

Exploring the Relationship Between China and South Korea from the Theory of Complex Interdependence: A Case Study of China-ROK Visa Suspension

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Abstract: Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and South Korea in 1992, the relations between the two countries have generally maintained a positive momentum while experiencing large fluctuations. Based on the theory of complex interdependence, this paper explores the main contradictions and resolution paths between China and South Korea. Using both case study and historical analysis, this paper finds that China-ROK relations are sensitive and fragile as the interdependence between the two countries deepens. Fundamentally, the lack of political mutual trust between China and South Korea is the main contradiction between the two countries. In addition, the contradiction is also reflected in the structural shift in economic relations from complementarity to both competition and cooperation. Furthermore, the significant decline in the level of awareness and understanding of each other at the social level between China and South Korea in recent years is also an important reason for the occurrence of visa suspension. Facing the new challenges of the relationship between the two countries in the post-epidemic era, this paper proposes a solution path to build political mutual trust, improve communication and early warning mechanisms, and consolidate bilateral cooperation.

Keywords: China-ROK relations, complex interdependence, post-epidemic era, visa suspension

1. Introduction

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and South Korea in 1992, the relations between the two countries have generally maintained a positive momentum of development while also experiencing large fluctuations. The outbreak of the Covid-19 in 2020 caused a huge impact on the normal cooperation and exchanges between the two countries and objectively posed serious challenges to the China-ROK relations. Synthesizing the above research background, this paper will focus on the following two questions from the theoretical perspective of complex interdependence, with the case of visa issues between China and South Korea in 2023 [1]. What are the main contradictions between China and South Korea in the post-epidemic era? What is the path to solve the problems of China-ROK relations? This paper will analyze and elaborate on these two topics to

provide an appropriate perspective on the proper handling of relations between the two countries at this stage, and also to provide a factual basis for the complex interdependence theory in the post-epidemic era, and thus enrich and develop the theory.

From the perspective of complex interdependence, this paper will analyze the main contradictions in the current stage of China-ROK relations by using historical analysis and case study, and then discuss the paths to solve the problems of China-ROK relations in the post-epidemic era in terms of political mutual trust, communication and early warning mechanisms, and bilateral cooperation.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Research Status

On the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and South Korea, scholars from various countries have reviewed the history of China-South Korea relations and made cautious predictions on the future of the two countries' relations. Among them, scholars generally agree that the U.S.-ROK alliance is an important factor influencing China-ROK relations, and that the THAAD dispute is a turning point in China-ROK relations and has been a constant obstacle to the relationship. Xu Zhou and Zhao Yujia pointed out that although the interaction between China and South Korea continues, substantive cooperation and the stability of China-South Korea relations is decreasing [2].

In reviewing the foreign policies implemented by recent Korean governments, scholars generally agree that relations between China and South Korea have eased under the Moon Jae-in administration, while the foreign policy preferences of the Yoon Seok-Youl government have been unfavorable. Han Xiandong and Zhao Shaoyang argue that the hedging strategy has been the dominant strategy of South Korea toward China in recent years, but it is unstable and can adjust its tendencies depending on South Korea's domestic political environment as well as extraterritorial pluralistic influences [3]. For instance, Zhang Chi makes the point that during the early years of Moon's tenure, he placed almost parallel importance on relations with the U.S. and China, maintained strategic ambiguity between them, and strived to promote South Korean interests in the coordinated development of the U.S.-South Korea alliance and China-South Korea relations. However, South Korea's current president Yoon Seok-Youl, who comes from the conservative side, has released a more obvious signal of moving closer to the U.S. side [4].

As for the factors influencing China-ROK relations, the academics argue that there is a lack of mutual trust between China and South Korea, with Taeho Kim pointing out the fact that Beijing and Seoul seem to agree on many aspects of bilateral relations does not necessarily mean that the former supports South Korea's major policy goals, especially when it comes to specific or long-term issues on the Korean Peninsula [5]. Jung, HJ, Jeong, HW, and Tae-am, O take Korea's national security as the starting point, explaining the historical fact that Korea has gradually leaned toward the U.S. between China and the U.S. after 2004, in the context of the problems and specific contingencies that exist between China and Korea, such as the North Korean nuclear issue, maritime rights, and territorial disputes [6-7].

In general, despite the challenges and risks, the academic community recognizes that there is still a strategic opportunity period for the future direction of relations between the two countries. Wirth, C has cited the consensus and conflict of interest among China, Japan and Korea, while scholar Kim, GO has elaborated on the proposal to resolve the existing conflicts among East Asia [8-9]. Lee, H argues that China needs to strike a balance between its traditional friendship with North Korea and the Korea-China strategic partnership if it wants to counterbalance South Korea's excessive pro-U.S. ties and cooperate with South Korea in dealing with North Korea's nuclear ambitions [10].

2.2. Literature Summary and Research Innovation

To sum up, the research on China-Korea relations in recent years has focused on the history of development and influencing factors, and has shown the following shortcomings. First, the research is more macro and less micro, focusing on macro policies and situations in the general context, and less on the analysis of a specific event. Second, the research time period is mostly focused on the pre-epidemic period, and less in the post-epidemic era, without combining the new context and challenges of the times. Third, few of these studies have used international relations theory as support, and there is less literature on complex interdependence to analyze China-ROK relations.

Therefore, this study will focus on the following aspects. First, it makes a focus on China-ROK relations in the post-epidemic era, which is a real-time study. Second, it analyzes the relations between the two countries from a micro perspective, by starting from the sudden incident of the China-ROK visa dispute. Third, it is combined with the theory of complex interdependence, which is a core theory of the neoliberal school, providing a innovative theoretical perspective not only for the study of China-ROK relations, but also for the reference of the same type of international relations research.

3. Theoretical Foundation

Complex interdependence theory, created by Robert.O.Keohane and Joseph Nye, provides a new perspective for understanding and analyzing international relations.

First, the theory can better explain the diplomatic situation between China and South Korea, where achievements and conflicts coexist. The theory of complex interdependence emphasizes “low-level politics”. In addition to military security issues, economy, resources and environment issues will enter the agenda of both countries more often. Moreover, the theory also predicts a situation where conflicts and contradictions will become more intense as the interdependence deepens. While China and South Korea have cooperated in many aspects, such as economic cooperation and cultural exchanges, since the establishment of diplomatic relations, their respective socio-economic and political lives are also affected by more external events and policy changes that are probably not under their control.

Second, the theory emphasizes that inseparable ties are in fact conducive to maintaining peace between the two countries, thus providing theoretical support for China and South Korea to cooperate in various ways to maintain regional peace. In contrast to the power politics theory, which advocates the significant role of force in international relations, the complex interdependence theory places more emphasis on common interests and international cooperation between countries, while force may undermine the mutually beneficial relationship between the two countries.

4. Case Study

4.1. Case Description

Since the end of 2022, after China adjusted its domestic epidemic prevention and control measures, South Korea has tightened its entry controls on Chinese passengers.

On January 2, 2023, the South Korean government suspended the issuance of short-term visas to Korea from China and imposed entry restrictions on flights from mainland China; in response, on January 10 of the same year, China suspended the issuance of some short-term visas to China for South Korean citizens. Although officials from both countries expressed the possibility of resuming visa issuance the following month, the unexpected incident had a significant negative impact on normal personnel exchanges and cooperation between the two countries. The timeline of the visa suspension can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Timeline of China-ROK Visa Suspension.

Time	Incidents
The end of 2022	South Korea tightened entry controls on Chinese.
Jan. 2, 2023	Suspended the issuance of short-term visas
Jan. 10, 2023	Suspended the issuance of short-term visas

4.2. Case Analysis

4.2.1. The Background of Complex Interdependence Between China and South Korea

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and South Korea, multi-channel ties have existed between the two countries. On the economic front, China has been Korea's largest trading partner for 17 consecutive years since 2004 and is the largest source of trade surplus for Korea. In terms of humanistic exchanges, China and South Korea also have frequent cultural exchanges due to similar cultural traditions, and the interplay of "Han style" and "Korean flow" has become the third pillar of China-ROK cooperation.

However, the benefits and costs coexist in the context of the complex interdependent relationship between China and South Korea. Peaceful engagement and common interests between the two countries come at a price. The "low politics" of domestic policy matters can largely influence the "high politics" of a country's foreign policy. The public health policies of the two countries, for example, have led to bilateral diplomatic tensions and a decline in economic and cultural relations.

4.2.2. Main Contradictions Between China and South Korea in the Post-epidemic Era

The epidemic prevention and control measures are the trigger of this conflict, however, the deeper reasons behind it cannot be ignored. Fundamentally, the lack of political mutual trust between China and South Korea is the main conflict between the two countries. On the THAAD issue a few years ago, South Korea did not consider China's position; and on the nuclear issue of North Korea, South Korea believes that China has not shown its support for South Korea. As the strategic competition between China and the U.S. heats up and the Cold War mentality resurfaced, political contradictions and suspicions obstruct the communication mechanism, coupled with poor coordination among various domestic sectors, which in turn leaves the two countries with obvious shortcomings in the area of crisis management and prevention.

In addition, the contradiction between China and South Korea is also reflected in the structural shift in economic relations from complementarity to competition and cooperation. In bilateral trade between the two countries, South Korea has run a surplus in the vast majority of years. However, since May 2022, South Korea's imports from China have been larger than its exports to China for several months in a row, turning into a trade deficit.

Finally, in recent years, the level of awareness and understanding of each other at the social level between China and South Korea has declined significantly. The differential understanding of epidemic prevention and control measures and concepts between the two countries is also an important reason for the occurrence of visa dispute.

4.2.3. Solutions to China-ROK Relations from the Perspective of Complex Interdependence

The China-South Korean relationship is of key importance to both countries. For China, it is an important link in dealing with the strategic competition between China and the United States. For

South Korea, a good relationship with China is a key step for South Korea to win a secure international environment.

In view of the above contradictions, China and South Korea should first actively promote the construction of cooperation-oriented political mutual trust. The Yoon Seok-Youl government needs to strike a balance between the U.S.-ROK alliance and the China-ROK partnership to prevent excessive tilting and to avoid blocking the room in China-ROK cooperation. At the same time, China should also assume its responsibility as a major power and actively promote the improvement of bilateral communication and early warning mechanisms. Through dialogue and cooperation, such as summit meetings, economic and strategic dialogues, and communication mechanisms at various levels, it should resolve friction and suspicion in China-ROK relations, replace the Cold War with negotiations, and improve the predictability of the development of relations between the two countries. In addition, Joseph Nye particularly emphasized the influence and role of perception on interdependence. China and South Korea should seek common ground while reserving differences and cultivate a sense of shared values so that national rationality and national virtue are greater than the scope of national power and national hegemony.

Furthermore, the theory of complex interdependence emphasizes the importance of low-level politics in bilateral relations. Economically, under the framework of strategic partnership, China's market size and potential as the world's second-largest economy provide huge room for Korean companies to grow. The two countries can strengthen research cooperation in technology as well as energy, and facilitate healthy industrial competition, thus promoting the establishment of good neighborly relations politically.

5. Conclusions

From the perspective of complex interdependence, building political mutual trust, improving communication as well as early warning mechanisms, and consolidating bilateral cooperation are the keys to the peaceful development of both countries. Among the solution paths, this paper combines national ethics, with introducing national virtue ethics into the theory of complex interdependence to go beyond a national power-centered understanding of international relations and international governance, which would complete the ideal model of complex interdependence. It should be noted that the existing academic studies on China-ROK relations are mainly based on the literature on China and South Korea, and there are few studies from the perspective of third-party countries, and even if there are, most of them appear as regional studies on East Asia. In future academic studies, it is expected to see more studies on the relationship between the two countries from third-party perspectives.

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