified because of the poor state of South Korea–Japan relations, with Park Geun-hye refusing to hold summit meetings with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe for nearly three years over Japan's stances on the issue of “comfort women” and other historical issues.

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If Park Geun-hye's *trustpolitik*—emphasizing trust-building in foreign policy—led South Korea to adopt a “no talk with Japan” position until 2015, the personal friendship between Park Geun-hye and Xi Jinping seemed to point to the possibility that China might support South Korea's foreign policy goals over North Korea's. Before Park Geun-hye's first visit to Beijing in June 2013, South Korean experts debated whether China's sanctions of North Korea in response to Pyongyang's third nuclear test four months prior signified a fundamental change in its North Korea policy or a mere tactical move.⁴⁷ During the visit, Xi Jinping and Park Geun-hye agreed to establish and regularize high-level communication channels between the national security adviser of South Korea's Blue House and the State Councilor for foreign affairs; China had previously had this kind of high-level strategic dialogue with only the United States and Russia.⁴⁸ In July 2014, Xi Jinping visited South Korea before visiting North Korea, and the two sides agreed that their relations constituted

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an “Enriched Strategic Cooperative Partnership.” South Koreans interpreted the image of Park Geun-hye standing next to Chinese and Russian leaders at the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II in 2015 as one of her “standing where Kim Il Sung had been 60 years ago,” with South Korea replacing North Korea on the podium.⁴⁹

The change in the relationship from 2015 to 2016 was as drastic as it was frustrating, especially for Seoul. In 2015, South Korea joined the AIIB but decided not to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership;⁵⁰ a bilateral free trade agreement with China entered into effect in December. However, when North Korea conducted its fourth nuclear test in January 2016, Park Geun-hye could not even talk to Xi Jinping for a month, which confirmed that there was little change in China’s strategic calculations toward North Korea. Amid the U.S. rebalance to Asia and its perceived encirclement of China, Chinese deliberations over whether

to place tougher sanctions against Pyongyang, as South Korea and the United States wanted, would not have been easy.⁵¹ This decision, which occurred at the high point of China–South Korea relations, underscores the consistency of China’s focus on broader geopolitical considerations when forming policies toward the two Koreas; in this case, its geopolitical aim was to avoid measures that could destabilize the North Korean regime.⁵²

Given the growing threats from North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs, South Korean policymakers increasingly viewed the deployment of THAAD as a reasonable option for their national security.⁵³ However, viewing the United States’ ballistic missile defense policy against North Korea as strengthening the U.S. hegemonic position in Asia,⁵⁴ China put pressure on South Korea not to deploy on the grounds that such a step would undermine China’s national security. When the Park Geun-hye government made an alliance decision with the United States to deploy THAAD in South Korea, China’s retaliatory measures resulted in a reduction in the number of Chinese tourists visiting South Korea, the cancellation of simplified visa application procedures, and a block on access to the Chinese market for South Korean goods and services.⁵⁵ China’s use of economic coercion over the THAAD deployment turned the South Korean public more critical of China.⁵⁶

It is worth mentioning that in response to the Obama administration’s efforts toward strengthening the alliance system in Asia, three differing views were expressed within China concerning how to approach its relations with Seoul. The idealist school—a minority view—argued that China should establish an alliance with South Korea. The pragmatist school stated that South Korea could be made to play the role of China’s “Trojan horse” in the U.S.

alliance system, with many Chinese scholars identifying the U.S.–South Korea alliance as “the most important” yet “a relatively vulnerable link” in the U.S. regional alliance architecture and strategy. The traditionalist school maintained the view that the enhancement of China’s relations with South Korea should not come at the expense of China–North Korea relations.⁵⁷ From 2013 to 2015, China’s foreign policy moved closer to the pragmatist school; China wanted to use its relations with South Korea as leverage against the United States and sought to strengthen its relations with South Korea with positive incentives, such as the South Korea–China free trade agreement. In the face of North Korea’s provocations in 2016, China shifted toward the traditionalist approach, while the Park Geun-hye government decided to deploy THAAD in South Korea in response to Pyongyang’s provocations.

When President Moon Jae-in was inaugurated in 2017, South Korea faced the dual challenges of managing alliance issues with the Trump administration and putting an end to the dispute with China over the THAAD deployment. At the start of the Moon government in May 2017, two THAAD launchers and an associated radar were made operational; the other launchers were brought into South Korea but were not yet operational. On June 30, Moon Jae-in and President Donald Trump agreed that the THAAD deployment was a joint decision between allies. On July 4, Pyongyang conducted its first intercontinental ballistic missile test. During a summit meeting between Xi Jinping and Moon Jae-in two days later, Xi Jinping emphasized that Seoul should respect China’s core interests and remove a key obstacle to their bilateral ties. On July 28, North Korea successfully launched its second intercontinental ballistic missile, which led the Moon Jae-in

government to decide that Seoul would complete the installation of the additional launchers.

If there is an area of continuity between the Obama and Trump administrations’ national security strategy as concerning Seoul, it is to “deepen the trilateral security cooperation between the United States, South Korea, and Japan, including missile defense, intelligence-sharing, and other defense-related initiatives.”⁵⁸ The Trump administration’s expectation of South Korea as an established ally, as outlined in the Indo-Pacific Strategy concept, is that Seoul work more closely with the United States and Japan to preserve both U.S. global military primacy vis-à-vis China and Russia and the free and open Indo-Pacific order. One of the core elements of the Indo-Pacific strategy is to reinforce the United States’ commitment to established alliances and evolving the U.S. alliances into a networked security architecture in ways that share more costs with Seoul and other allies.⁵⁹

Meanwhile, South Korea’s efforts to restore its relations with and reassure Beijing took the form of the October 31 “three Nos” agreement, in which Seoul stated its position that

The South Korean government is not considering additional deployment of THAAD; it will not participate in the U.S. missile defense system; and it does not intend to develop U.S.–South Korea–Japan tripartite security cooperation into a military alliance.⁶⁰

China and South Korea’s relations began to recover but not to the degree of the pre-THAAD dispute period. This is perhaps unsurprising, because the Moon Jae-in government’s strategy of avoiding making decisions that appear to take sides between Beijing and Washington is designed to

create room and autonomy for South Korea and to possibly alter its choices at a later point.

Regarding the Indo-Pacific framework, in June 2019, Moon Jae-in stated that “[w]e’ve reached a consensus to put forth further harmonious cooperation between South Korea’s New Southern Policy and the United States’ Indo-Pacific Strategy.”⁶¹ According to a joint statement published in November 2019, the United States and South Korea agreed on the “principles of openness, inclusiveness, transparency, respect for international norms, and ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] centrality,”⁶² while identifying energy, infrastructure and development finance, digital economy, good governance and civil society, and regional peace and security as areas of formal cooperation under the U.S. Free and Open Indo-Pacific Policy strategy and South Korea’s New Southern Policy. The South Korean government’s post-THAAD strategies included efforts to diversify its diplomacy toward ASEAN members and work on policy alignments with the Indo-Pacific strategy through the New Southern Policy. It is uncertain whether South Korea will incorporate the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Policy strategy into its own foreign policy agenda.⁶³

South Korea’s response to the growing rivalry between Beijing and Washington has been “balanced diplomacy,” seeking to pursue friendly relations with both Washington and Beijing. First, Moon Jae-in’s determined pursuit of inter-Korean relations is the hallmark of his administration’s foreign policy and holds the key to understanding South Korea’s current positioning between Washington and Beijing. It is worth noting that in 2015, as chief of the opposition party, Moon Jae-in had recommended that President Park Geun-hye should attend China’s

commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II.⁶⁴ The Trump administration’s transactional approach toward U.S. Forces Korea and the cost-sharing issue were causing concerns among South Koreans about the state of the U.S.–South Korea alliance. However, after the 2017 tensions between the United States and North Korea, Trump’s willingness to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un became a critical element toward accomplishing South Korea’s policy objectives toward North Korea. The Moon Jae-in and Trump administrations still were aligned in their views on North Korea, compared with the dynamics between the Roh Moo-hyun and Bush administrations, arguably preventing a decisive move toward China by South Korea.

Second, the asymmetry in the level of economic dependence in the China–South Korea bilateral relationship creates room for strategic vulnerability. The South Korean economy remains highly dependent on foreign trade, with exports and imports creating 63.7 percent of the total South Korean gross domestic product.⁶⁵ In 2003, China replaced the United States as South Korea’s top trading partner; China’s share in terms of overall South Korean exports rose from 7.0 percent in 1998 to 25.1 percent in 2019.⁶⁶ South Korea’s share in terms of overall Chinese exports was 3.5 percent in 1998, 3.6 percent in 2003, 5.2 percent in 2008, 4.1 percent in 2013, and 4.4 percent in 2019.⁶⁷ In 2019, South Korea was China’s fourth-largest export market and its largest import source, making it China’s third-largest trade partner. It seems that after the THAAD experience, economic consideration and business sentiments within South Korea explain in part why Seoul chose not to openly join the U.S. ban on Huawei.⁶⁸ South Korea also has strong economic links with the United States; in 2019, South

Korea was the United States' seventh-largest export market and its sixth-largest import source, making it the United States' sixth-largest trade partner overall.

It remains to be seen if China can continue to rely solely on economic means as leverage against South Korea. As Beijing has turned to coercive measures and economic retaliation, South Korean companies have adopted a diversification strategy, turning their eyes to other Asian markets for investment, especially Vietnam and India.⁶⁹ Lotte Group, for example, lost \$1.78 billion after it yielded its golf course site to host THAAD. Sales fell in its duty-free shops, its businesses were suspended, and its shopping mall construction projects in China were cancelled.⁷⁰ Lotte Mart finally had to sell all operations in China; it now has 46 stores in Indonesia and 14 in Vietnam, as well as 123 in South Korea.⁷¹ China's public diplomacy efforts toward winning the hearts and minds of South Koreans have not been successful; their views of China's global influence have deteriorated between 2004 and 2017.⁷² In 2017, eight out of ten South Korean respondents said that Seoul-Beijing relations were bad, compared with only three out of ten just after Park Geun-Hye's attendance in the military parade in 2015.⁷³ The image of South Korea in China has been similarly negatively affected.⁷⁴

Yes, It's Geopolitics, and What This Means for U.S. Policy in the Indo-Pacific

What do the contours of Beijing-Seoul ties over the past 70 years tell us about the future of China-South Korea relations and of the U.S. Indo-Pacific policy? They reveal

the enduring relevance of geopolitical considerations—how China and South Korea's comparative sizes and their locations influence their policies.⁷⁵ *Geopolitics* is defined as “the study of the way a country's size, position, etc. influence its power and its relationships with other countries.”⁷⁶ According to Saul Cohen, “Geopolitical analysis does not predict the timing of events, crises, and flash points that force radical changes in the geopolitical map. . . . What such analysis can do is focus the attention of policy makers on conditions that are likely to bring about geopolitical change.”⁷⁷ In the context of China-South Korea relations, the Korean Peninsula serves as the bridge between China and Japan geographically, with important implications for the U.S. alliance system in the region. What specific insights does this geopolitical reality offer in terms of U.S. policy in the Indo-Pacific?

China's Policies Toward South Korea Are a Function of Its Ambitions vis-à-vis the United States

First, the more ambitious Beijing becomes in seeking to change the status quo power balance in Asia, and the more antagonistic Beijing-Washington relations become, the more China is likely to condition its policy toward South Korea on China's goals vis-à-vis the United States. This is not to say that China's policy toward South Korea is determined solely by U.S.-China relations. Rather, under circumstances of intense competition, China's approach and calculations toward the Korean Peninsula—both South and North Korea—are likely to be largely a function of its policy toward the United States. The relationship between China and the Korean Peninsula is often likened to that

between lips and teeth because the peninsula's proximity could create a vulnerability for China vis-à-vis other great powers. Since before the nineteenth century, Beijing has tended to have instrumental objectives toward the Korean Peninsula at times of power competition in Asia. The two Koreas' strategic importance to Beijing means that their values can fluctuate depending on the nature of China's relations with other great powers.

During China and Korea's long history as neighbors of asymmetric power until the nineteenth century, a state of stability in bilateral relations was reached and maintained when China respected the autonomy of Korea; diplomacy was a means to shape Korean behavior so as to prevent Korea from making strategic decisions that China believed were against its interests.⁷⁸ During the Cold War, China's signing of a military treaty with North Korea in 1961 meant that Beijing had diplomatic leverage over North Korean behavior through regularized interactions and the requirements of reciprocal information-sharing.⁷⁹ Beijing's continued engagement with North Korea could be viewed as a form of insurance to keep its influence on matters related to the Korean Peninsula. Beijing's desire to upgrade its relationship with Seoul in the political and strategic realms could also be understood as a way to have influence on South Korea. However, this instrumental approach will ultimately likely limit China's ability to expand its influence over the Korean Peninsula because both Koreas clearly do not want to be treated as means to an end in great power politics. China's policy of viewing North Korea as a buffer against U.S. influence is likely to impede its long-term, broader goals of expanding its political and strategic influence over the entire Korean Peninsula.⁸⁰

Against the backdrop of U.S.-China competition, Beijing has begun to use its relationship with Seoul as a means for soft balancing against the United States while still avoiding direct confrontation.⁸¹ If strategic confrontation with Washington further intensifies, Beijing will likely use its relationship with Seoul to delegitimize U.S. leadership and the U.S.-led liberal international order. In the eyes of Beijing, South Korea, a key ally of the United States, is of strategic value in the context of Sino-U.S. rivalry on such issues as the U.S. Indo-Pacific concept, THAAD, Huawei, AIIB, and BRI.⁸² This has put South Korea in a position where the political significance of joining China-led international institutions and initiatives as a close ally of the United States is not small. Similarly, Moon Jae-in's acceptance of Trump's invitation to the proposed expanded G7 meeting is a reminder to Chinese policymakers that South Korea is a valued member of a U.S.-centered international order. Precisely because of the current context of rising confrontation between Washington and Beijing, this gesture can be interpreted as carrying more political significance than usual.⁸³ At the time of writing, Seoul had joined the AIIB but not the BRI. The Moon Jae-in government has let individual companies make their own decisions on whether to continue to do business with Huawei.

Beijing Is Unlikely to Take Any Actions to Destabilize Pyongyang

Second, the recurring pattern in Seoul-Beijing relations of going downhill after each attempt at an upgrade explains why U.S. efforts to persuade China to put pressure on North Korea are not likely to work. China's North Korea policy has shown remarkable continuity, dating back to the

years of the Cold War, and it is unlikely to change without external shocks that fundamentally change China's strategic calculations. Even when Chinese policymakers were looking to improve political relations with Seoul, they did not respond to Seoul's requests to exert pressure against North Korea. South Korea's requests did not align with China's strategic calculation toward Pyongyang amid perceived threats from the U.S. strengthening of the alliance system in Asia.

Generally speaking, as long as Beijing perceives its relations with the United States as competitive, it will likely want to maintain its relationship with Pyongyang as a form of insurance—first, to ensure stability on the Korean Peninsula, and second, to have a voice and influence on matters on the Korean Peninsula. It is for this reason that China has not renounced the 1961 alliance with North Korea and has continued to provide aid to sustain the regime to this day.⁸⁴

Why did Beijing use coercive tactics on South Korea after the THAAD deployment while refusing to enforce more sanctions against North Korea to change Pyongyang's behavior? These two actions are the two sides of the same coin. Having enough leverage over North Korea's behavior has proven difficult for Beijing. Short of a regime change or collapse, which China does not want, North Korea has very little to lose, and Beijing is often left to deal with Pyongyang's provocative behavior. Whereas the use of coercion or any other form of sanctions might create even greater instability in North Korea,⁸⁵ South Korea has much to lose due to the South Korean economy's interdependence with that of China. The asymmetry in the level of dependence means that China can threaten to withdraw those

The recurring pattern in Seoul–Beijing relations of going downhill after each attempt at an upgrade explains why U.S. efforts to persuade China to put pressure on North Korea are not likely to work.

economic benefits—a form of power that China has begun to employ to affect South Korean behavior.

Seoul's Desire for Autonomy Means No Automatic Support for Beijing

Finally, the past 70 years of history show that South Korea's desire to tighten strategic ties with China does not mean that Seoul is joining the Beijing bandwagon on regional affairs. This is evidenced in part by the recurring pattern of China–South Korea relations deteriorating after each attempt to upgrade. Although South Korean leaders remain sensitive to Chinese interests, both progressives and conservatives have pursued China policy within the bounds of South Korea's alliance with the United States and South

Korea's interests, particularly its desire for a breakthrough in relations with North Korea toward unification.⁸⁶ South Korean leaders showed more reservations when it came to responding to "Chinese ways" of approaching regional affairs. For example, South Korea–China relations did not proceed with upgrading to a next-level designation, "Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership," in 2014, in part because Seoul did not agree to Beijing's suggestion of coordinating their policy toward Japan and on China's "New Asia Security" concept.⁸⁷

Two episodes deserve attention during the last phase. In May 2014, at the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, Xi Jinping stated that

it is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia and uphold the security of Asia. The people of Asia have the capability and wisdom to achieve peace and stability in the region through enhanced cooperation.⁸⁸

Before this meeting, Beijing asked Seoul to sign on to a joint statement that called for the end of blocs and alliances in Asia, but the Park Geun-hye government rejected the proposal and the draft statement was not issued.⁸⁹ The other episode concerns South Korea's refusal to join China to form a joint front against Japan over history issues during Park Geun-hye's visit to China in 2013.⁹⁰ During a visit to Seoul in July 2014, Xi Jinping highlighted the ties between China and South Korea with reference to the two countries' history of having been victims of Japan's militarist past in his address at Seoul National University.⁹¹ According to the Asan Institute's polling data, whereas only 12.8 percent of South Korean respondents thought

dealing with Japan's past should be the top agenda for South Korea–China relations, 53.6 percent cited North Korea's nuclear problem.⁹²

When Do China–South Korea Relations Tend to Improve?

Generally speaking, South Korean policymakers, especially the progressives who find more alignment of views with regard to North Korea, will likely take an initiative toward tightening strategic ties with Beijing when at least two conditions are met. However, whether these conditions exist, it is important to keep in mind that South Korean conception of autonomy is autonomy from great powers generally—including the United States and China.

One condition is a strong desire to pursue unification with North Korea. Although both the conservative and progressive governments in South Korea showed this pattern previously, it is worth noting that generally speaking, Beijing's North Korea policy resonates more with South Korean progressives' agenda for their emphasis on inter-Korean dialogue and engagement. It is no coincidence that China had a favorable view of South Korea–China relations under the progressive government of Roh Moo-hyun, during which U.S.–South Korea relations tended to experience strain over coordinating their North Korea policy.

The second consideration is that South Korea needs good Beijing–Washington relations to proceed with upgrading strategic relations with Beijing. Generally, China's views of the U.S.–South Korea alliance tended to be less negative when U.S.–China relations were more cooperative than conflicted, as in the 1970s, 1990s, and early 2000s. This relative positivity creates more room for diplomacy

between Beijing and Seoul. Park Geun-hye was able to tighten ties with Beijing partly because South Korea's alliance with the United States was on solid ground. From the perspective of South Korea, whose national defense centers on its military alliance with the United States, it is difficult to take any bold step toward tightening strategic and political relations with Beijing when U.S.-China relations are not good. The United States' adversarial relationship with China now puts South Korea in a position of having to make decisions among undesirable choices.

Under the two conditions that exist at present—no major change in Beijing's basic strategic calculations toward North Korea and no improvement in the U.S.-China strategic competition—South Korea-China relations would have difficulty further improving strategic ties. Now and for the foreseeable future, China is not emerging as a strategic alternative to the United States for South Korea; South Korea's alliance with the United States is not replaceable with a strategic partnership with China.

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¹⁰ Myǒng-hae Ch'oe, 2009, pp. 315–317.

¹¹ Hun-bong Park, 2015, p. 249.

¹² After Lee Bum-suck first used the term *Nordpolitik* in 1983, the Roh Tae-woo government officially adopted the policy of taking diplomatic initiatives toward the Soviet Union, China, and other countries in the Communist bloc in 1988 as a strategy aimed at reducing hostility in inter-Korean relations (see Ch'ŏr-ho Cho, “Nordpolitik [Pukpang oegyo],” *Encyclopedia of Korean Culture* [Han'guk minjok munhwa

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²³ Jae Ho Chung, 2014, p. 432.

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하지 않고 있습니다. (또) 우리 정부는 ‘미국의 MD체계에 참여하지 않는다’는 정부 기존 입장에 변함이 없고 (한미일) 삼국간 안보협력이 군사동맹으로 발전하지 않을 것임을 분명히 말씀드립니다.”

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⁷⁵ For the works that emphasize the role of geopolitics in China’s approach to the Korean Peninsula, see Young-nam Cho, “Analysis on Pressing Security Issues in South Korea–China Relations [Han-Chung kwan’gye 20-yŏn ūi banbo chaengchŏm punsŏk],” *International and Area Studies [Kukche chiyŏk yŏngu]*, Vol. 21, No. 4, 2012; Dongryul Lee, “The Current Status and Tasks of South Korea–China Relations [Han-Chung kwan’gye ūi hyŏnhwang gwa gawje],” in *2019 China Report [2019 Chungguk chŏngse pogo]*, Seoul: The Korea National Diplomatic Academy, 2020; Wang Fei-Ling, *Tacit Acceptance and Watchful Eyes: Beijing’s Views of the U.S.-ROK Alliance*, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, 1997; Dan Li, “Chinese Foreign Policy Principles and Relations with the Republic of Korea in the Jiang Zemin Era [Jiang Zemin sidae ūi Chungguk ūi oegyo gicho wa taehanpando kwan’gye],” *Northeast Asian Studies [Hanguk Tongbuga nonch’ong]*, Vol. 22, 2002; Kwihwa Chung, “Chinese Foreign Policy and Sino-Korean Relations [Chungguk ūi oegyo chŏngch’aek gwa HanChung kwan’gye],” *Korean Journal of Political Science [Taehan chŏngchi’i hakheo po]*, Vol. 23, No. 3, August 2015; Sang-mun Suh, “Continuity and Change in China’s Korea Policy [Chungguk ūi Taehanpando chŏngch’aek ūi chisok kwa pyŏnhwa],” *Journal of Strategic Studies [Chŏllyak yŏngu]*, Vol. 63, July 2014; Zhou Jianren, “Coping with America’s Alliance Strategy Within the Context of the Rebalancing to Asia and the Pacific [Dongmeng lilun yu meiguo chongfanyatai tongmeng zhanlue yingdui],” *Dangdaiyazhou*, Vol. 4, 2015; and Zhou Fangyin, “The U.S. Alliance System in Asia: A Chinese Perspective,” *Asian Politics and Policy*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2016.

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⁷⁸ Ji-Young Lee, *China’s Hegemony: Four Hundred Years of East Asian Domination*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.

⁷⁹ Myŏng-hae Ch’oe, 2009.

⁸⁰ The author wishes to thank Scott Snyder for bringing these valuable points to her attention.

⁸¹ See, for example, Heungkyu Kim, 2013a; Dongryul Lee, 2020.

⁸² See, for example, Kevin G. Cai, “The One Belt One Road and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank: Beijing’s New Strategy of Geoeconomics and Geopolitics,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 27, No. 114, 2018.

⁸³ Eduardo Baptista, “China–South Korea Ties Face a Testing Time After Seoul Accepts Donald Trump’s G7 Invitation,” *South China Morning Post*, June 5, 2020.

⁸⁴ Myöng-hae Ch’oe, 2009.

⁸⁵ Derek Grossman, “China’s Reluctance on Sanctions Enforcement in North Korea,” *RAND Blog*, webpage, January 4, 2018.

⁸⁶ For example, in response to Roe Tae-woo’s balancer argument, President Kim Dae Jung said, “It’s best that our diplomatic relations operate within the three frameworks of a strong Korea-U.S. relationship, the tripartite alliance and cooperation between the region’s four Great Powers. . . . This is not a choice, but a position we have to accept fatalistically, our destiny.” See Snyder, 2018, p. 124.

⁸⁷ Hee Ok Lee, “South Korea–China Relations, What Has Changed and Will the Change Be Sustainable [HanChung kwan’gye, gwayönmuöt i pyönhwadeoutgo chisok kanüng hal köt in’ga],” East Asia Foundation, No. 6, July 16, 2014.

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⁹¹ Sang-hun Choe, “Chinese Leader, Underlining Ties to South Korea, Cites Japan as Onetime Mutual Enemy,” *New York Times*, July 4, 2014.

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About This Perspective

How are Beijing's growing influence and assertiveness in regional affairs affecting South Korea–China relations? Since the 1992 diplomatic normalization between South Korea and China, attempts to upgrade bilateral strategic ties have repeatedly faced unmet expectations, revealing the two countries' diverging interests at a deeper, geopolitical level. Recently, China has begun to approach South Korea–China relations as an intermediary mechanism for handling its strategic competition with the United States. Meanwhile, South Korean leaders' own goals concerning North Korea are a key variable in efforts to build friendlier political relations with China. These often diverging interests have three implications for U.S. policymakers. First, as Beijing becomes more ambitious about changing the status quo in Asia, it might seek to tighten Beijing–Seoul political relations as a way to weaken the U.S. alliance system in the region. Second, Beijing is unlikely to take any actions that would destabilize the North Korean regime, especially if U.S.–China competition grows more intense. This understanding should inform Washington and Seoul's policy coordination efforts toward Pyongyang. Third, South Korean progressives tend to draw closer to Chinese views on issues of North Korea's nuclear and missile development programs. However, it is important to keep in mind that Seoul's desire for autonomy in foreign policy and inter-Korean relations means that it does not render automatic support for Beijing's regional agenda.

Funding for this research was provided by generous contributions from the Korea Foundation and the RAND Center for Asia Pacific Policy Advisory Board. This research was conducted within the National Security Research Division.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Scott W. Harold and Agnes Schaefer of the RAND Corporation and Scott Snyder of the Council on Foreign Relations for their reviews of this Perspective. Their excellent comments and suggestions helped improve the quality of this Perspective. The author also owes a debt of gratitude to Rafiq Dossani, Bruce Bennett, and other RAND colleagues who participated in Korea Focus Group discussions for sharing their views on the various security issues concerning the two Koreas.

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