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CURRENT CHALLENGES AND CONTRADICTIONS IN THE RELATIONS BETWEEN THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA AND CHINA

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The article provides a comprehensive analysis of the key challenges and contradictions in contemporary South Korea-China relations, focusing on political, economic, security, and societal dimensions. It examines the sources of tension between the two countries, including disputes over the deployment of the THAAD missile defense system, which have triggered strong responses from China and influenced regional security dynamics. The study also considers China's economic pressure on South Korea, highlighting trade restrictions and other measures that have impacted bilateral economic relations.

The research traces the evolution of bilateral relations from the period of active cooperation in the 1990s to the emergence of strategic divergences during the 2010s-2020s. In particular, the study highlights the complexity of territorial and maritime disputes in the Yellow Sea, which complicate political dialogue and negotiations. It also addresses the Taiwan issue, which poses potential risks to regional stability and affects South Korea's diplomatic balancing between China and the United States. Furthermore, the article analyzes anti-Chinese sentiments in South Korean society, demonstrating how public opinion can create domestic political pressures that shape foreign policy decisions. Security challenges, such as those arising from the THAAD issue, remain a central source of tension and a key factor in shaping Seoul-Beijing relations.

Key words: Republic of Korea, China, territorial and maritime disputes, Taiwan issue, anti-Chinese sentiments, THAAD system, security challenges, foreign policy, economic interdependence, strategic contradictions.

Research relevance. The relations between the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the People's Republic of China face multiple challenges and contradictions, driven by a complex mix of territorial, political, and security issues. Territorial and maritime disputes in the Yellow Sea and surrounding waters continue to generate tensions, while the Taiwan issue introduces further diplomatic sensitivity and strategic uncertainty. Anti-Chinese sentiments in South Korean society, fueled by historical grievances and political controversies, affect public perception and bilateral cooperation. At the same time, both countries navigate competing geopolitical initiatives and strategic dilemmas, balancing economic interdependence with regional security concerns. A particularly contentious point is the deployment of the U.S. THAAD missile defense system, which has strained ROK-China relations and highlighted the delicate interplay between national security priorities and broader diplomatic objectives. These overlapping challenges make the

ROK-China relationship simultaneously cooperative, competitive, and fraught with tension, reflecting the broader complexities of East Asian geopolitics.

Considering the above, **the aim of this article** is to analyze the current challenges and contradictions in the relations between the Republic of Korea and China, to trace their impact on the regional security architecture and international politics.

The theoretical and empirical foundation of our research is based on the works of leading scholars, analytical reviews, and media sources that examine contemporary South Korea-China relations. Notably, studies on maritime boundaries and territorial disputes between China and Korea are presented in the works of Kim S. K. [6]. Publications on historical factors and their impact on South Korea's foreign policy by Gries P., and Masui Y. [4] and contemporary public attitudes toward China (Hwang Y. J. [5]; Choe, S.-H. [2]; Silver L., Devlin K., Huang C. [10] and Rich T., Brueggemann C. [9]) serve as sources for analyzing socio-political dimensions of the bilateral relationship. Information on South Korea's policy toward Taiwan and its "unofficial" relations is provided in the studies by Lee C., Liff A. P. [7], Park J. [8], as well as Korean media publications [13–16]. Research on economic and security challenges, including the conflict over the THAAD system, is highlighted in the works by Davies C., Hille K. [3] and Tias A. [12]. This combination of academic, media, and empirical sources ensures a comprehensive understanding of both structural and societal factors shaping the current challenges and contradictions in South Korea-China relations.

In recent years, China has emerged as a far more contentious issue in South Korea, drawing both domestic and international attention. Unlike anti-Japanese sentiment, which has long been rooted in unresolved historical grievances, views of China had previously been relatively positive. Following the normalization of relations in 1992, Beijing was seen as a potential stabilizer on the Korean Peninsula and a key economic partner amid its rapid growth. Indeed, trade and cultural exchange expanded rapidly, making South Korea one of the world's most China-dependent economies [8]. Yet this dependence has also deepened tensions, as many South Koreans increasingly perceive China less as a guarantor of stability and more as a source of political, economic, and cultural challenges.

The deployment of the U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system became one of the most controversial issues in East Asian security. In 2016, North Korea conducted a series of nuclear tests, sharply escalating tensions in the region. This prompted the United States and South Korea to negotiate the installation of THAAD, aimed at protecting South Korean territory from potential DPRK's missile threats.

However, China perceived this move as a direct challenge to its strategic security, viewing THAAD not only as a defensive shield but also as a tool capable of monitoring Chinese military activity. In response, Beijing imposed economic pressure on Seoul, which resulted in significant losses in trade, tourism, and the cultural sector.

To ease tensions and restore stability in bilateral relations, South Korea adopted the so-called "Three No's" policy:

1. No plans to deploy additional THAAD batteries;
2. No participation in military alliances targeting China;
3. No actions that could undermine regional stability [12].

This compromise highlighted South Korea's attempt to balance between U.S. security guarantees and its economic dependence on China, while underscoring the complexity of geopolitical dynamics in East Asia.

The maritime boundary disputes between South Korea and China in the Yellow Sea and East China Sea are rooted in conflicting principles of maritime delimitation and competing claims

over strategic features such as Ieodo/Socotra Rock. China favors the principle of natural prolongation, which extends its continental shelf to claim maritime areas, whereas South Korea advocates for the equidistant line method, placing the boundary halfway between the two coasts. This fundamental disagreement has prevented the establishment of a mutually recognized boundary. The submerged rock Ieodo, located in a critical position between the two countries, remains a particularly contentious point. South Korea asserts sovereignty over Ieodo and has constructed an ocean research platform on it, while China disputes this, citing its extended continental shelf under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). In addition to sovereignty disputes, the negotiations are influenced by other factors, including the use of straight baselines, regional military activities, and the management of shared fishery and underwater mineral resources, all of which complicate efforts to reach a final agreement.

In the absence of a formally delimited maritime boundary, South Korea and China signed the China-Korea Fishery Agreement in 2001, which serves as a provisional arrangement to manage overlapping Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs). This agreement established a Provisional Measures Zone (PMZ) in the Yellow Sea, allowing for regulated fishing activities while maintaining a temporary framework for dispute management. Despite multiple rounds of negotiations from 1996 to 2008, both nations have not yet resolved the dispute, leaving tensions over maritime sovereignty and resource usage unresolved [6].

In recent years, tensions have escalated due to China's installation of large sea structures in the disputed areas of the Yellow Sea. These structures, which China claims are for fish farming, have been perceived by South Korea as attempts to assert territorial control in the PMZ. The South Korean government has expressed concerns over these developments, viewing them as violations of the provisional agreement and a challenge to its maritime sovereignty [3].

South Korea has raised formal concerns with China regarding the establishment of "no-sail zones" in the Yellow Sea, areas jointly administered by both nations. These restrictions on maritime navigation have heightened diplomatic tensions and prompted discussions to clarify the scope and purpose of such designations. South Korea emphasizes the importance of mutual respect for international maritime laws and cooperative agreements in the region [11].

In late February 2025, the South Korean research vessel "Onnuri" attempted to inspect one of three steel structures that China had installed without prior notice in the Provisional Measures Zone (PMZ), but it was blocked by the Chinese coast guard, which described the facilities as fish farms. Seoul argued that the installations violated its maritime rights and obstructed navigation, demanding their removal, while Beijing rejected the claim, insisting they represented the lawful use of resources within China's coastal waters. South Korea responded by conducting its own ecological surveys using a large floating platform. Tensions escalated further in May 2025 when China declared navigation exclusion zones for exercises involving its newest aircraft carrier, the "Fujian", a move Seoul viewed as part of a gradual effort to assert de facto control over the region. Additionally, South Korean media reported that between 2018 and 2023 China had set up at least 13 solar-powered beacons in the Yellow Sea, raising concerns about the gradual expansion of its semi-permanent maritime infrastructure in disputed waters [1].

In addition to territorial and maritime disputes that complicate political dialogue, attention should also be given to the Taiwan issue, which may pose significant risks to regional security.

South Korea officially recognizes the People's Republic of China as the "One China" government, a policy adopted in 1992 when Seoul switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to PRC. However, academic research shows that Seoul has never explicitly accepted the PRC's version of the One China principle regarding Taiwan's sovereignty, especially in that it holds that Taiwan must be politically unified with the mainland under PRC jurisdiction. Instead, South

Korea's approach involves maintaining 'unofficial' relations with Taiwan (trade, cultural, people-to-people) while avoiding recognition of Taiwan as a state in diplomatic terms. This nuanced position gives Seoul a level of flexibility in foreign policy, allowing it to engage with Taiwan economically and socially, without breaching its diplomatic commitment to China [7].

According to a 2023 survey by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, 64 % of South Koreans believe that a conflict in the Taiwan Strait would directly affect Korea's security, while 59% support participating in international efforts to deter China if it uses force against Taiwan. At the same time, only about 11–15 % of respondents explicitly support Taiwan's formal independence, whereas the majority (around 55–60 %) favor maintaining the "status quo". A 2022 study by the East Asia Institute similarly found that nearly 70 % of South Koreans are concerned about the possibility of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, and almost half (47 %) think Seoul should join international sanctions against China in the event of war. These findings indicate that, although the government's official stance remains cautious, public opinion is increasingly leaning toward supporting Taiwan and perceiving its security as closely linked to South Korea's own [9].

South Korea has found itself in a difficult geopolitical position due to the escalating tensions over Taiwan, as it must balance between the United States – its key security ally and China, its major trading partner. While relying on the U.S. security framework to deter North Korea, Seoul cannot ignore Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy that involves support for Taiwan, yet it avoids strong statements to prevent provoking Beijing, which regards the Taiwan issue as an internal matter. Adhering to the "One China" principle, South Korea emphasizes the importance of ensuring Taiwan's international participation, while also recognizing that peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait are crucial, as reaffirmed during the 2022 Korea-U.S. summit. In the event of further escalation or a possible Chinese military intervention, Seoul must maintain flexibility, minimize direct involvement, rely on alliances, and adapt its stance to changing circumstances [16].

South Korea places great importance on maintaining stability in relations between China and Taiwan, as the Taiwan Strait is a vital maritime route for trade and energy transportation, and Taiwan itself ranks as Seoul's sixth-largest trading partner. To contribute to a peaceful resolution, the ROK seeks to sustain constructive ties with China while simultaneously broadening its diplomatic engagement. Strengthening the ROK-U.S. alliance and advancing trilateral cooperation with Japan remain central to deterring North Korea, yet this does not preclude the parallel development of relations with Beijing. These strategies are not mutually exclusive: by identifying shared interests, coordinating priorities, and fostering mutually beneficial exchanges, Seoul can shift from a confrontational framework toward cooperation, underscoring that the essence of diplomacy lies in turning challenges into opportunities [15].

In addition, recently anti-Chinese sentiments in South Korean society have become a significant factor shaping public opinion and influencing bilateral relations between the Republic of Korea and the People's Republic of China. While the two nations share deep economic interdependence and cultural exchanges, tensions have increasingly surfaced due to historical grievances, political disputes, and cultural clashes. Incidents such as controversies over traditional heritage, negative perceptions of Chinese influence in the region, and disputes surrounding the deployment of the U.S. THAAD missile defense system have fueled distrust and resentment among many South Koreans. These sentiments not only affect people-to-people relations but also pose challenges for policymakers who must balance domestic opinion with the necessity of maintaining stable ties with China.

Recent studies indicate that South Koreans harbor stronger negative feelings toward China than toward Japan, even though Japan occupied Korea for over three decades. Surprisingly, Koreans dislike China even more than their longstanding adversary, North Korea, with which they

remain technically at war since 1950 [2]. According to the Pew Research Center, South Koreans' unfavorable opinions of China have reached their highest point in the eighteen years since the organization began conducting surveys. Back in 2002, only 31 % of South Koreans viewed China negatively, whereas by 2020, this figure had surged to 75 % [10].

Participants in the study were presented with existing anti-Chinese slurs, including “*jjang-ggae* (짱깨),” “The only good Chinese is a dead Chinese (착짱죽짱/착한 짱깨는 죽은 짱깨),” and “Nanjing Grand Festival (난징대축제).” They were asked whether they had encountered these slurs in online communities and whether they had ever used them in real life. Results showed that a significant majority, 71.3% (n = 214), had seen the slurs online, while 10% (n = 30) admitted to using them personally. Respondents were then asked to indicate their emotional reactions upon encountering the slurs, choosing from: nothing, pleasure, unpleasant, funny, or sorry. For analytical purposes, positive reactions (pleasure and funny) and negative reactions (unpleasant and sorry) were coded separately. The findings revealed that most respondents, 64.3 % (n = 193), perceived the slurs negatively, while a smaller proportion, 13.7 % (n = 41), reported positive perceptions [5].

These results suggest that while exposure to anti-Chinese language online is widespread, only a minority of individuals actively adopt such language, and the dominant reaction among South Koreans is one of disapproval. This underscores the complexity of online hate speech, showing that visibility does not necessarily translate into personal endorsement, yet the presence of such slurs contributes to a charged digital environment.

In one more research respondents were asked to identify which of four countries – China, North Korea, Japan, or the United States – posed the greatest threat to South Korea. Most participants chose North Korea (41.3 %, n = 124) and China (35.3 %, n = 106), while 19.7% selected Japan (n = 59) and only 3% viewed the United States as the main threat (n = 9). For those who identified China as the top threat, further questions explored which domains they felt were most at risk: security, economy, environment, democracy, culture, or history. Respondents also rated the severity of the threat on a 7-point Likert scale. Among them, 42.5 % (n = 45) indicated the economy as the most threatened area, followed by security (24.5 %, n = 26) and environment (17 %, n = 18) [5]. This suggests that South Koreans perceive China primarily as a source of realistic, tangible threats, particularly economic, rather than symbolic or cultural ones.

Although fewer studies address the roots of anti-Chinese sentiment than those examining anti-Japanese attitudes, this gap largely reflects South Korea's differing historical experiences with the two countries. A discernible trend can still be observed, with discussions centering on nationalism, domestic polarization, and contentious issues such as the Northeast Project and the THAAD deployment dispute. Several scholars highlight the role of nationalism, noting that historical controversies, particularly the dispute over the legacy of the ancient kingdom of Koguryo, have directly contributed to the rise of anti-Chinese sentiment in South Korea [4]. These findings suggest that negative perceptions of China are not only shaped by present-day security and policy conflicts but are also deeply rooted in historical memory, where questions of cultural heritage and national identity remain highly sensitive.

In recent years, air pollution has overtaken historical and security disputes as the leading driver of anti-Chinese sentiment. A SisaIn survey found that 89.4% of respondents cited air pollution as the primary cause, followed closely by the impact of COVID-19 (86.9 %) [14]. These findings indicate that everyday, tangible issues affecting public health now play a greater role in shaping negative perceptions of China than traditional geopolitical or historical tensions.

The single largest immigrant group in South Korea comes from China, accounting for 43.6 % of the total foreign population [13]. This substantial presence not only reflects geographic

proximity and historical ties but also underscores the deep economic and social interconnections between the two countries. At the same time, it has become a focal point in debates on multiculturalism, labor migration, and rising anti-Chinese sentiment within South Korean society.

Conclusions and recommendations. Based on the analysis conducted in this article, several key conclusions can be drawn regarding the current state of relations between the Republic of Korea and China. Despite strong economic interdependence, political and security disagreements – particularly over the THAAD missile defense system, territorial and maritime disputes, and the Taiwan issue continue to generate tension in bilateral relations. These strategic contradictions indicate that economic cooperation alone cannot ensure long-term stability in the relationship.

The ROK-China relationship significantly influences the broader East Asian security architecture. Disagreements between the two countries affect not only the Korean Peninsula but also the strategic calculations of the United States and neighboring countries. This highlights the growing complexity of regional security and the necessity for careful diplomatic management.

Domestic factors also play a crucial role. Anti-Chinese sentiments in South Korean society affect policymaking and can limit the government's flexibility in balancing economic ties with China and security cooperation with the United States. Therefore, internal social dynamics must be considered alongside strategic and economic factors when analyzing bilateral relations.

Given these challenges, both countries face the need to maintain cooperation in trade and investment while managing strategic differences. This underscores the importance of pragmatic diplomacy, transparency, and clear communication in preventing misinterpretations and mitigating tensions.

Based on these conclusions, several recommendations can be proposed. First, strengthening multilateral dialogue mechanisms and engaging in regional security forums can help reduce misunderstandings related to territorial disputes and security challenges. Second, South Korea should continue balancing its alliance with the United States and economic interdependence with China, avoiding unilateral policies that could provoke a negative reaction.

Promoting people-to-people and cultural exchanges is also essential. Strengthening educational, cultural, and economic ties can help mitigate anti-Chinese sentiments and foster mutual understanding. Additionally, policymakers should develop contingency scenarios to prepare for potential escalation related to the Taiwan issue or other regional security crises, ensuring coordinated responses with key partners. Finally, enhanced transparency and communication regarding security policies will allow both Seoul and Beijing to reduce geopolitical tensions and strengthen mutual trust.

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СУЧАСНІ ВИКЛИКИ ТА ПРОТИРІЧЧЯ У ВІДНОСИНАХ МІЖ РЕСПУБЛІКОЮ КОРЕЯ ТА КИТАЄМ

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Стаття надає комплексний аналіз ключових викликів та протиріч у сучасних відносинах між Республікою Корея та Китаєм, зосереджуючись на політичних, економічних, безпекових та соціальних аспектах. Досліджене джерела напруженості між двома країнами, зокрема суперечки щодо розгортання протиракетної системи THAAD, які спричинили різку реакцію Китаю та вплинули на динаміку регіональної безпеки. У роботі також розглянуто економічний тиск Китаю на Південну Корею, зокрема торговельні обмеження та інші заходи, що вплинули на двосторонні економічні відносини.

Дослідження простежує еволюцію двосторонніх відносин від періоду активного співробітництва в 1990 рр. до появи стратегічних розбіжностей у 2010–2020 рр. Зокрема, робота висвітлює складність територіальних та морських суперечок у Жовтому морі, що ускладнює політичний діалог та переговори. Також розглянуто тайванське питання, яке створює потенційні ризики для регіональної стабільності та впливає на дипломатичне балансування Південної Кореї між Китаєм та США. Крім того, проаналізовано антикитайські настрої в південнокорейському суспільстві, що демонструє, як громадська думка може створювати внутрішньополітичний тиск, який впливає на зовнішньополітичні рішення. Безпекові виклики, такі як конфлікт навколо системи THAAD, залишаються ключовим джерелом напруженості та важливим фактором у формуванні відносин Сеула та Пекіна.

Ключові слова: Республіка Корея, Китай, територіальні та морські суперечки, тайванське питання, антикитайські настрої, система THAAD, безпекові виклики, зовнішня політика, економічна взаємозалежність, стратегічні протиріччя.

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