

**Constructing Hierarchy:
Identity, Interdependence, and Conflict in China-South Korea Relations**

See-Won Byun

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Abstract

Why do interdependent states engage in costly political disputes? Political conflict despite growing interdependence remains a persistent feature of East Asia, where the gains from economic cooperation are countered by recurring frictions over history and territorial claims. Based on the China-South Korea case since diplomatic normalization in 1992, this paper examines the political consequences of national identity conflict from the perspective of asymmetric interdependence. Sino-South Korean asymmetric interdependence intensifies the impact of identity conflict by (1) deepening the historical legacy of hierarchical relations under the Sinocentric tributary system and (2) strengthening China’s economic leverage in current political and security disputes. These trends are increasingly apparent in the period since 2004, when South Korea grew more dependent on China than on the United States for trade. To demonstrate, this paper traces the pattern of China-South Korea relations in two ways. Drawing on official, scholarly, and popular narratives, it first examines how China and South Korea’s political relations stem from competing identities as Middle Kingdom and tributary state, and Cold War rivals. Second, it assesses the extent to which such identity conflict is shaped by an increase in the asymmetry of economic interdependence in favor of China, focusing primarily on trade interdependence. By linking the real and normative implications of China-centered interdependence in Asia, the China-South Korea case informs current debates on the Middle Kingdom’s revival, China’s engagement of neighbors, and the implications for U.S.-China great-power interactions in the region.