

# Is South Korea in China's Orbit? Assessing Seoul's Perceptions and Policies

*Jae Ho Chung and Jiyoong Kim*



**JAE HO CHUNG** is a Professor in the Department of Political Science and International Relations and Director of the Program on U.S.-China Relations in the Asia Center of Seoul National University. He can be reached at <cjhir@snu.ac.kr>.

**JIYOON KIM** is a Research Fellow at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. She can be reached at <jiyoong@asaninst.org>.

**NOTE** ≈ This article draws in part on Jae Ho Chung, “Wind Behind the Sails? South Korea–China Relations after the Park-Xi Summit: A South Korean Perspective,” *Asan Forum, National Commentary*, September 24, 2014 ≈ <http://www.theasanforum.org/a-south-korean-perspective>.

**KEYWORDS:** SOUTH KOREA; CHINA; ROK-U.S. ALLIANCE; KOREAN PENINSULA

---

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

---

This article examines South Korea's perceptions of and policies toward China, particularly since President Park Geun-hye's inauguration in 2013, and assesses the thesis that Seoul is in the Chinese orbit.

**MAIN ARGUMENT**

Although the view that South Korea is tilting increasingly toward China at the expense of its relations with the U.S. has been gaining an audience in some corners of the U.S. and Japan in recent years, this thesis is largely ungrounded. It is challenged both by an assessment of Xi Jinping's state visit to South Korea in July 2014 and by an analysis of South Korean perceptions toward China in seven issue domains: China's rise, historical disputes, the sharing of norms and values, territorial disputes, North Korea, reunification, and the ROK-U.S. alliance. Nonetheless, nascent concerns about North Korea's renegade behavior and China's rise are in the backdrop of Seoul's recent approach to China. Down the road, the number of issues over which Seoul must agonize will only increase, thereby leading the U.S. to worry about China's influence over South Korea more often than ever before.

**POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

- South Korea's policies and perceptions toward China, though varying by issue, overall are embedded in recognition of the high uncertainty surrounding China's rise and how it will relate to the fate of North Korea.
- In order to mitigate or eradicate faulty assumptions and perceptions, both Track 1 and Track 1.5 dialogues need to be held more frequently between South Korea, Japan, and China, as well as between South Korea, the U.S., and China.
- The accelerating pace of China's ascent is likely to make important issues of contention arise more frequently, pushing Seoul to choose between Washington and Beijing.

The vital interests—and core goals—of the Republic of Korea (ROK) are anchored in economic growth and development, peace and security, and reunification. So far as economic interactions are concerned, China currently figures prominently vis-à-vis the United States. In terms of national security and military defense, by contrast, China pales in importance next to the ROK-U.S. alliance. Which country's role and contribution will be deemed more pivotal to the daunting task of reunification still hangs in the air. Key questions about South Korea's perceptions of and policies toward China are posed in this fluid and evolving context.

Since mid-2013, there has been a growing perception in Washington and Tokyo that Seoul has fallen into China's orbit. The thesis posits that South Korea is at present tilting increasingly toward China at the expense of its relations with the United States and will eventually align itself with China.<sup>1</sup> Such concerns originated with President Park Geun-hye's successful state visit to China in June 2013, during which Seoul-Beijing ties were further cemented by a pledge to consolidate the "strategic cooperative partnership" established in 2008.<sup>2</sup> Granted that it was fairly common to hear that ROK-China relations have never been better (particularly compared with the five years under Lee Myung-bak), such concerns on the part of the United States and Japan are understandable, though largely blown out of proportion.

A year after Park's visit, President Xi Jinping reciprocated with his first state visit to South Korea in early July 2014. It was the first time that the Chinese president visited South Korea before he did the North. More importantly, President Xi's itinerary included only one country—South Korea—as if he had specific goals and motives in mind for the visit. Naturally, the overall atmosphere was cordial, protocols were maximally accorded, schedules were planned to the minute, and hopes and expectations soared high. However, some reporting on the visit was exaggerated and assessments were inflated by

---

<sup>1</sup> For such assessments, see Alain Guidetti, "South Korea and China: A Strategic Partnership in the Making," *Global Asia* 9, no. 3 (2014): 110–15; and Tom Wright, "South Korea Looks to Prosper in China While Staying Close to U.S.," *Wall Street Journal*, November 25, 2014. For Japanese sources, see, for instance, Kimura Kan, "Chuugokuheno kyusekkinkin Kankokuno" [South Korea's Futures Trading—Closer Relations with China], *Weekly Toyo Keizai*, July 13, 2013, 79–101; Nishimura Kinyichi, "Shinmitsuna Chuukankankeiga Kakkokuhe oyabosu eikyō to sono tenbō" [The Impact of Closer Korea-China Relations on Other Nations], Japan Forum for Strategic Studies, Quarterly Report, no. 62, October 2014, 28–34; and Suzuoki Takabumi, "Kankokuha 'kaerazaru hasi' wo wataru" [Korea Has Passed the "Point of No Return"], *Nikkei Business Online*, September 7, 2015 ~ <http://business.nikkeibp.co.jp/atcl/report/15/226331/090400012>.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that despite Beijing's suggestion in early 2013 to upgrade the bilateral relationship to a "comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership" (*quanmian zhanlue hezuo huoban*), Seoul held on to the original designation.

the news media's eagerness to mete out positive results even before the two sides had announced their formal agreements.

This article is an empirical rebuttal to the mostly anecdotal and largely impressionistic views in some corners of the United States and Japan that South Korea is already in the Chinese orbit. The article is organized as follows:

- ≈ pp. 126–29 offer an assessment of the Xi visit in July 2014 as a key indicator of South Korea's policies toward China.
- ≈ pp. 130–43 examine South Koreans' perceptions of China in seven issue domains, arguing that these are not quite congruent with the thesis that Seoul is in China's orbit.
- ≈ pp. 143–45 look into the more recent case of President Park's attendance of China's Victory Day celebration in September 2015 and provide some informed predictions about South Korea's future relations with China.

#### AN ASSESSMENT OF THE XI VISIT IN 2014

Twenty-three years after the normalization of diplomatic ties, ROK-China relations have entered into a period of maturation. With a history of ebbs and flows,<sup>3</sup> bilateral ties were particularly bumpy during 2008–12 due not only to the Lee Myung-bak administration's largely pro-U.S. approach but also to Beijing's defense of North Korea's sinking of the ROKS *Cheonan* and shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in 2010. When the Xi and Park administrations were inaugurated in 2012 and 2013, respectively, an improvement in the bilateral relationship was highly anticipated.

Four factors have played a role in facilitating better relations between Seoul and Beijing since 2013. First, as if to accommodate such high expectations, the Xi administration has put much effort into wooing Seoul, often at the expense of Pyongyang.<sup>4</sup> Second, the Park government found that it was rather difficult to distinguish itself from the previous administration in the relationship with the United States and regarded improving relations with China as a diplomatic blue ocean. Third, as a result of the bizarre behavior of the Kim Jong-un regime, Beijing came to realize that Pyongyang could become a serious political liability for China's reputation as a "responsible great power." Fourth, President Park's visit to China in 2013—officially

---

<sup>3</sup> Jae Ho Chung, *Between Ally and Partner: Korea-China Relations and the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Several South Korean officials interviewed by the authors referred to Beijing's recent approach as a "charm offensive."

promoted as a “trip for heart-to-heart building of trust” (*xinxin zhi lü*)—was such a big hit in China that it had the effect of further cementing bilateral ties.

Many analysts thus expected President Xi’s state visit to South Korea in July 2014 to lead to another heyday for ROK-China relations. As the saying goes, summits rarely fail. Although the outcomes of the Park-Xi summit did not exactly meet these inflated expectations, a couple of developments merit special attention. The decision to start official negotiations in 2015 regarding the demarcation of maritime boundaries, including exclusive economic zones (EEZ), was a huge step forward. For one, successful win-win negotiations on this sensitive issue would eliminate for good a principal obstacle to stable ROK-China relations. In addition, given that maritime territorial disputes have long constituted a principal source of contention in East Asia, agreement by Seoul and Beijing on a mutually satisfying solution could set a useful model for crisis prevention and confidence building with far-reaching ramifications for the region.

As for the areas of bilateral cooperation, three were specified—reduction of air pollution, collective rescue operations in cases of accidents and natural calamities, and increased cooperation in public health—with specific modes of operation and cooperation to be delineated.<sup>5</sup> In the realm of economic cooperation, the two sides set the target of reaching an agreement on a bilateral free trade agreement (FTA) before the end of 2014. Thanks to the leaders’ close attention to this issue, the Korea-China FTA was subsequently signed on November 10, 2014, and is now waiting to be formally ratified. Other noteworthy outcomes of the summit included establishing an offshore yuan center in Seoul (the first one in Asia outside the greater China region) and granting South Korea an 80 billion renminbi quota for domestic investors to buy Chinese securities under the Renminbi Qualified Foreign Institutional Investor program.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, a big picture for economic cooperation over the next five to ten years was apparently missing.

With regard to areas for regional and global cooperation, which are now deemed a key domain of the strategic cooperative partnership between the two countries, three issues were highlighted—climate change, cybersecurity,

---

<sup>5</sup> The following discussion is based on the joint statements announced after the 2014 Park-Xi summit. For the joint statement, see “Pakdaetonglyeong-Sijuseog chaetaeg Hanjung gongdongseongmyeong jeonmun” [President Park-Premier Xi Sino-Korean Joint Statement Text], Yonhap News Agency, July 30, 2014 ~ <http://www.yonhapnews.co.kr/politics/2014/07/03/0501000000AKR20140703143800001.HTML>.

<sup>6</sup> See Jung-Hoon Kim, “Xi Jinping banghan” [Specials on Xi Jinping’s Visit], *Chosun Daily*, July 4, 2014; and Special Report, “Hanguk gyungje yong eui deung’e olatada” [South Korea’s Economy Riding with the Dragon], *JoongAng Daily*, November 11, 2014.

and intraregional nuclear plant safety. While these issues are undoubtedly important, specific modes of bilateral cooperation have yet to be formulated.

Positive assessments of the Xi visit nearly stop there. Other than the issues discussed above, the “same bed, different dreams” phenomenon was discernible. China’s position—at least the public side of it—on North Korea and its nuclear weapons program was little different than 2013. Although President Xi apparently expressed quite a bit of his displeasure with Pyongyang in private conversations with President Park, he stopped short of publicly criticizing Pyongyang and calling for the denuclearization of North Korea.<sup>7</sup> As expected, he called for yet another round of six-party talks, which many pundits have long considered to be on life support, if not already dead. President Xi also demanded action on the agreement reached on September 19, 2005.<sup>8</sup> It is questionable, however, whether that could really be the basis of a meaningful new beginning, given the developments since 2005 (particularly the advancement of Pyongyang’s nuclear and missile capabilities).

If China was lukewarm on the North Korean conundrum, South Korea was equally so on the Japan question. Against Beijing’s expectations, South Korea did not quite go along with China’s plan of turning Japan into an open culprit. Japan was never mentioned in the joint statement (not even in the appendix).<sup>9</sup> Although China and South Korea agreed to conduct joint research on “forced sex slaves,” a united front against Japan did not materialize. President Xi’s “strong remarks” on Japan during his down-to-earth speech at Seoul National University on July 4, 2014, was perhaps another way of expressing his frustrations with the summit so far as the Japan issue was concerned.<sup>10</sup>

Overall, President Xi’s visit was not as impressive or substantive as President Park’s visit to China a year earlier. For one, the 2013 Park-Xi

<sup>7</sup> Scattered pieces of evidence—such as exchanges of negative remarks between Beijing and Pyongyang, the reduction of China’s crude oil shipments to North Korea, and the absence of high-level official exchanges—appear to suggest that China’s tactical mode of dealing with North Korea might have changed, although whether Beijing’s strategic interests vis-à-vis Pyongyang have also changed remains to be substantiated. For an argument along this line, see Jae Ho Chung and Myung-hae Choi, “Uncertain Allies or Uncomfortable Neighbors? Making Sense of China-North Korean Relations, 1949–2010,” *Pacific Review* 26, no. 3 (2013): 243–64.

<sup>8</sup> The September 19 joint statement grew out of the fourth round of the six-party talks and laid out several principles, such as the U.S. reaffirmation of having no intention to attack or invade North Korea with nuclear or conventional weapons and North Korea’s commitment to abandon all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs.

<sup>9</sup> China allegedly demanded that the word “Japan” be stipulated in the appendix. Authors’ interview with a senior ROK official, October 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Jae Ho Chung, “Wind Behind the Sails? South Korea–China Relations after the Park-Xi Summit: A South Korean Perspective,” *Asan Forum, National Commentary*, September 24, 2014 ~ <http://www.theasanforum.org/a-south-korean-perspective>. Also see Won-Yop Chung, “Hanguk Xi Jinping hangil bigonggae haji” [As South Korea Chose Not to Reveal Xi’s Anti-Japan Remarks], *JoongAng Daily*, July 4, 2014.

summit—as the first between the two presidents—already dealt with most of the principal issues in the bilateral relationship. Second, the media's outsized expectations made the 2014 summit appear less successful than it really was. A South Korean official offered the following comments on the 2014 summit: “The media in Seoul went way ahead on setting the atmosphere and agendas for the summit.... Granted that media people always look for something new instead of important continuities, they were generally excessive and often dead wrong.”<sup>11</sup> The official specifically pointed out that some media organizations performed as a mouthpiece for China by demanding that the bilateral relationship be “upgraded” to a “comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership.”<sup>12</sup> Their demands were effectively rejected by President Park's decision to keep the official designation intact.

After the 2014 summit, the *People's Daily* described Seoul as Beijing's close partner in regional peace and global prosperity. The *Global Times* went further to characterize the bilateral relationship as “politically hot and economically hot as well” (*zhengre jingre*), as if to contrast it with relations under the Lee administration (which were economically hot but politically cold).<sup>13</sup> Soon thereafter, however, sober—if not conservative—voices became loud in Seoul. Mainstream newspapers published editorials warning the Park administration against moving too fast to consolidate security ties with China. In some cases, this argument was only implicit, while other pundits were more explicit in highlighting the need to guard against China's “hidden agenda” in actively wooing South Korea.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Authors' interview with a South Korean official, November 2014.

<sup>12</sup> The possibility of upgrading the bilateral relationship to a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership was allegedly explored informally by the Chinese side in early 2014. See Jihye Yoo and Won-Yop Chung, “Hanjung gwangye jungreo sujuneuro gyuksang chujin” [South Korea and China in the Middle of Upgrading the Relationship on a Par with Sino-Russian Relations], *JoongAng Daily*, June 26, 2014.

<sup>13</sup> See Yao Dawei, “Xi Jinping tong hanguo zongtong Park Geun-hye huitan” [Xi Jinping's Summit with President Park Geun-hye], *Renmin ribao*, July 4, 2014; and *Huanqiu shibao*, July 4, 2014.

<sup>14</sup> See Michael Green, “An Optimistic Relationship,” *JoongAng Daily*, July 11, 2014; Park Jung-Hoon, “6-25reul wideaehan ‘Hangmi wonjo jonjaeng’ yila haetdeon Xi Jinping” [Xi Jinping Who Dubbed the Korean War as a Great ‘Resist the U.S. and Support North Korea’ War], *Chosun Daily*, July 11, 2014; Kim Younghee, “Xi Jinping pyo Junggukkeui ggumeul gyonggyehanda” [Need to Guard Us against Xi Jinping's China Dream], *JoongAng Daily*, July 11, 2014; Sunwoo Jung, “Yiyi jeyi” [Using the Barbarians to Check the Barbarians], *Chosun Daily*, July 12, 2014; Kim Dae-Jung, “Byongja horaneul yingneunda Xi Jinping yi watda” [Xi Jinping's Visit in the Midst of Reading a Book on China's Invasion of Chosun], *Chosun Daily*, July 15, 2014; Kim Ki-Chun, “Hanjung FTA—sodureul pilyo eopda” [No Need for Rush—The Korea-China FTA], *Chosun Daily*, July 16, 2014; Victor Cha, “Is South Korea Already Tilting Toward China,” *JoongAng Daily*, August 15, 2014; Lee Jeong-Jae, “Jungguk gwa hanggye salgi” [Co-Living with the Chinese], *JoongAng Daily*, September 11, 2014; and Kim Dae-Jung, “Jungguk e jongsokjokin Park Geun-hye woegyoy” [Park's Diplomacy Too Dependent on China], *Chosun Daily*, February 3, 2015.

SOUTH KOREA'S PERCEPTIONS OF CHINA:  
AN ISSUE-AREA APPROACH

Being a democratic system, South Korea's diplomacy is conditioned and constrained, often considerably, by public opinion.<sup>15</sup> Studies are readily available on psychological sources of South Korea's inherent concern with an assertive China, many of which were historically learned and accumulated over long years.<sup>16</sup> As for the contemporary sources of friction between South Korea and China, seven domains may be identified here: economic relations, historical disputes, clashes of norms and values, territorial issues, the North Korean conundrum, differences over the question of reunification, and the ROK-U.S. alliance. Based on the premise that leaders may mitigate certain frictions but nonetheless find it difficult to uproot the sources of contention, this study seeks to trace South Korean public opinion regarding the seven issue areas listed above.

Given that systematic elite interviews on all these issues are difficult—if not impossible—to conduct, public opinion surveys are utilized here to gather pertinent empirical data. Three principal sources are opinion polls conducted by the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies (IPUS) of Seoul National University, the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, and the East Asia Institute. The first refers to the Unification Attitude Surveys from 2007 to 2014. The second includes the Asan Annual Survey (2010–14) and the Asan Daily Poll (May 1–3, 2014; May 4–6, 2014; May 7–9, 2014; July 4–6, 2014; and August 26–28, 2014).<sup>17</sup> And the third denotes a number of polls conducted by the East Asia Institute in collaboration with *JoongAng Daily*, the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, and the Asiatic Research Institute of Korea University.<sup>18</sup> In addition, overseas surveys by polling agencies such as the Pew Research Center are also utilized.

---

<sup>15</sup> Key examples include the South Korean government's accommodation of and submission to public opinion regarding the history controversy with China in 2004, the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement's clause on beef imports in 2008, and intermittent conflicts over a wide array of history issues with Japan.

<sup>16</sup> See Chung, *Between Ally and Partner*, chap. 2.

<sup>17</sup> Data for all Asan surveys and polls is available upon request. Since August 2012, when the Asan Daily Poll began, China-focused surveys have been conducted just three times.

<sup>18</sup> For all the South Korean polls used in this study, respondents were over nineteen years old and were randomly selected in order to best represent the South Korean public. Although the size of samples differed across the series of surveys, the survey with the smallest sample size still had one thousand respondents, sufficing to restrict the margin of error within  $\pm 3.1\%$  at a 95% confidence level. All survey results were subjected to customary post-stratification processes to best match the census data of South Korea.



*General Perceptions of Sino-South Korean Relations*

Perceptions in South Korea of relations with China have fluctuated in tandem with the evolving international environment and in response to unforeseen events. For example, the Goguryeo history controversy generated a hugely negative impact on the bilateral relationship in 2004 and beyond.<sup>19</sup> Public opinion has been particularly fluid in recent years. As **Table 1** demonstrates, positive perceptions of Sino-South Korean relations dropped to 36.4% in 2008 from 65.5% in 2007.<sup>20</sup> In the very next year, 58.9% of South Koreans thought that relations between the two countries were relatively good, while only 39.7% saw the relationship in a negative light. The former figure again declined to 50.8% in 2010, perhaps due to China's lukewarm response to North Korea's provocations against the South in the West Sea and on Yeonpyeong Island. While it is somewhat difficult to explain these ups and downs, South Korean perceptions of China have improved since the inauguration of President Park. The Asan Daily Poll found in 2014 that 62.0% of respondents assessed the relationship to be good. More importantly, the percentage of those who viewed the relationship in a negative light plummeted from 45.8% in 2010 to only 13.6% in 2014.<sup>21</sup>

TABLE 1

*South Koreans' Perceptions of Sino-South Korean Relations (%)*

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2014
<b>Relatively good</b>	65.5	36.4	58.9	50.8	62.0
<b>Relatively bad</b>	34.5	59.8	39.7	45.8	13.6

*Source:* Northeast Asian History Foundation, Public Opinion Poll on Korea-China Relations, 2007-10; and Asan Institute for Policy Studies, Asan Daily Poll, July 4-6, 2014.

*Note:* The balance consists of "no difference from before" and "don't know."

<sup>19</sup> Scott Snyder, "A Turning Point for China-Korea Relations?" *Comparative Connections* 6, no. 3 (2004): 109-14; and Peter Hays Gries, "The Koguryo Controversy, National Identity, and Sino-Korean Relations Today," *East Asia* 22, no. 4 (2004): 3-17.

<sup>20</sup> Some incidents during the Olympic torch relays in Seoul stirred South Korean public sentiments against China in 2008.

<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that because the survey in 2014 was conducted by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies rather than the Northeast Asian History Foundation, it is hard to claim that these numbers are on the same continuum. Nonetheless, the numbers for 2014 still seem to indicate a fairly positive state of affairs between China and South Korea.

South Korean views of China have likewise fluctuated considerably over time.<sup>22</sup> As **Table 2** demonstrates, in 2007 only 19.3% of the respondents regarded China as a cooperative partner, while 46.5% and 31.0% saw China as a competitor or a country to be guarded against, respectively. The percentage of respondents who considered China as a cooperative partner gradually declined to a record low of 16.9% in 2012 (which was the last year of President Lee's tenure).<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, the percentage of those who regarded China as an enemy rose significantly from 2007 to 2012. The overall mood changed drastically in 2013 when the percentage of those viewing China as a cooperative partner increased by 11.6 percentage points. The figure again rose to 34.0% in 2014.<sup>24</sup> The percentage of South Koreans perceiving China as a competitor also increased from 35.3% in 2012 to 43.9% in 2013. The competitor figure subsequently decreased to 34.6% in 2014, suggesting that South Korean sentiments toward China have indeed improved since 2013.

TABLE 2  
*South Koreans' Perceptions of China (%)*

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
<b>Cooperative partner</b>	19.3	23.7	21.1	19.7	20.5	16.9	28.5	34.0
<b>Competitor</b>	46.5	38.2	42.0	45.1	40.2	35.3	43.9	34.6
<b>Country to be cautious about</b>	31.0	32.9	33.3	31.8	34.9	35.8	24.5	29.1
<b>Enemy</b>	3.3	5.1	3.6	3.4	4.4	5.4	3.1	2.3

Source: Institute for Peace and Unification Studies (IPUS), *Tongil euisik josa* [Unification Attitude Survey] (Seoul: IPUS, 2014), 187.

<sup>22</sup> See, for instance, Jae Ho Chung, "Korean Views of Korea-China Relations: Evolving Perceptions and Upcoming Challenges," *Asian Perspective* 36, no. 2 (2012): 219–36.

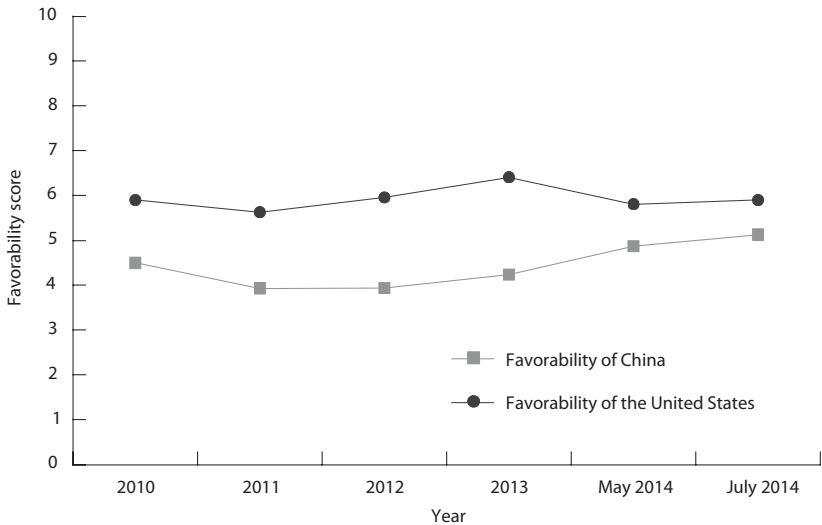
<sup>23</sup> The decline may well have been due to China's position on the *Cheonan* sinking and the Yeonpyeong shelling, which was not in line with South Korea's expectations and preferences. See Kim Jiyeon and Woo Jung-yup, "Yeonpyeong pogyok satae gwanlyon gengeup yoron josa bogoseo" [Report on the Survey Regarding the Yeonpyeong Shelling Incident], Asan Institute for Policy Studies, November 2010, 18.

<sup>24</sup> The authors are grateful to the staff of the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies (IPUS) at Seoul National University for sharing these figures before their official publication. IPUS, *Tongil euisik josa* [Unification Attitude Survey] (Seoul: IPUS, 2014).

These findings are also supported in part by the changes in the favorability score for China (see **Figure 1**).<sup>25</sup> In 2010, China's favorability score was 4.50, but it dropped to 3.93 and 3.94 in 2011 and 2012, respectively. Due perhaps to the positive impact of the exchange of visits by Presidents Park and Xi, China's favorability score increased to 4.24 in 2013 and 4.87 in 2014, reducing the gap with the scores for the United States. Around the time of President Xi's visit in July 2014, China's favorability score peaked at 5.13.<sup>26</sup>

Thanks to the new leaders' proactive diplomacy, South Korean public perceptions of China have been quite positive since 2013. Compared with the prevailing sentiments in South Korean society in 2012, the change is rather

FIGURE 1  
*Country Favorability Scores*



Source: Asan Institute for Policy Studies, Asan Annual Survey, 2010–13; and Asan Institute for Policy Studies, Asan Daily Poll, May 1–3, 2014, July 4–6, 2014.

<sup>25</sup> The favorability scores of China and the United States are measured on a scale of 0 to 10. When a person dislikes a country very much, he or she gives a score of 0. If a person likes a country very much, his or her favorability score for the country is 10. The scores are average figures of the sample. Calculations are based on the Asan Institute's annual surveys as well as its daily polls in May and July 2014. While the primary focus here is South Koreans' favorability scores for China, we have juxtaposed them with the favorability scores for the United States for the purpose of comparison.

<sup>26</sup> According to a recent survey conducted by the *Chosun Daily* in 2015, those who had favorable feelings toward China accounted for 23.1%, while the percentage of respondents with favorable feelings toward the United States was 54.2%. See "Gwangbok 70nyon gungmin euisik josa" [The National Opinion Survey in Commemoration of the 70th Year of Liberation], *Chosun Daily*, August 10, 2015.

impressive. Although this trend is certainly welcome for Sino–South Korean relations, the fundamental question remains of how sustainable or durable it is. As these surveys show, public sentiments and perceptions are by definition fickle and, therefore, assessing them more concretely in a couple of principal issue-areas is deemed necessary.

### *China as an Economic Partner or Competitor*

Once regarded as a factory for the world with its cheap labor, China has been fast transforming and upgrading its industrial structure, thereby enhancing its economic competitiveness. Accordingly, in the eyes of the South Korean public, China is increasingly seen as a source of tough competition and even a growing economic threat. A poll conducted in 2006 found that 58.5% of respondents considered China as a market with ample business opportunities, whereas 40.8% viewed the country as an economic threat (see **Table 3**).<sup>27</sup> By 2012, the mainstream South Korean view had changed, as 52.7% now saw China's economic growth as a threat to the Korean economy. This trend persisted in 2014, with 71.9% of South Koreans viewing China's economic rise as threatening.<sup>28</sup>

Two reasons largely account for the growing view of China's rise as an economic threat. For one, the fear of China's economic rise stems from South Korea's high level of trade dependence on China. While the level of

TABLE 3

### *South Koreans' Perceptions of China's Economic Rise (%)*

	<b>2006</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2014</b>
<b>Threat</b>	40.8	52.7	71.9
<b>Not a threat</b>	58.5	43.5	18.7

*Source:* East Asia Institute, *JoongAng Daily*, and Chicago Council on Global Affairs, Public Opinion Survey on Foreign Relations, 2006; Asan Institute for Policy Studies, Asan Annual Survey, 2012; and Asan Institute for Policy Studies, Asan Daily Poll, May 7–9, 2014.

<sup>27</sup> East Asia Institute, *JoongAng Daily*, and the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, Public Opinion Survey on Foreign Relations, 2006 ~ <http://www.eai.or.kr/type/p2.asp?catcode=1410101100>. Data is available upon request.

<sup>28</sup> Asan Institute for Policy Studies, Asan Annual Survey, 2012; and Asan Institute for Policy Studies, Asan Daily Poll, May 7–9, 2014. See also Jiyeon Kim, Karl Friedhoff, Chungku Kang, and Euicheol Lee, *Asan Report: South Korean Attitudes on China* (Seoul: Asan Institute for Policy Studies, July 2014) ~ <http://en.asaninst.org/contents/south-korean-attitudes-on-china>.

trade dependence of the two countries on each other was fairly similar up to the mid-1990s, China's volume of trade grew explosively thereafter, steeply increasing South Korea's trade dependence on China (see **Table 4**). As of 2013, South Korea's dependence on China was 3.8 times that of China's on South Korea. South Koreans are in part concerned that Beijing could utilize this trade dependence as diplomatic leverage.

South Koreans also feel threatened by the rapidly narrowing technological gap between South Korea and China. In an Asan Daily Poll conducted in May 2014, 43.6% of respondents referred to this factor as an important reason for their wariness of China's rise.<sup>29</sup> The relative technological indices for Seoul and Beijing were 83.9 and 71.4, respectively, in 2013, compared with 76.3 and 58.5 in 2010 (the United States has a standard value of 100). South Korea has also been less competitive than China on the world market. In 2012, for instance, China produced 1,495 products ranked number one, while South Korea only produced 64.<sup>30</sup>

Despite these concerns, South Koreans were fairly sanguine about reaching an FTA with China. Whereas in 2012 46.5% of respondents supported an FTA, while 39.0% opposed it, by 2014 the percentage of those supporting an FTA had

TABLE 4

*Mutual Trade Dependence of South Korea and China (%)*

Year	South Korea's dependence on China	China's dependence on South Korea
1990	2.8	3.3
1995	6.4	5.9
2000	9.4	6.6
2007	19.9	8.9
2013	21.0	5.5

Source: Korea International Traders Association  $\approx$  <http://www.kita.net>, calculated with data from *Zhongguo tongji nianjian* [China Statistical Yearbook] (Beijing: National Bureau of Statistics of China, pertinent years).

<sup>29</sup> Asan Institute for Policy Studies, Asan Daily Poll, May 7–9, 2014.

<sup>30</sup> See *JoongAng Daily*, July 9, 2014. For further analysis of South Koreans' concerns with the massive inflow of Chinese capital, see "Haewundae ggaji Jung jabor milmul" [A Tidal Wave of Chinese Capital into Korea], *Chosun Daily*, October 3, 2014.

increased to 65.5%, while opposition decreased to 24.2%. Similarly, whereas 31% of respondents regarded the Korea-China FTA as mutually beneficial in 2012, a near majority of 49% saw it as mutually beneficial in 2014.<sup>31</sup> Such perceptual undercurrents were the key driver that facilitated the bilateral agreement on the FTA on November 10, 2014. The actual contents of the FTA, however, proved to be less comprehensive than South Korea's FTAs with the United States (2006) and the European Union (2007).<sup>32</sup>

In sum, the South Korean public is watching the economic rise of China with wary eyes. Given that the level of economic complementarity between the two countries is fast decreasing—i.e., mutual competition is becoming more severe—the future on this front may not necessarily be so bright.<sup>33</sup>

### *Historical Controversies*

Since the end of the Cold War, East Asia as a whole has been inundated with “identity politics.”<sup>34</sup> While Japan has long been the locus of these sensitive controversies, ROK-China relations are by no means exempt from historical debates, particularly concerning the interpretation of the Goguryeo dynasty.<sup>35</sup> Although the controversy has been largely contained by both governments, the issue is more or less dormant rather than resolved for good. Given that both Koreans and Chinese are highly nationalistic, even a small catalyst could reignite the debate and possibly even cause a diplomatic row between Seoul and Beijing.

When a 2014 Asan Daily Poll asked South Koreans about how seriously they viewed the Chinese claim to the Goguryeo dynasty, 78.9% replied that it was indeed a serious problem.<sup>36</sup> According to the same poll, 51.1% of respondents thought that this issue would have a negative impact on the relationship between South Korea and China, while 23.5% did not expect any

<sup>31</sup> Asan Institute for Policy Studies, Annual Survey of the Asan Institute, 2012; and Asan Institute for Policy Studies, Asan Daily Poll, July 4–6, 2014.

<sup>32</sup> “Tagyol doen Hanjung FTA” [The Korea-China FTA Finally Agreed], *JoongAng Daily*, November 11, 2014.

<sup>33</sup> Zhang Yunling of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, for instance, characterizes economic relations today between South Korea and China as a “competition for advantages” (*youshi jingzheng*). See Zhang Yunling (remarks at the 20th Korea-China Future Forum, Seoul, September 17, 2015).

<sup>34</sup> See Gilbert Rozman, ed., *East Asian National Identities: Common Roots and Chinese Exceptionalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

<sup>35</sup> China had long regarded the Goguryeo dynasty as part of Korean history, but since the early 1980s some Chinese scholars have put forward revisionist views with an intention to incorporate the dynasty into Chinese history. For detailed discussions of this debate, see Jae Ho Chung, “China’s ‘Soft’ Clash with South Korea: The History War and Beyond,” *Asian Survey* 49, no. 3 (2009): 468–83.

<sup>36</sup> Asan Institute for Policy Studies, Asan Daily Poll, August 26–28, 2014.

impact on the relationship and 19.4% were unsure about the consequence.<sup>37</sup> Given that both countries are currently engaged in historical disputes with Japan, neither perhaps intends to pick a fight with the other over history for the time being.

A fundamental question remains, however: will the issue continue to be dormant or will it resurface at some point, especially as China's power continues to grow? The same Asan Daily Poll cited above asked South Koreans why China is seeking to incorporate the Goguryeo dynasty into its own history: 28.8% of respondents replied that Beijing is planning to wield influence over a reunified Korea on the basis of the rewritten history of Goguryeo, 24.5% stated that China is preparing for a territorial dispute with South Korea through its Northeast Project (*dongbei gongcheng*), and 15.2% thought that China wishes to sustain its influence over North Korea.<sup>38</sup> Thanks to the efforts by both governments, the issue is currently not perceived as an imminent problem. Yet if the past is a useful guide, this controversy is likely to come back to haunt both South Korea and China.

### *The Clash of Norms and Values*

When asked what comes to their mind when hearing the word China, South Koreans' number one answer was "rapid economic growth" (35.1%), followed by "huge territory" (32.9%). Although China is well known for its long history and rich culture, only 7.6% of the respondents mentioned them.<sup>39</sup> Overall, South Koreans appear to be more attuned to aspects of contemporary China than those of traditional China. Despite frequent references to the "shared culture" between the two countries, only 32.5% of respondents think that they share similar values.<sup>40</sup> While this is higher than the percentage of South Koreans who think that South Korea and the United States share values (24.2%), given that Chinese culture—especially Confucianism—immensely influenced Korean traditions and culture, the figure appears a bit low.

Normative divergence between Seoul and Beijing on the issue of North Korean refugees (which China refers to as "escapees") is already

---

<sup>37</sup> Not surprisingly, only 5.4% of respondents answered that the dispute would have a positive impact on Sino-South Korean relations.

<sup>38</sup> The percentage of respondents who replied "don't know" was 18.8%. Asan Institute for Policy Studies, Asan Daily Poll, August 26–28, 2014.

<sup>39</sup> Asan Institute for Policy Studies, Asan Daily Poll, May 7–9, 2014. See also Kim et al., *Asan Report*, 30.

<sup>40</sup> Kim et al., *Asan Report*, 31.

widely documented.<sup>41</sup> Environmental protection and food safety are newly emerging issues that cause divergence in norms and values. In a poll conducted in June 2014, 95.2% of South Koreans regarded environmental pollutants from China as a serious threat, while 80.8% of respondents stated that they would prefer not to buy food from China.<sup>42</sup>

Given that China has been emphasizing the cultivation of soft power and cultural diplomacy in recent years, how do South Koreans evaluate China’s cultural influence abroad? In an Asan poll conducted in 2014, 37% of South Koreans felt uncomfortable with the diffusion of Chinese culture and values. In contrast, only 25% were uncomfortable with the spread of American culture and values.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, in a 2008 poll nearly 70% of South Koreans did not favor China becoming Asia’s leader. Although this figure had decreased to 55% in 2014, a majority of respondents still viewed this scenario in a negative light.<sup>44</sup>

**Table 5** cross-tabulates South Korean views of China’s regional leadership and of culture-sharing with China. Of the respondents who agreed that South Korea and China shared values, 57.9% supported China’s leadership over Asia, while 42.1% disapproved of it. In contrast, of the respondents who disagreed

TABLE 5  
*South Koreans’ Views on Shared Values*

	Share similar values	Do not share similar values	Total
<b>Approve of China’s leadership in Asia</b>	194 people	199 people	393 people
	57.9 %	32.7%	41.6%
<b>Disapprove of China’s leadership in Asia</b>	141 people	410 people	551 people
	42.1%	67.3%	58.4%

Source: Asan Institute for Policy Studies, Asan Daily Poll, May 7–9, 2014.

<sup>41</sup> Young Nam Cho, “Gyubom gwa gachigwan eso eui chungdol” [Clashes in the Areas of Norms and Values], in *Jungguk eul gominhada* [Agonizing over China], ed. Jae Ho Chung (Seoul: Samsung Economic Research Institute, 2011), chap. 5.

<sup>42</sup> Jihye Yoo and Won-Yop Chung, “Hangukin euisik josa” [Korean Opinion Surveys], *JoongAng Daily*, June 27, 2014.

<sup>43</sup> Asan Institute for Policy Studies, Asan Daily Poll, May 7–9, 2014. See Kim et al., *Asan Report*, 29.

<sup>44</sup> East Asia Institute and Chicago Council on Global Affairs, “Global Views 2008: Soft Power in East Asia,” Joint Survey, 2008 ↪ <http://www.eai.or.kr/type/p2.asp?catcode=141010000&subcatcode=1410101000>.



that the two countries shared many values, 67.3% were uncomfortable with China assuming regional leadership. Despite the repeated rhetoric about shared culture, the majority of South Koreans do not believe that the countries share many values and norms for the time being.

### *Territorial Issues*

South Korea and China are not officially engaged in any territorial disputes at the present time. When it comes to the issue of territorial skirmishes in East Asia, most South Koreans tend to think of the dispute with Japan over Dokdo. According to a survey conducted in 2014, 76% of respondents viewed Dokdo (also known as the Liancourt Rocks) as the most salient territorial dispute in the region, followed by the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands (6.5%). Competing claims by South Korea and China over the jurisdiction of Ieodo/Suyanjiao (i.e., the Socotra Rock) were recognized by only 4.4% as a serious source of dispute in the region.<sup>45</sup>

In the case of Ieodo, the question of maritime boundary demarcation (specifically the recognition of EEZs) remains to be resolved. It would be overly optimistic or naive to state that South Korea will not get involved in any jurisdictional dispute with China. Because both South Koreans and Chinese are highly nationalistic, any sort of jurisdictional dispute is likely to seriously undermine the bilateral relationship unless properly managed. When asked about a hypothetical territorial dispute with China, 77% of South Korean respondents answered that such a dispute could easily develop into a much more serious conflict.<sup>46</sup> Before the issue resurfaces, therefore, it is important for both countries to follow through on their agreement at the 2014 Park-Xi summit to work out a mutually beneficial settlement.

### *The North Korean Problem and the Issue of Reunification*

From South Korea's viewpoint, North Korea has been the thickest thorn stuck in its relations with China. During crises in inter-Korean relations, due mostly to the North's provocative actions, South Korea's relationship with China has tended to be adversely affected. The most recent such examples are the *Cheonan* sinking in March 2010 and the Yeonpyeong shelling in

<sup>45</sup> Asan Institute for Policy Studies, Asan Daily Poll, August 26–28, 2014.

<sup>46</sup> Pew Research Center, "America's Global Image Remains More Positive Than China's but Many See China Becoming World's Leading Power," July 2013, 24  <http://www.pewglobal.org/2013/07/18/chapter-3-attitudes-toward-china>.

November of that same year. In the eyes of many South Koreans, China one-sidedly defended North Korea in both instances. Particularly in the latter case, when North Korea attacked South Korea's land territory for the first time since the armistice in 1953, China's position was deemed unacceptable.<sup>47</sup>

Annual polls conducted by IPUS illustrate South Koreans' deep-seated distrust of China regarding the issue of North Korea (see **Table 6**). Concerning a hypothetical war between the two Koreas, the polls in 2007 and 2008 found that 26.8% and 30.4% of South Koreans, respectively, viewed China as prone to support North Korea. This percentage, however, rose to 56%–63% in polls taken during 2010–12. A reversal of this trend occurred in 2013 when, due perhaps to the improvement of the bilateral relationship, the percentage of South Koreans who regarded China as likely to support North Korea in a war with the South declined to 49.7%. The figure decreased further in 2014 to 42.0%. Still, nearly a majority (41.4% in 2013 and 46.6% in 2014) of respondents held that China would act according to its national interest, which could cut either way.<sup>48</sup> In all the polls discussed, very few South Koreans regarded China as likely to support South Korea.

With regard to North Korea's nuclear weapons program, the gap between what South Koreans expect from China and what they think China is actually delivering is particularly wide. Prior to President Xi's visit to South Korea in 2014, 53.6% of South Koreans regarded North Korea's nuclear program as a key agenda for the summit, and 34.3% chose China as a country that should perform a proactive role in resolving the conundrum.<sup>49</sup>

On the issue of reunification, the South Korean public strongly believes that attaining China's cooperation is necessary for this daunting process. The IPUS polls show that, except for 2012, more than 80% of South Koreans replied that China's cooperation was indispensable (see **Table 7**). In stark contrast, only a small fraction of the South Korean public (an average of 14.5% for 2007–14) thought that China would actually support Korean reunification. While this figure slightly increased during 2013–14, more than 81% of South Koreans were still of the view that reunification would not be wholeheartedly supported by China.

<sup>47</sup> See Jae Ho Chung, "China's Evolving Views of the Korean-American Alliance, 1953–2012," *Journal of Contemporary China* 23, no. 87 (2014): 425–42.

<sup>48</sup> IPUS, *Tongil euisik josa*, 153.

<sup>49</sup> The comparable figures for South Korea and the United States were 33.7% and 22.5%, respectively. See Asan Institute for Policy Studies, *Asan Daily Poll*, May 4–6, 2014.

TABLE 6

*South Koreans' Views on China's Position  
in an Inter-Korean Conflict (%)*

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
<b>Side with South Korea</b>	5.3	4.5	3.1	3.3	2.4	1.3	3.3	5.4
<b>Side with North Korea</b>	26.8	30.4	38.5	55.5	62.8	58.3	49.7	42.0
<b>Stay out of the conflict</b>	11.4	13.0	7.7	3.8	3.8	2.8	5.6	6.0
<b>Protect its own national interest</b>	56.4	52.2	50.8	37.4	31.0	37.5	41.4	46.6

Source: IPUS, *Tongil euisik josa*, 187.

TABLE 7

*South Koreans' Views on China and Korean Reunification (%)*

	<b>China's cooperation necessary</b>	<b>China's cooperation not necessary</b>	<b>China wants reunification</b>	<b>China does not want reunification</b>
<b>2007</b>	N/A	N/A	16.0	83.8
<b>2008</b>	80.7	19.3	12.3	87.6
<b>2009</b>	83.2	16.7	13.9	86.2
<b>2010</b>	89.1	10.9	14.9	85.1
<b>2011</b>	84.7	15.3	10.1	89.7
<b>2012</b>	68.0	32.0	11.9	88.1
<b>2013</b>	84.5	15.5	18.3	81.7
<b>2014</b>	88.6	11.4	18.9	81.1

Source: IPUS, *Tongil euisik josa*.

Note: The four response options were (1) very necessary, (2) somewhat necessary, (3) not very necessary, and (4) not necessary at all. Replies of "very necessary" and "somewhat necessary" were combined as "necessary," and replies of "not very necessary" and "not necessary at all" were combined as "not necessary." The four response options on reunification were similarly reformulated into two categories.

*The ROK-U.S. Alliance*

From the Chinese perspective, the ROK-U.S. alliance is undoubtedly the biggest impediment to constructive relations with South Korea. In the past—up to the mid-2000s—Beijing officially opposed the stationing of American troops in South Korea but implicitly recognized the utility of U.S.

forces in restraining North Korea.<sup>50</sup> As China's power grows and the range of its power projection expands over time, its objection to the ROK-U.S. alliance has become increasingly loud. Particularly after Washington's adoption of the "rebalance" strategy, Beijing has become more sensitive and vocal about the possibility of the alliance being deployed to "contain" China.<sup>51</sup>

While China generally views the alliance as a remnant of the Cold War, the South Korean perspective differs quite considerably. As far as the conventional military forces are concerned, South Korea is believed to have a sufficient edge over the North. In recognition of this disparity, Pyongyang has developed asymmetric capabilities—namely, nuclear and biochemical weapons. This leaves Seoul with two options: violating pertinent international law and norms by following the North's path and developing nuclear and biochemical capabilities; or relying on its alliance with the United States to offset the North's advantage in asymmetrical capabilities. Seoul's choice has clearly been the latter, which the international community has largely supported. South Korean public opinion, too, appears to be generally supportive of this choice. **Table 8** tabulates three different survey series during 2002–13 and shows public support for the alliance with the United States increasing over the given period.

Last but not least, when asked about South Korea's preferred partner for security cooperation in 2014, 59.6% of South Koreans chose the United States over China (24.9%).<sup>52</sup> Given that the survey was conducted right after President Xi's visit in July 2014, the finding seems to have key implications. It also matches the findings of the 2013 survey by the Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project in which 56% of the South Korean public chose the United States as the ROK's preferred security partner, compared with only 28% who chose China.<sup>53</sup> If Seoul is so determined to sustain the alliance with the United States, which China views as detrimental to its security interests, the ROK-U.S. alliance is likely to remain a thorny issue for Sino–South Korean relations.

---

<sup>50</sup> See Wang Jianwei and Wu Xinbo, "Against Us or With Us? The Chinese Perspective of America's Alliances with Japan and Korea," Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, Working Paper, May 1998; and Jae Ho Chung, "Decoding Beijing's Perception of the U.S.-South Korea Alliance," S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Policy Report, July 2014, 4–6.

<sup>51</sup> See Keyu Gong, "The Korea-U.S. Alliance from a Chinese Perspective," *Asian Perspective* 36, no. 2 (2012): 309–30.

<sup>52</sup> Asan Institute for Policy Studies, Asan Daily Poll, July 4–6, 2014.

<sup>53</sup> Pew Research Center, "America's Global Image," 42.

TABLE 8

*South Koreans' Views on the U.S.-ROK Alliance (%)*

	2002 <sup>a</sup>	2003 <sup>a</sup>	2004 <sup>a</sup>	2006 <sup>b</sup>	2008 <sup>b</sup>	2009 <sup>c</sup>	2010 <sup>c</sup>	2013 <sup>c</sup>
<b>Independent diplomacy</b>	26.3	16.8	19.8	29.0	26.8	18.9	30.8	14.9
<b>Balance between independent diplomacy and the alliance</b>	50.5	48.6	45.6	22.2	21.4	–	–	–
<b>Maintain status quo</b>	–	–	–	–	–	40.9	33.6	19.5
<b>Strengthen the alliance</b>	21.9	32.8	32.7	48.6	50.9	39.7	34.7	65.6

*Source:* Data noted *a* is from East Asia Institute and *JoongAng Daily*, Public Opinion Survey, 2002–4; data noted *b* is from East Asia Institute, *JoongAng Daily*, and Chicago Council on Global Affairs, Public Opinion Survey on Foreign Relations, 2006; and data noted *c* is from East Asia Institute and Hankook Research Company, Public Opinion Survey on Politics and National Security, 2009–10, 2013.

*Note:* No such surveys were conducted in 2005, 2007, 2011, or 2012.

## BACK TO THE QUESTION

Has South Korea already entered the Chinese orbit? The foregoing analyses of South Korea's policies toward and perceptions of China suggests probably not. Seoul's agony over keeping a delicate balance between Washington and Beijing on key issues might have given the United States the impression that South Korea is tilting toward China, but we stand by our assessment in this article for two reasons. For one, because of geographic proximity and historical memories, South Korea has nascent fears of a strong and imposing China on its border. Second, personal relationships between leaders rarely outweigh vital national interests. While some still assert that Seoul does not have to choose between Washington and Beijing, important issues of contention are arising more frequently than ever before.

One such issue is missile defense—that is, the deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) and X-band radar on U.S. bases in South Korea. While China wishes to avoid such a scenario at all costs for fear of its military assets being exposed, on what grounds Seoul can effectively dissuade Washington remains unclear, particularly given the changing

assessments of the threat from North Korea.<sup>54</sup> Heated debates on joining the U.S.-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the China-centered Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) or Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific raise other issues of contention. Seoul has already expressed its desire to join the TPP, while RCEP has been taking its own path of evolution.

More recently, China's new initiative of "Asian security by the Asian people" announced at the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia in 2014 put additional pressure on South Korea. Seoul's position was very clear, however: the United States' presence in the region is both necessary and crucial. Beijing's invitation for South Korea to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) as a founding member presented yet another dilemma. Seoul's calculated responses to these issues—e.g., a last-minute decision to participate—have not been fully satisfying to China.<sup>55</sup>

The most controversial case perhaps concerned President Park's attendance of China's Victory Day celebration on September 3, 2015.<sup>56</sup> She was the only head of state from a close U.S. ally and her standing shoulder to shoulder with Xi and Putin certainly looked odd. Then, again, when President Xi offered to have a private lunch—a privilege granted to President Park alone among 30 heads of state—and given the "personal friendship" emphasized in 2013 and again in 2014 by both governments, what else could she have done? Given the top priority the Park administration has placed on reunification, turning down China's cordial invitation would not have been as easy as it seemed to Washington or Tokyo. While Chinese media dubbed the visit as

---

<sup>54</sup> For further discussion of the differing positions between South Korea, the United States, and China on the issue of THAAD, see Teng Jianqun, "Why Is China Unhappy with the Deployment of THAAD in the ROK?" China Institute of International Studies, April 1, 2015 ~ [http://www.ciis.org.cn/english/2015-04/01/content\\_7793314.htm](http://www.ciis.org.cn/english/2015-04/01/content_7793314.htm); Woo Jung-Yeop, "A South Korean View on the Deployment of THAAD to the ROK," Asan Forum, National Commentaries, March 31, 2015 ~ <http://www.theasanforum.org/a-south-korean-perspective-3>; and Van Jackson, "From Political Taboo to Strategic Hedge: A U.S. Perspective on Ballistic Missile Defense," Asan Forum, National Commentaries, March 31, 2015 ~ <http://www.theasanforum.org/a-us-perspective-4>.

<sup>55</sup> While South Korea joined the AIIB in the last batch, Seoul did not quite buy into the principle of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia. For further discussion of Seoul's deliberation over the AIIB, see Sung-Hoon Lee, "Hanguk do chamyohana gomin" [South Korea Agonizing over Whether to Join the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank], *Chosun Daily*, March 14, 2015; Jung-Hoon Kim, "Hanguk eun chamyo ileun bulcham" [South Korea Joining While Japan Not Joining], *Chosun Daily*, March 27, 2015; Byung-gun Chae, "THAAD wa AIIB: Obama eui jaegyunhyung Hanguk so hodoen sihom" [THAAD and AIIB: Obama's Rebalance Being Harshly Tested in South Korea], *JoongAng Daily*, March 19, 2015; Tae-Kyung Lee et al., "Je2 gonsol boom gidae" [High Expectations for the Second Boom of Overseas Construction], *JoongAng Daily*, March 28, 2015; and Kyung-jin Shin, "57gaeguk'i AIIB changlip member" [57 Countries to Be Founding Members of the AIIB], *JoongAng Daily*, April 16, 2015.

<sup>56</sup> For a report on different views among American pundits, see In-Sun Kang, "Do keun woegyo chaeikyak yoguhaneun Hanjung milwol" [The Korea-China Honeymoon Is in Need of a Broader Diplomatic Strategy], *Chosun Daily*, September 5, 2015.

President Park's "strategic choice based on her diplomatic wisdom," this claim remains to be substantiated.<sup>57</sup>

Nonetheless, there may be some room for reasonable doubt on the part of the United States concerning South Korea's foreign policy direction in recent years. China is now an indispensable economic, diplomatic, and cultural partner for South Korea. Yet Seoul continues to be structurally tied to Washington through the alliance treaty, which it may find helpful and reassuring if Beijing proves to be too demanding and assertive in the future. The United States often overlooks the weight that the economic dimension carries for ROK-China bilateralism: South Korea's combined trade with the United States and Japan has for several years been smaller than its trade with China.<sup>58</sup> In contrast, China tends to underestimate the ultimate insurance value that South Korea attaches to its military alliance with the United States in an era of growing strategic uncertainties in East Asia.

Being a middle power in a sea of global powers, South Korea must be prudent and prepare to adjust its sails in the winds of 21st-century international politics, which will be both turbulent and highly unpredictable. Unfortunately, the United States and China will likely ask South Korea for an exclusive commitment—"Are you with us or against us?"—with increasing frequency down the road. Because China's future remains highly uncertain, a singular emphasis on the alliance option may well prove as unwise for South Korea as rushing into the Chinese orbit now. Principles are important, but they are never as important as key national interests. As an old saying goes, "the pessimist complains about the wind, the optimist expects it to change, and the realists adjusts the sails." ◆

---

<sup>57</sup> For an exemplary report by Chinese media, see *Fazhi ribao*, September 3, 2015. Dozens of columns in the mainstream South Korean media warned Seoul against letting its guard down too fast against China. See, for instance, Yoon Pyung-joong, "Jungguk jaksarang DNA" [Korean DNA in One-Sided Love with China], *Chosun Daily*, September 25, 2015.

<sup>58</sup> The United States should seek to enhance its multidimensional relevance to South Korea as well as other regional states. See, for instance, "China or the U.S., Which Is More Confident?" *Global Times*, September 19, 2015.

