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SOUTH KOREANS' NEGATIVE VIEW OF CHINA IS NOTHING NEW, BUT IS GETTING WORSE

By
Jaewoo Choo

To outside observers South Korea's [negative attitude](#) toward China appears to be growing apace, but it is nothing new to locals. Since [an annual poll](#) by the Institute of Peace and Unification Studies (IPUS) at Seoul National University began in 2007, China has consistently ranked fourth on Korea's favorability list, behind the US, North Korea, and even Japan (but ahead of Russia). It only surpassed the North to reach second place on two occasions: in 2014 and 2015, due to Chinese leader Xi Jinping's visit and at the conclusion of a free trade agreement.

Nonetheless, one can demonstrate that South Korea's negative view of China has been compounded by two factors since the turn of the millennium. One is China's unilateral displays of irredentist and arrogant behavior, which have wounded the Korean public's pride and heightened their distrust. The other is the Korean public's disappointment in their own government's lackluster efforts in countering China's challenges and claims. The Seoul government has persistently remained low key over fear of a possible stall in economic relations caused by China's punitive response. Should it decide to fight back, it is also fearful that the consequences could undermine its domestic political support.

These internal and external factors have incrementally driven the Korean people's negative feelings toward China. Had the government sufficiently addressed China's political challenges, a positive turn in public sentiment could have resulted. Further growth in Korea's affinity for China might also have been possible had Beijing demonstrated restraint in its irredentist claims and empathy toward South Korea's security concerns regarding North Korean provocations, including its nuclear proliferation.

Little Affinity to Begin With

Having co-existed as neighbors for millennia, the Korean people have naturally developed their own perception of China, which has left a rather belligerent, rather than benign, impression. China as of late has reminded Koreans of its bellicosity by [noting its intervention](#) in the Korean War. Commemorating the 70th anniversary of intervention, Chinese leader Xi Jinping extolled the decision to join in a “just war” that culminated in the successful rescue of North Korea and the defense of its border against American imperialism. Never in the past had Xi’s predecessors called it a “just war” (though Xi had also done so before assuming leadership of China, including [in 2010](#)).

In addition to China’s intervention in the Korean War, China’s recent actions on the security front have only enhanced the Korean public’s distrust. Beijing’s [sanctions](#) on the South for its Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) deployment decision spoke volumes. The annual IPUS survey in 2018 and 2019 found that a mere 13% of the respondents saw China as a cooperative partner. While 90% of Koreans think Japan opposes Korean unification, China comes in a close second at 89%. More than half of the populace believes that China will again intervene on behalf of the North in a contingency. As a result, 81% say Seoul must seek cooperation with China on unification, compared to 97% who say the United States’ help is needed, and even then the reasons are different: to dissuade China from opposition and collaborate in the rebuilding efforts, while the US’ support is for a safe and stable transformation of the unified Korea.

Making Things Worse

Throughout the 2010s the percentage of Koreans’ who regard China with affection has seldom exceeded 10% of the population—once in 2014 at 10.8%, as per an IPUS survey. Since the start of the millennium, there have been five incidents that have heightened Korea’s negativity toward their neighbor.

The first incident was China’s [irredentist claim](#) to Korea’s ancient kingdom of Goguryeo, in 2004. In the aftermath, 58.2% of Koreans, whose opinions of China had been generally approving to that point, told a survey by the Korea Broadcasting System they no longer held a favorable [view of China](#). Also, in a turning point, the majority of Koreans (50%) began to perceive the rise of China as a danger.

Other salient examples were China’s refusal to condemn the North over its sinking of the Cheonan naval vessel and shelling of Yeonpyeong island in 2010. An IPUS survey showed that a mere 4.2% of South Koreans reported affection towards China that year. Another was the economic sanctions following the deployment of THAAD in 2016, sinking ratings below the 4% threshold. The feelings would get worse with the advent of COVID-19: a record low of 3.3%.

Finally, sporadic incidents involving Chinese nationals residing in Korea have been another source of anti-China sentiment. The 2008 [beating of Korean](#)

[spectators](#) by Chinese students during the Olympic torch relay in downtown Seoul is one example. Consequently, a drop in affection occurred, from 10.2% the year before to 7.8%. Another incident happened during the passing of the Hong Kong national security law in August 2020, when the [Chinese students](#) vandalized their Korean school's facilities that hosted activities supporting human rights in Hong Kong.

'Silent Diplomacy' isn't Helping

Why has the South Korean government not countered the challenges from China? 58.3% of Koreans, for instance, [favored](#) a ban on incoming flights from China in February when COVID-19 started to spread globally. However, the incumbent government's preoccupation with the possibility of Xi's reciprocal visit [from 2017](#) stifled public demand. On other issues, past governments preferred to adopt so-called "silent diplomacy," avoiding unnecessary misunderstandings that could damage the interests of the nation and government. This has become the hallmark of Korea's China diplomacy.

However, the government's indulgence in China is prompted by its own myths: that China is vital to Korea's unification, and that China is critical to denuclearization of North Korea. What the government does not seem to realize is that the Korean public thinks otherwise. IPSU data shows that never has more than 15% of the Korean people thought that China would be helpful to the cause of unification. The past two years also indicate that less than 9% see cooperation with China as viable for the North's denuclearization, while more than 40% perceive the US as a more feasible partner. Only simultaneous cooperation with the US and China garnered a majority response. In addition, scholarship by Hwang In-chang and Baek Jong-rok shows that 62.6% of Koreans want the government to strongly protest against China on the issue of [fine dust](#), which severely afflicts Korea at certain parts of the year and has been blamed for respiratory problems.

Conclusion

Due to the foregoing mythical reasons, the Seoul government has taken a position opposite to its constituency, further contributing to anti-China sentiment. It is the government that is responsible for Korea's ill-perceived indulgences of China. The public is frustrated with the government's illusion of China as a cooperative partner, while the rise of China induces anxiety. So long as a vast majority (72%) support the continued alliance with the US, the government remains the culprit behind China's burgeoning unilateral behavior in the Northeast Asian region.

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