

## **Interdependence, Identity, and Conflict in China-South Korea Relations (1992-2018)**

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### **Abstract**

Studies on the relationship between international economic and security relations have produced no consensus on whether trade promotes peace. While liberal proponents claim that constrained trade partners are unlikely to fight, there is less agreement on why and how. For realist skeptics, interdependence brings greater vulnerability and mistrust. This debate prevails in Northeast Asia, where recurring tensions overshadow rapid trade growth in the post-Cold War period, characterizing what South Korean president Park Geun-hye in 2012 called “Asia’s paradox” of a rising but clashing Asia. This paper assesses the security impact of economic interdependence based on the China-South Korea case since 1992. Asymmetric interdependence can exacerbate political disputes by (1) generating strategic leverage for dominant partners, and (2) amplifying the identity dimensions of conflict that shape societal preferences. China-South Korea security interactions since diplomatic normalization have increased in quantity but not quality, contrary to liberal claims on the pacifying effects of trade. The political and cultural costs of interdependence are especially evident from 2004, when South Korea grew more dependent on China than on the United States for trade. Other factors explain periods of bilateral engagement, including perceived military threats from Japan and North Korea favoring China-ROK alignment, and the need to satisfy domestic economic interests. The China-Korea case enriches the interdependence-conflict debate by drawing attention to both material and non-material consequences of asymmetric trade, the quality of cooperation rather than just instances of conflict, and broader regional security implications of China-centered economic interdependence in Asia.