



Reassessing Seoul's "One China" Policy: South Korea-Taiwan "Unofficial" Relations after 30 Years (1992-2022)

Chaewon Lee and Adam P. Liff

Indiana University, USA



ABSTRACT

Amid U.S.-led efforts to "internationalize and multilateralize" support for Taiwan in response to mounting pressure from China, the 2021 U.S.-South Korea presidential statement's unprecedented reference to "peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait" made global headlines. This study analyzes contemporary Korea-Taiwan relations in historic and comparative perspective, focusing especially on Seoul's official 1992 position on "One China" and its implications for Korea's Taiwan policy. It demonstrates that Seoul has never recognized Beijing's self-defined "One China principle" concerning its essential claim of PRC sovereignty over Taiwan. Comparative analysis of Korea's position and subsequent policies with the U.S., Japan's, and others' further reveals significant (potential) flexibility in Korea's approach to Taiwan. The relatively distant state of Korea-Taiwan relations today is the collective political choice of Korea's democratically-elected leaders—not the legacy of some (non-existent) putative commitment made to Beijing 30 years ago.

Introduction

On 22 May 2021, Republic of Korea (ROK; below, 'Korea') President Moon Jae-in and U.S. President Joe Biden made global headlines when they jointly 'emphasize[d] the importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait'.¹ This marked the first such joint reference to the Taiwan Strait by the U.S. and Korean presidents since Seoul recognized the People's Republic of China (PRC) 'as the sole legal government of China' in 1992, thereby ending official relations with the government of Taiwan (officially, the Republic of China (ROC))—the ROK's last and oldest diplomatic partner in Asia. The fact that 2021's historic statement occurred in a bilateral document with Korea's U.S. treaty ally, which is also Taiwan's de facto security benefactor, and during a period when both cross-Strait tensions and U.S.-China relations are widely considered to be at a half-century nadir, implied additional significance.

Given longstanding, widespread perceptions of Seoul's relative reluctance to risk Beijing's ire by significantly deepening ties or practical cooperation with Taiwan, over which the PRC government claims sovereignty, the Biden-Moon statement caught many observers by surprise. In Taiwan, and elsewhere, some leading analysts saw it as auguring a potential inflection point in Korea's long-standing preference for avoiding official public comment in support of Taiwan and as a signal of Seoul's commitment to the U.S.-led effort to 'internationalize and multilateralize' (*guojihua yu*

CONTACT Adam P. Liff  aliff@indiana.edu  Hamilton Lugar School of Global & International Studies, Indiana University, 355 N. Eagleson Ave, Bloomington, Indiana, USA 47405

¹'U.S.-ROK Leaders' Joint Statement' (The White House, 22 May 2021) <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/05/21/u-s-rok-leaders-joint-statement/>> accessed 24 May 2021.

duobianhua) concerns about cross-Strait stability.² Unsurprisingly, the response from Beijing was swift and fierce: the PRC foreign ministry spokesperson warned Seoul and Washington to ‘refrain from playing with fire’ (*jinyanshenhang, buyaowanhuo*).³

Though President Moon asserted at the time that the joint statement’s historic reference to the Taiwan Strait was not due to U.S. pressure, such claims were widely questioned. An exchange a few hours later between a reporter and Choi Jong-kun, Korea’s vice foreign minister, suggested Seoul’s apparent eagerness to avoid angering Beijing: its number-one trading partner. Choi took pains to contrast the U.S.-ROK statement from the more assertive April 2021 U.S.-Japan statement, which had explicitly criticized China’s recent behavior. He pointed out that the U.S.-ROK statement avoided any explicit mention of ‘China’ and contained only ‘generalities’. Choi concluded, remarkably, that China’s leaders would ‘highly assess’ it.⁴ In stark contrast to the situation in Washington and Tokyo, after the May 2021 Biden-Moon summit neither Korea’s Taiwan policy nor a possible cross-Strait crisis appeared as mainstream policy concerns in Seoul. This was true both for the remainder of the Moon administration and the just-concluded 2022 presidential campaign, during which both issues attracted strikingly little attention.⁵

What explains the relative reluctance on the part of Seoul to adopt a more assertive position and to deepen practical ties with Taiwan in recent years—as the U.S., Japan, Australia, and major U.S. democratic allies in Europe have been doing? Is it because, as much existing scholarship on the Korea case suggests, Seoul, in the interest of positive ties with its massive neighbor, gave in to pressure from Beijing to recognize the PRC’s ‘One China principle’ in 1992? More generally, how have South Korea’s policies toward Taiwan and the Taiwan Strait evolved vis-à-vis Seoul’s official position on ‘One China’ in the thirty years since Seoul and Taipei formally severed official diplomatic relations? And how do they compare to those of the United States and Japan, the U.S.’ other democratic treaty ally in Northeast Asia, today?

This article analyzes Korea-Taiwan relations in historical and comparative perspectives against the backdrop of widespread and deepening global concerns about cross-Strait tensions, the U.S.-led effort to internationalize and multilateralize concerns about peace and stability and expand international support for Taiwan in the face of increasing pressure from Beijing, and worsening frictions between China and the United States and major U.S. democratic allies. Inspired by the landmark May 2021 Biden-Moon statement and the 30th anniversary of ROK-PRC diplomatic normalization, its analysis focuses on clarifying Seoul’s official 1992 position on ‘One China’ and its implications for how scholars should understand the reasons and manner in which ROK leaders have operationalized Seoul’s Taiwan policy over the three decades since.

Beyond its real-world implications, this study also contributes to addressing several gaps in related academic literatures. Whereas scholarship on U.S.-China relations regularly distinguishes between Beijing’s unilaterally-asserted ‘One China principle’ (*yi ge zhongguo yuanze*), which claims that Taiwan is part of the PRC, and the U.S.’ officially ambiguous 1979 position and effective (and evolving) ‘One China’ policy (*yi ge zhongguo zhengce*) in the decades since, no analogous analysis of

²Yizhong Lai, ‘Taihai anquan de dianfan zhuan—yu taiwan qiuji’ermen de shidai tian da’ *Sixiang Tanke* (26 May 2021) <<https://voicettank.org/%E5%8F%B0%E6%B5%B7%E5%AE%89%E5%85%A8%E7%9A%84%E5%85%B8%E7%AF%84%E8%BD%89%E7%A7%BB%E8%88%87%E5%8F%B0%E7%81%A3%E9%82%B1%E5%90%89%E7%88%BE%E5%80%91%E7%9A%84%E6%99%82%E4%BB%A3%E5%A1%AB%E7%AD%94/>> accessed 23 October 2021.

³2021nian 5yue24ri Waijiaobu Fayanren Zhao Lijian Zhuchi Lixing Jizhehui’ *Waijiaobu (PRC)* (24 May 2021) <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/fyrbt_673021/t1878152.shtml>> accessed 23 October 2021.

⁴Seung-yeon Kim, ‘Vice FM Expects China to ‘highly assess’ S. Korea for Not Mentioning Beijing in Moon-Biden Statement’ *Yonhap News Agency* (Seoul, 24 May 2021) <<https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20210524005600325>>> accessed 24 September 2021.

⁵For example, neither major presidential candidate even mentioned Taiwan in their respective articles in *Foreign Affairs*. This is especially revealing, as the venue suggests a desire to appeal to foreign—and especially American—audiences. Suk Yeol Yoon, ‘South Korea Needs to Step up’ *Foreign Affairs* (17 February 2022) <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/south-korea/2022-02-08/south-korea-needs-step>>> accessed 6 March 2022; Jae-Myung Lee, ‘A Practical Vision for South Korea’ *Foreign Affairs* (24 February 2022) <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/east-asia/2022-02-23/practical-vision-south-korea>>> accessed 6 March 2022.

the Korean case exists.⁶ Also absent is a study closely analyzing the 1992 ROK-PRC Normalization Communique's text and its implications for Seoul's official position on 'One China' and subsequent policies vis-à-vis Taiwan. Lastly, the literature lacks both a systematic comparison of the Korean case with those of the U.S., Japan, and other major U.S. democratic allies, and a study which situates the Korean case in the larger literature on the 'One China' framework in international politics.

This study aims to address these important gaps and contribute to scholars' understanding about a critical matter with real-world implications for contemporary China, Korea, Taiwan, and the United States, as well as fellow U.S. ally Japan and East Asian international relations more generally. Coupled with a Korea-Taiwan-focused historical overview to baseline post-1992 developments, its comparative analysis of Korea's official position and policies vis-à-vis Taiwan the past thirty years helps elucidate an important but neglected analytical distinction in the literature on the Korean case: between what the ROK actually agreed to when it normalized diplomatic ties with the PRC in 1992 and the *political choices* Korean leaders have made since concerning in what manner and how robustly Seoul should engage Taiwan.

Contrary to widespread claims in the existing literature, this study finds that in 1992 Seoul did not give in to pressure to recognize Beijing's 'One China principle'. Rather, Korea's official position on Taiwan's status is strikingly ambiguous, and differs from that asserted by Beijing. A comparative analysis further reveals that (1) Seoul's stance bears underappreciated similarities to the more famously vague Japanese (1972) and U.S. (1979) positions on Taiwan; and (2) the relative reluctance in Seoul to significantly deepen support for or pragmatic cooperation with Taiwan that characterizes its effective 'One China' policy today is due to Korean leaders' political choices, not any putative commitment made to Beijing thirty years ago. When assessed in the context of the Biden-Moon statement and more recent changes in the rhetoric and posture of the U.S., Japan, and several other major U.S. democratic allies, this study's findings suggest that, at least in theory, Seoul's effective policies vis-à-vis Taiwan could also change—even if its official position on 'One China' remains frozen in time.

In addition to this study's scholarly contributions, several real-world factors also make this an opportune moment for critically reflecting on the past, present, and possible future evolution of Seoul's 'One China' policy and Korea-Taiwan 'unofficial relations', and for understanding the importance of both international and domestic politics in shaping them. First, 2022 marks the 30th anniversary of the normalization of ROK-PRC relations. Second, U.S.-China frictions today are arguably worse than they have been at any time since the 1970s and the U.S. government has openly called for greater cooperation with U.S. allies in confronting associated challenges. And third, over the past two years global interest in cross-Strait stability and prospects for enhanced support for and cooperation with Taiwan from the U.S. and its democratic allies have reached unprecedented heights. Though the just-departed Moon administration (2017–2022) appeared reluctant to upset Beijing on the sensitive matter of Taiwan, vicissitudes across the Taiwan Strait and in Korean domestic politics could shift policy preferences in Seoul. Of particular note are a striking surge of negative popular sentiment in Korea vis-à-vis China, and the May 2022 inauguration of conservative President Yoon Suk Yeol, who has pledged to deepen security cooperation with Tokyo and Washington.⁷

This article is structured as follows: The next section provides historical context for the contemporary Korea-Taiwan relationship through a brief overview of ROK-ROC relations during the Cold War and the gradual twenty-year ROK-PRC rapprochement that culminated in Seoul's fateful 1992 decision to switch official diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing. Next, the authors analyze the foundational pillars of Korea's effective 'One China' policy today, with particular focus on the 1992 ROK-PRC Normalization Communique and the 1993 framework

⁶The authoritative post-Cold War study of U.S. "One China" policy is Alan D. Romberg, *Rein in at the Brink of the Precipice: American Policy Toward Taiwan and U.S.-PRC Relations* (Stimson 2003). More recently, see Richard C. Bush, *A One-China Policy Primer* (Brookings Institution 2017).

⁷Sang-hun Choe, 'South Koreans Now Dislike China More Than They Dislike Japan' *New York Times* (Seoul, 8 March 2022) <<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/20/world/asia/korea-china-election-young-voters.html>> accessed 9 March 2022.

for Korea-Taiwan ‘unofficial’ relations. The subsequent section explores how Seoul has chosen to operationalize its official position through a brief summary of the vastly different trajectories of Korea-PRC and (officially ‘unofficial’) Korea-Taiwan relations over the three decades since. Next, the authors further elucidate the underappreciated ambiguity and practical significance of Seoul’s official position on ‘One China’ through a comparative analysis of the ROK-PRC, Japan-PRC (1972) and U.S.-PRC (1979) communiques, and of Seoul’s post-normalization approach vis-a-vis Taiwan to those of the U.S., Japan, and other major democratic U.S. allies. Against the backdrop of the May 2021 Biden-Moon summit and U.S., Japanese, and other parties’ efforts to ‘multilateralize and internationalize’ support for Taiwan and calls for a ‘peaceful resolution’ today, the penultimate section critically reflects on the implications of this study’s findings for scholars’ understanding of Korea’s effective ‘One China’ policy and the prospects for deeper Seoul-Taipei ties in the years ahead. A final section concludes this article.

Historical Background: ROK-ROC Relations During the Cold War (1948–1991)

The Beginnings of ROK-ROC Relations and Their Anti-Communist “Blood Alliance”

To a time-traveler from the early Cold War, the contemporary political and popular distance between Seoul and Taipei would probably be surprising. Indeed, in the decades after Korea’s division into North and South and the ROK government’s establishment (1948) there were striking similarities between Taipei and Seoul’s ideological inclinations, geopolitical alignments, and domestic political and economic trajectories.

During the early Cold War, both governments were led by staunchly anti-communist, U.S.-aligned, autocratic, and nationalistic leaders determined to reunify their divided nations by force, if necessary.⁸ They were also closely linked politically and diplomatically from the moment of the ROK’s establishment. On 13 August 1948, the ROC became the first national government to convey its intent to recognize the newly-established ROK.⁹ One month later, on September 16, it established a consulate in Seoul. On November 11, the ROK returned the favor with a diplomatic office in Nanjing. And on 2 January 1949—just one day after the U.S.—the ROC became the first Asian government to publicize its diplomatic recognition. After the ROC moved its seat of government from the Chinese mainland to Taiwan following the establishment by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) of the new PRC, the ROK became the first foreign government to move its embassy to Taipei.¹⁰ Anti-communist solidarity and the 1949 founding of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) also inspired the ROK and ROC to pursue a military, political, economic, and cultural alliance, which included the Philippines (the Pacific Pact).¹¹

The Korean War (1950–1953) exacerbated nascent Cold War tensions regionally and globally, pushed the U.S., ROK, and ROC closer together, and locked in divisions in Northeast Asia along communist and anti-communist lines.¹² In the eyes of Washington and many in Seoul and Taipei, the Korean War also directly linked the security of Korea and Taiwan. Most famously, the Truman Administration responded to North Korea’s June 1950 invasion of the ROK by deploying the U.S. Seventh Fleet to the Taiwan Strait, effectively interjecting the U.S. into the unresolved Chinese Civil War. Notably, the ROC offered to deploy 30,000 troops and air support to aid South Korea.¹³ Though the United States and ROK declined, Taipei

⁸Victor D. Cha, *Powerplay: The Origins of the American Alliance System in Asia* (Princeton 2016).

⁹Taeho Kim, ‘Jungguk Nunchi boda Daeman Nochinda’ *Pressian* (Seoul, 15 April 2016) <<https://www.pressian.com/pages/articles/135438>>> accessed 23 June 2021; Kyu-tae Lee, ‘Hangukgwa Daemanui Gwangye - ‘Junghwa minguk 100nyeon’: Han-Daeman Gwangyeui Yeoksawa Hyeonsil’ [2011] 33 *Junggukak Nonchong* 214.

¹⁰Jun-sik Son, ‘Hyeongjeibang’ eseo ‘Hyungjijibang’ euro Daehanmingukgwa Junghwaminguk ui Oegyogwangye: (1948–1992)’ [2013] 58 *Jungguk geunhyeondaesa yeongu* 27–31.

¹¹Junghyun Park, ‘Frustrated Alignment: The Pacific Pact Proposals from 1949 to 1954 and South Korea-Taiwan Relations’ [2015] 12(2) *International Journal of Asian Studies* 225.

¹²Robert Jervis, ‘The Impact of the Korean War on the Cold War’ [1980] 24(4) *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 563–92.

¹³Park (n 11) 225.

contributed other material aid. General MacArthur, Commander-in-Chief of the United Nations Command during the Korean War, famously referred to Taiwan as ‘an unsinkable aircraft carrier’ and even traveled to Taiwan during the war.¹⁴

ROC-ROK cooperation continued following the 1953 armistice ending Korean War hostilities. Seoul and Taipei jointly supported the non-governmental Asian People’s Anti-Communist League, maintained strong ties, and outwardly displayed a shared commitment to each other that some scholars describe as ‘a blood alliance’, or ‘brotherhood’.¹⁵ As part of their anti-Communist solidarity, neither recognized the PRC or the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK; or North Korea) as a legitimate government. By the mid-1950s, both were also part of the U.S.-centered ‘hub-and-spokes’ system of bilateral, anti-communist treaty alliances.

In the 1960s, the ROC and ROK continued to develop their close relations. High-ranking government and military officials exchanged visits frequently, such as when ROK President Park Chung Hee (1961–1979) visited Taipei in 1966. The ROC and ROK also held annual economic cooperation conferences and signed numerous bilateral agreements—e.g., the 1961 Trade Agreement, 1963 Cultural Agreement, 1964 Friendship Agreement—and jointly participated in the Asian and Pacific Council.¹⁶ Yet, some conflicting interests also began to manifest, especially regarding the formation of an anti-communist regional alliance.¹⁷ While the ROC was eager to establish a military alliance, the ROK, for various economic and political reasons, wished to avoid a military relationship and instead focus on trade and cultural exchanges. Nevertheless, the U.S.’ 1969 Nixon Doctrine—which, *inter alia*, called on U.S. allies to take greater responsibility for their own security—led Park to convene West Germany, the ROC, South Vietnam, and the ROK at the 1970 Ministerial Conference of Divided Nations. The goal was to strengthen relations among divided nations in a setting absent the major powers.¹⁸

The similarities transcended geopolitics and anti-communist solidarity, as the ROK and ROC also followed strikingly parallel economic and political developmental paths. For example, from the mid-1960s on, leaders in Seoul and Taipei pursued heavily export-oriented industrialization as the largest of the ‘Four Asian Tigers’. And beginning in the 1980s, both close U.S. partners also concomitantly launched far-reaching democratic reforms, culminating in free and fair national elections and, later, peaceful transitions of power to progressive-led governments—also around the same time (in 1998 and 2000, respectively).

Despite close early Cold War-era cooperation and similar political and economic trajectories, however, in 1992 it was—ironically—the ROK’s first-ever democratic administration that made Seoul the last Asian government to switch diplomatic recognition from rapidly democratizing Taipei to the authoritarian CCP-led government in Beijing. What had happened to the early Cold War ROK-ROC ‘blood alliance’? To understand how and why this switch of diplomatic recognition happened when it did, it is important to consider the gradual ROK-PRC rapprochement that began in the 1970s. Remarkably, nearly two decades would pass until it ultimately culminated in mutual diplomatic recognition and, consequently, Seoul’s effective severance of official relations with Taipei.

¹⁴Coulter janggun dongsang jemaksigeseo iseungman daetongnyeongui chukayeonseol’ Haengjeonganjeonbu (16 October 1959) <https://www.mois.go.kr/cmm/fms/FileDown.do?atchFileId=FILE_00000000049952&fileSn=0>> accessed 31 July 2022; JungHyun Park, ‘Hangukjeonjaenggwa Taiwanui Jiwi’ [2013] 56(3) Asea Yeongu 140.

¹⁵Jun-Young Kang, ‘Han-Daeman Dangyo 20nyeounui Hoegowa Jeonmang- Saeroun Hanguk-Daeman Gwangyereul Wihayeo’ [2013] 26 Hanjung Sahoegwahak Yeongu 3; Young-Hyun Yoon, ‘Naengjeongi Hanguksahoeui Jayjungguk(Daeman) Insik’ [2019] 68 Hangukak Yeongu 119–64.

¹⁶Kyu-tae Lee, ‘Hangukgwa Daemanui Jeongchijeok Gwangye: Gwageo, Hyeonjae, Mirae’ [1994] 27 Donga Yeongu 36.

¹⁷Son (n 10) 38–39.

¹⁸*ibid.*

The 20-Year Denouement of ROK-ROC Diplomatic Relations and Long Road to ROK-PRC Normalization

By the early 1970s, a rapidly changing geopolitical context had transformed the Cold War in East Asia and weakened the strategic logic underpinning both ROK-ROC anti-communist solidarity and ROK-PRC antagonism. During the 1969–1972 period, the Sino-Soviet split nearly escalated into war, Nixon and Mao launched a historic U.S.-PRC rapprochement, the PRC effectively took over ‘China’s’ seat at the United Nations from the Chiang Kai-shek-led government, and many other U.S.-aligned countries switched diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing. Between 1971 and 1972, twenty-five foreign governments officially recognized the PRC, including key U.S. treaty allies Japan and Australia.¹⁹ By 1979, even Seoul’s U.S. ally had followed suit, also abrogating the U.S.’ mutual defense pact with Taipei and withdrawing its military from Taiwan. These transformative changes reshaped East Asian international relations (and the world). They also catalyzed major foreign policy debates in Seoul.

A turning point was in June 1973, when ROK President Park announced his ‘Peaceful Reunification Foreign Policy’ and expressed interest in establishing diplomatic relations with the PRC and other communist nations.²⁰ One of Park’s goals was to use improved relations with the DPRK’s communist allies to reduce frictions between Seoul and Pyongyang. This new approach heralded a major shift away from Seoul’s early Cold War foreign policy posture rooted in anti-Communist ideology, and toward a more pragmatic, flexible approach. This included efforts to follow the lead of the U.S., Japan, and others by developing more cooperative ties with Beijing.²¹

This 1973 shift also marked a turning point for Korea’s approach to Taipei. Thenceforth, the Park government quietly discouraged efforts to deepen ROK-ROC ties.²² It also reportedly expressed a willingness to adjust its Taiwan policy commensurate with changes in Beijing’s approach to Seoul.²³ In contrast to Beijing’s welcoming attitude toward Washington, Tokyo, and many other U.S. allies, however, the PRC resisted Seoul’s entreaties to normalize diplomatic relations. Beijing’s reluctance owed largely to its frictions and competition for leadership of international communism with Moscow, as well as concerns about how Pyongyang would react. Under a 1961 treaty, the PRC and DPRK were allies. And Pyongyang did not consider the ROK a legitimate government.²⁴ In short, whereas Sino-Soviet frictions gave Beijing powerful geopolitical incentives to quickly normalize ties with Tokyo and Washington, they disincentivized a similarly welcoming posture toward Seoul.

Under the PRC’s post-Mao ‘Reform and Opening up’ (*gaige kaifang*), however, Beijing gradually softened its position. First, under its self-described ‘separation of politics and economics’ (*zhengjing-fenli*) the PRC incrementally expanded trade ties with Seoul, despite the latter’s continued recognition of the ROC government.²⁵ Beijing sought to benefit from economic exchange while maintaining traditional security commitments to Pyongyang.²⁶ Between 1978 and 1991, ROK-PRC bilateral trade volume surged from \$37,000 to \$4.4 billion, catching up to that between Seoul and Taipei by the mid-1980s. In 1984, Beijing lifted commercial restrictions and allowed limited ROK investment.²⁷ Cognizant of the expected economic benefits and eager to weaken one of Taiwan’s most important remaining official diplomatic relationships, yet wary of upsetting Pyongyang and stability on the Korean Peninsula, PRC leaders gradually deepened and expanded nongovernmental exchange with Seoul, such as through ‘sports diplomacy’, ferry and air routes, and local government links. But they

¹⁹Falu baihuawen yundong, *Zhonghua minguo duanjiao shi* (Lianhe wenxue chubanshe gufen youxiangongsi 2019).

²⁰Ipyong J Kim, ‘The Normalization of Chinese-South Korean Diplomatic Relations’ [1992] 16(3) *Korea and World Affairs* 483; Lee (n16) 38.

²¹Lee (n 9) 215–16.

²²Jae Ho Chung, *Between Ally and Partner: Korea-China Relations and the United States* (Columbia University Press 2007) 30.

²³Jie Dong, ‘Zhong Han jianjiao zhong de zhongguo wajiao juece zai tantao’ *Zhonggongdang shi yanjiu* August 2019 <<http://www.dswxyjy.org.cn/n1/2019/1226/c219000-31524343.html.>> accessed 23 October 2021.

²⁴*ibid.*

²⁵Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History* (Addison-Wesley 1997) 186–87.

²⁶Chung (n 22) 65.

²⁷*ibid* 35–41.

refused to normalize diplomatic relations.²⁸ CCP Central Party School scholar Dong Jie sums up the period 1973–1988 as one of Beijing’s ‘cautious exploration’ (*jinshe tansuo*).²⁹

As Beijing cautiously engaged Seoul, under ‘nordpolitik’ (*beifang zhengce*) President Roh Tae-woo (1988–1993), the ROK’s first democratically elected leader, demonstrated ‘extraordinary enthusiasm’ for improving relations with the CCP regime.³⁰ Seoul sought to normalize relations with Moscow and Beijing to facilitate eventual Korean unification, enhance access to the PRC’s growing market, and encourage the DPRK to improve relations with Washington and Tokyo.³¹ As one indication of how eager Roh appeared to improve relations with Beijing, he remained quiet after the tragic and deadly 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown—presenting a stark contrast with the U.S., Japan, and other G7 countries.³² Confronted with punishing sanctions from Washington and other U.S. allies, China’s leaders appreciated Seoul’s positive engagement.³³ ROK-PRC trade surged after June 4th—more than doubling between 1989 and 1991.³⁴

Coupled with a major improvement in Beijing-Moscow relations by the late 1980s, a series of events after 1989—especially Soviet-ROK normalization in 1990 and the ROK and DPRK’s simultaneous admission to the United Nations in 1991—diminished Beijing’s concerns about Pyongyang’s response to improving ties with Seoul.³⁵ By early 1991, newly established trade offices had begun to operate similarly to *de facto* embassies.³⁶ Finally, the Soviet Union’s collapse that December marked a decisive coda on the Cold War and lingering fears in Beijing about Moscow potentially exploiting ROK-PRC normalization to Beijing’s disadvantage.

Negotiating the Foundations of Korea-Taiwan “Unofficial” Relations Today (1992–1993)

On 24 August 1992, the ROK and PRC released a historic communique normalizing diplomatic relations. The consequences for Taiwan were especially significant because the ROK was Taipei’s last and oldest diplomatic ally in Asia. The rebuke from Taipei, which received only a few days’ advance warning, was severe.³⁷ The official ROK-ROC relationship was no more. What precise form a newly ‘unofficial’ Korea-Taiwan relationship would take, however, was (and still is) to be determined by political leaders in Seoul and Taipei.

The 1992 ROK-PRC Normalization Communique: Debunking the Myth of Consensus

The existing literature in multiple languages leaves one with the impression that Seoul came to the negotiating table in May 1992 as an ardent suitor willing to concede to Beijing’s demands, including the latter’s claim of PRC sovereignty over Taiwan. For example, a recent Korean-language study argues that Seoul accepted Beijing’s ‘One China principle’ early on during the negotiations.³⁸ A recent English-language study of Sino-Korean relations claims

²⁸See Dong (n 23); Byung-joon Ahn, ‘Prospects for Sino-South Korean Relations: A Korean Perspective’ [1992] 6(1) *The Journal of East Asian Affairs*; and Chung, *Between Ally and Partner* (n 24) 30–35 and 43–52 for more detailed analyses.

²⁹Dong (n 23).

³⁰*Ibid.*

³¹Tae Dong Chung, ‘Korea’s Nordpolitik: Achievements and Prospects’ [1991] 15(2) *Asian Perspective* 153; Dong (n 23); Seong-Il Lee, ‘1992nyeon Han-Jungguk Gyojeongsanghwa uuiue Gwanhan Jaegochal—Hanbandowa Junggukgwai Gwangye Gujobyehonwareul Jungsimeuro’ [2011] 40 *Junggukak* 538.

³²Chung (n 22) 44.

³³Dong (n 23).

³⁴‘K-Statistic: Specific Country (Pr. China)’ (Korea International Trade Association) <http://www.kita.org/kStat/byCount_SpeCount.do.> accessed 29 September 2021.

³⁵Chae-Jin Lee and Doo-Bok Park, *China and Korea: Dynamic Relations* (Hoover Institution Press 1996), 123; Chung (n 22) 69–70; Dong-gyu Lee, ‘Naengjeonsigi Hanjunggwangyeui Baljeonyoingwa Teuksuseong’ [2018] 74(2) *Hanguk Gunsahak Nonjip* 179.

³⁶Dong (n 23).

³⁷Chung (n 22) 72–73.

³⁸Hee-ok Lee, ‘Hanjungsugyo Gyoseop Gwajeong Yeongu’ [2019] 43(3) *Jungso Yeongu* 134, 139–40.

that the 1992 joint statement “mutually confirm[ed] the ‘One China’ principle”.³⁹ Similarly, a recent Chinese-language study from the CCP Central Party School asserts that Seoul ‘accepted China’s principles for normalization, agreed that the PRC was China’s only legal government, and that Taiwan was part of China’.⁴⁰

Yet a close reading and comparative analysis of the 1992 ROK-PRC normalization communique’s actual text reveals what much existing scholarship overlooks: Seoul’s official 1992 position on Taiwan is both distinct from Beijing’s and is similarly ambiguous to the U.S’. and Japan’s more famously vague 1979 and 1972 positions. Seoul joined Washington and Tokyo in recognizing the PRC government ‘as the sole legal government of China’. But it also joined them in *not* recognizing Beijing’s ‘One China principle’ *as it applies to Taiwan*. (See the section titled *Korea-Taiwan Relations in Comparative Perspective* for more extensive and quadrilingual comparative analysis) Rather, the 1992 communique stated only ‘The government of the Republic of Korea recognizes the government of the People’s Republic of China as the sole legal government of China . . .’ [and] ‘The government of the Republic of Korea [. . .] respects *the position of the Chinese side* that there is but one China and Taiwan is part of China’.⁴¹

Indeed, there is an underappreciated but crucially important distinction between what Seoul agreed to in the 1992 normalization communique and Beijing’s own self-defined ‘One China principle’. The latter basically has two essential claims: (1) ‘that the PRC [is] the sole legal Government of China’ and (2) that ‘Taiwan is an inalienable part of the territory of the PRC’.⁴² Contrary to what many scholars have asserted (or implied by omission or commission) over the years, in 1992 Seoul did not recognize Beijing’s ‘One China principle’. Rather, the communique’s actual text shows that Seoul accepted the first essential claim, but regarding the second merely stated that the ROK “respects (*zunzhong/jon-jung*) *the position of the Chinese side*—without saying whether Seoul agrees with it.”⁴³ This carefully-worded but clear lack of consensus was no accident. In his 2003 memoir Lee Sang-ock, ROK foreign minister during the 1992 normalization negotiations, makes clear that the PRC originally demanded that Seoul explicitly recognize Taiwan as part of the PRC.⁴⁴ Critically, no such language ended up in the final communique.

Seoul’s vague official 1992 position on the sovereignty question is but one essential aspect of its ‘One China’ policy in principle and in practice. How ROK political leaders have chosen to *operationalize* that position in terms of Seoul’s concrete policies toward and degree of engagement with/support for Taiwan over the past thirty years is the other. In August 1992, ROK President Roh set a high bar when he called for Seoul and Taipei to establish ‘the highest level of unofficial relations’ (*zuigao shuiping de feizhengshi guanxi*) that would be both ‘substantive’ and the ‘best’ possible.⁴⁵ What that would mean in practice, however, was to be determined by Korea’s democratically-elected leaders in the years that followed. Despite Roh’s ambitious 1992 call, the newly ‘unofficial’ Korea-Taiwan relationship began inauspiciously.

³⁹Jaeho Hwang, ‘The Continuous but Rocky Developments of Sino-South Korean Relations: Examined by the Four Factor Model’ [2021] 10(2) *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies* 1–12.

⁴⁰Dong (n 23).

⁴¹‘Han-Jung Oegyogwangye Suribe Gwanhan Gongdongseongmyeong’ (Oegyobu Oegyo Saryogwan, 24 August 1992) <http://diplomaticarchives.mofa.go.kr/new/show/age_view.jsp?pagenum=2&idx=115&board_id=picture2&divine=&tagoption=5&status=all&str=>> accessed 19 August 2021. Emphasis Added. English translation are authors’ own.

⁴²Adam P. Liff and Dalton Lin, ‘The ‘One China’ Framework at Fifty (1972–2022): The Myth of ‘Consensus’ and its Evolving Policy Significance’ [forthcoming] *The China Quarterly*.

⁴³‘Han-Jung Oegyogwangye’ (n 41).

⁴⁴Lee Sang-ock, *Jeonhwangiui Hanguk Oegyo: Yi Sang-Ock Jeonoemujanggwan Oegyohoerok* (Samgwakkum 2003) 213–214.

⁴⁵Quoted in Wenshou Chen, ‘Zhengjing fenli’ yu taihan guanxi—— ‘sanying guanxi’ zhi mosuo’ *Aisixiang* (10 January 2008) <<https://www.aisixiang.com/data/17299.html>> accessed 23 October 2021.

The 1993 Korea-Taiwan Framework: Setting the (Strict) Bounds of Roh's "Highest Level of Unofficial Relations"

In response to the 1992 ROK-PRC normalization communique, Taipei severed diplomatic ties with Seoul and protested its unilateral abrogation of what scholars had called their 'anti-communist alliance'.⁴⁶ Ironically, the rapidly democratizing but still Kuomintang (KMT; or Nationalist Party)-led ROC government even threatened to punish Seoul by improving relations with the communist DPRK.⁴⁷ In moves with significant consequences for the cultural and economic exchange that was supposed to be the foundation of 'unofficial' ties after 1992, the ROC also abrogated a bilateral aviation agreement, ended preferential treatment for ROK goods, issued anti-dumping lawsuits against the ROK, and expressed its 'deep sense of betrayal'.⁴⁸ Taipei even terminated direct commercial flights between Korea and Taiwan, creating challenges for businesses and causing a sharp drop-off in tourism. Not until 2004 did the two sides conclude a new aviation agreement allowing aircraft to enter each other's airspace. Tourism, however, still had not fully recovered to pre-1992 levels.⁴⁹

After the initial shock had worn off, and adopting a well-worn playbook written by the U.S. and other democratic allies after their own respective normalization communiqués with Beijing, Seoul and Taipei eventually moved toward operationalizing a functional, if 'unofficial', relationship. The foundation was the July 1993 Korea-Taiwan 'New Relations Framework' (*xin guanxi jia gou*).⁵⁰ By January 1994, the nominally 'non-governmental' Korean Mission in Taipei (*zhu taipei hanguo daibiaobu*) and the Taipei Mission in Korea's (*zhu hanguo taipei daibiaobu*) Seoul and Busan offices were all operational.⁵¹ Absent official diplomatic ties, these offices have served as de facto embassies and facilitated cultural, academic, and other 'unofficial' bilateral exchanges. Notably, none contained 'Taiwan' or 'ROC' in their name.

Whereas the aforementioned were negotiated bilaterally, other aspects of Seoul's effective policies related to, and desired level of engagement with, Taipei since 1992 have been up to ROK leaders to determine unilaterally. For example, in 1994 the ROK promulgated its internal 'Principles for Allowing Contacts with Taiwan' and 'Basic Guidelines for Exchange and Cooperation with Taiwan'. These documents outlined, inter alia, which Korean officials could visit Taiwan and/or communicate directly with their Taiwanese counterparts. For example, Blue House and Prime Minister's office personnel were forbidden from having direct contacts. And while officials below the vice-ministerial level from the ministries of foreign affairs, unification, or defense could have unofficial contacts with their Taiwanese counterparts, officials of vice-ministerial rank or higher could not. Contact was allowed at international organizations of which Taiwan is a member (e.g. the World Trade Organization (WTO) or the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, as long as the communications concerned issues within the organization's mandate. Importantly, Seoul's policy placed no restrictions on exchanges by rank-and-file ROK and Taiwanese politicians.⁵²

As demonstrated in the following two sections and comparatively in the penultimate one, how these unilaterally-determined rules of engagement would be operationalized (and modified) over time—i.e. what Korea's 'One China' policy *in practice* would mean for the extent and nature of its engagement with Taiwan—was largely left to political leaders in Seoul to decide.

⁴⁶Kang (n 15) 3.

⁴⁷Hakjoon Kim, 'The Establishment of South Korean-Chinese Diplomatic Relations: A South Korean Perspective' [1994] 13(2) *Journal of Northeast Asian Studies* 42.

⁴⁸Yongsu Kim, "50nyeon Chingu Beoridani . . . ' Banhan Geukdoe' *Chosun News Library 100* (Seoul, 23 August 1992) <<https://newslibrary.chosun.com>> accessed 24 July 2021; Uk Heo and Hayam Kim, 'Private-Sector Networks, Democracy, and Interstate Relations: A Case Study of South Korea and Taiwan' [2012] 36(1) *Asian Perspective* 72.

⁴⁹Andrew Petty, 'Korea-Taiwan Flying Close to the Wind' *Asia Times* (Seoul, 15 September 2004) <<https://web.archive.org/web/20040916023257/http://atimes.com/atimes/Korea/FI15Dg01.html>> accessed 6 August 2021.

⁵⁰Zhonghua minguo waijiaobu yu ben (27)ri xuanbu' (Zhonghua minguo waijiaobu quanqiu zixun wang, 27 July 1993) <https://www.mofa.gov.tw/https%3a%2f%2fwww.mofa.gov.tw%2fNews_Content.aspx%3f%3d96%26s%3d73231%26Create%3d1> accessed 9 October 2021.

⁵¹Zhonghua Minguo 108nian Waijiao Nianjian' (Waijiaobu (ROC), 2019) 85 accessed 24 October 2021.

⁵²In Hee Han, 'Han-Daeman Gwangye 26junyeon Hoegowa Jeonmang' [2018] 13 *Daeman Yeongu* 69.

ROK-PRC and Korea-Taiwan Relations Over the Past 30 Years

Overview of ROK-PRC Official Relations, 1992–2021

As discussed above, even before diplomatic normalization in 1992 eliminated official constraints on most forms of bilateral engagement by the 1980s economic and other unofficial links between China and Korea were already extensive. Post-normalization, extant ties deepened, and new forms of cooperation—including official inter-governmental links—became possible. Over the past three decades the net effect has been that in many fields the gap in the breadth, depth, and practical significance of exchange between Korea-China and Korea-Taiwan has expanded greatly. Nevertheless, normalization was hardly a panacea for longstanding ROK-PRC tensions over the DPRK. And other sources of friction have also emerged more recently.

The rapid expansion over the past thirty years of Korea-China economic, trade, and cultural ties is most conspicuous, and something scholars frequently suggest as the reason why Seoul—arguably more so than some other major U.S. allies—generally seeks to avoid policies that risk angering Beijing, including vis-à-vis Taiwan. Some basic economic trends illustrate Seoul's interest in stable ties: bilateral trade increased 60-fold between 1991 (\$4.4 billion) and 2018 (\$269 billion); China is the destination of roughly one-fourth of South Korean exports; and since 2009 China's share of Korea's overall trade has exceeded the *combined* U.S. plus Japan total.⁵³ In 2015, Seoul and Beijing signed a free trade agreement and launched won-yuan direct exchange markets. Today, both are members of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Nevertheless, as China's massive corporations have rapidly moved up the value chain concerns about Korean firms' competitiveness have grown.⁵⁴ Economic issues are increasingly a source of friction.

Since normalization, Korea-China people-to-people exchanges have also expanded rapidly: from 130,000 in 1992 to nine-million by 2018. Though the positive impact on ROK-PRC relations appears significant, cultural exchanges have not prevented the worsening of negative sentiment toward China in the ROK over various issues including food, culture, history, territorial disputes, and geopolitics, including China's perceived support of now nuclear-armed DPRK. Whereas the first decade post-normalization was considered 'a honeymoon period', between 2014 and 2020 the percentage of Koreans expressing an 'unfavorable' opinion of China more than doubled: from 37% to 77%.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, business and popular exchanges remained robust. For example, Korea remains the number one source of foreign students studying in China, and Chinese students are the largest group of foreign nationals studying in Korea.⁵⁶

Despite these positive trends, efforts to deepen ROK-PRC cooperation beyond economics and cultural exchange have repeatedly confronted stiff political headwinds. As Ji-Young Lee summarizes, although "the two sides have continued upgrading their official relations—from 'Friendly Cooperative Relations' at the time of normalization to[...].]2014's 'Enriched Strategic Cooperative Partnership' [...]the primary foundation of Beijing-Seoul ties is commercial and economic".⁵⁷ See-won Byun sums up the state of affairs as emblematic of 'post-Cold War Asia's paradox' of 'strong trade ties and weak political ties' between Beijing and its Northeast Asian neighbors, arguing that 'China-South Korea political interactions have increased in quantity', but paradoxically, 'the quality of

⁵³See-Won Byun, 'Interdependence, Identity, and China—South Korea Political Relations: Asia's Paradox' [2021] 61(3) *Asian Survey* 481–82; 'K-Statistic: Specific Country (Pr. China)' (n 34).

⁵⁴Hwang (n 39) 4.

⁵⁵Hwang (n 39) 5–6; Laura Silver, Kat Devlin, and Christine Huang, 'Majorities Say China Does Not Respect the Personal Freedoms of Its People' (Pew Research Center, 30 June 2022) <<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/06/30/large-majorities-say-china-does-not-respect-the-personal-freedoms-of-its-people/>> accessed 6 October 2021.

⁵⁶2019nyeun Gungnae Godeunggyoyukgigwan Nae Oegugin Yuhaksaeng Tonggye' (Gyoyukbu (MOE), 18 November 2019) <<https://www.moe.go.kr/boardCnts/view.do?boardID=350&lev=0&statusYN=W&s=moe&m=0309&opType=N&boardSeq=79011>>> accessed 22 October 2021; 'Jiaoyu shuju: 2019nian quanguo lai hua liuxuesheng shuju fabu' *Shandong jiaoyu* (n.d.) <<http://www.jxdx.org.cn/gnjy/14176.html>>> accessed 28 September 2021.

⁵⁷Ji-young Lee, "The Geopolitics of South Korea-China Relations" (RAND Corporation, November 2020) <<https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA524-1.html>>> accessed 27 September 2021.

relations [has] deteriorated over 25 years of diplomatic ties'.⁵⁸ In Seoul, differing perspectives across progressive and conservative administrations about how best to manage the ROK's relations with Pyongyang, Beijing, Tokyo, and even its U.S. ally have been key variables. There have also been intermittent but major bilateral political disputes between Seoul and Beijing: including over historical and territorial issues and U.S.-ROK military exercises aimed at bolstering deterrence against Pyongyang. Indeed, the DPRK looms particularly large.

Importantly, however, and distinct from other key cases (e.g. U.S.-PRC relations), after normalizing diplomatic relations with Beijing, Seoul's policies toward Taiwan have not emerged as a major source of bilateral friction. The ROK government has generally sought to avoid upsetting China on related issues. This continues today. For example, when asked to comment on cross-Strait relations or matters such as Taiwan's request to attain observer status in the World Health Assembly (WHA), the Korean Foreign Ministry is typically evasive, stating that 'they cannot answer', or that 'the ROK government supports international unity and respects the decision of the World Health Organization (WHO)' (to exclude Taipei per Beijing's wishes).⁵⁹

Operationalizing "Unofficial" Korea-Taiwan Relations, 1992–2021

Despite the immediate fallout after 1992, over the past thirty years the ROK and Taiwan have nevertheless maintained extensive, if 'unofficial', ties. As discussed in the next section, however, relative to the U.S., Japan, and other key players' increasingly vocal support for and expanded practical cooperation with (now democratic) Taiwan over the same time period, it is difficult to argue that Roh and his successors have in practice sought to realize the 'highest level of [Korea-Taiwan] unofficial relations' possible. This is especially the case beyond the relatively narrow bounds of trade and cultural exchanges.

Although Korea-China trade has dwarfed Korea-Taiwan trade the past three decades, Korea-Taiwan trade volume has expanded significantly in absolute terms: ten-fold between 1992 (\$3.5 billion) and 2018 (\$37.5 billion).⁶⁰ Today, the ROK and Taiwan are each other's fifth- and sixth-largest trading partners, respectively.⁶¹ In contrast, bilateral investment has been limited and imbalanced. In 2019, Taiwan invested US\$220 million in Korea, while the Korea invested merely US \$37 million in Taiwan.⁶²

In terms of cultural exchanges, since the 2004 Civil Aviation Agreement Korea-Taiwan people-to-people exchanges have expanded—though they, too, pale in comparison to the corresponding figures for exchanges with the PRC. For example, in 2019 4,153 Korean students studied in Taiwan-based institutions of higher education while over ten-times as many (50,600) studied in the PRC.⁶³ Though tourism is a major driver of grassroots exchange—in 2019 roughly 1.24-million Koreans visited Taiwan and 1.21-million Taiwanese visited Korea—Korean scholars note significant declines since 1992 in public and academic interest in Taiwan's history, foreign policy and Korea-Taiwan

⁵⁸Byun (n 53) 484–85, 491.

⁵⁹'Daeyeonin Jeongnyebeuriping (5.25)' (Oegyobu, 25 May 2021) <https://www.mofa.go.kr/www/brd/m_4078/view.do?seq=368328&srchFr=&srchTo=&srchWord=%EB%8C%80%EB%A7%8C&srchTp=1&multi_itm_seq=0&itm_seq_1=0&itm_seq_2=0&company_cd=&company_nm=&page=1> accessed 21 October 2021; 'Daeyeonin Jeongnye Beuriping (11. 10)' (Oegyobu, 10 November 2015) <https://www.mofa.go.kr/www/brd/m_4078/view.do?seq=357023&srchFr=&srchTo=&srchWord=%EB%8C%80%EB%A7%8C&srchTp=1&multi_itm_seq=0&itm_seq_1=0&itm_seq_2=0&company_cd=&company_nm=&page=1> accessed 21 October 2021.

⁶⁰'K-Statistic: Specific Country (Taiwan)' (Korea International Trade Association) <http://kita.org/kStat/byCount_SpeCount.do> accessed 29 September 2021.

⁶¹Zhonghua Minguo 108nian Waijiao Nianjian' (n 51) 85.

⁶²'Taiwan-South Korea Economic Relations' (Bureau of Foreign Trade (MOEA), 18 May 2020) <<https://www.trade.gov.tw/English/Pages/Detail.aspx?nodeid=2910&pid=652204>> accessed 22 July 2021.

⁶³'2019nyeon Gugoe Godeunggyoyukgigwan Hanguin Yuhaksaeng Tonggye' (Gyoyukbu (MOE), 18 November 2019) <<https://www.moe.go.kr/boardCnts/view.do?boardID=350&lev=0&statusYN=W&s=moe&m=0309&opType=N&boardSeq=79010>> accessed 23 October 2021.

relations.⁶⁴ Leading expert Taeho Kim, for example, bemoans limited support in Korea for Taiwan-related research and a paucity of research jobs and promotions for Taiwan-focused scholars.⁶⁵

Given Seoul's self-imposed constraints on even ROK government officials' 'unofficial' engagement with their Taiwanese counterparts, one primary means of political interaction the past thirty years has been exchanges between the National Assembly's Korea-Taiwan Parliamentary Friendship Group [*han tai guohui yiyuan qinshan xiehui*] and its Taiwanese counterpart, the ROC-Korea Parliamentary Friendship Association (*zhonghua minguo yu hanguo guohui yiyuan youhao xiehui*). Another is visits by former officials and leaders from the business and think tank worlds. For example, in 2007 Taiwan's former vice president Lien Chan and former National Security Council Secretary General Mark Chen reportedly visited Korea.⁶⁶ The most prominent high-level visits from Korea to Taiwan were trips between 2001 and 2008 by former president Kim Young Sam (1993–1998), during which he met with then sitting President Chen Shui-bian (2000–2008). During the first visit, they discussed principles for restoring the aviation agreement Taipei severed in 1992.⁶⁷ Taiwan's last pre-COVID (2019) diplomatic yearbook notes visits by Taiwan's former vice president Annette Lu and current members of the Control Yuan, the chairmen of and legislators from both sides' parliamentary friendship groups, and leaders from tourism, business, and think tanks.⁶⁸

Nevertheless, publicly-reported visits by former political leaders or high-ranking government officials are rare.⁶⁹ Additionally, the level of interest appears imbalanced. For example, since 1992 Taiwan has sent special envoys to attend ROK presidential inaugurations, but the ROK government appears not to have reciprocated for the inauguration of a democratically-elected Taiwanese president or commemoration of a peaceful transition of power.⁷⁰ Furthermore, supportive of the idea that Korea does not consider Taiwan a major partner, or the Taiwan Strait a front-burner foreign policy concern, recent ROK diplomatic white papers do not even substantively discuss Korea-Taiwan relations.⁷¹

Korea-Taiwan Relations in Comparative Perspective: The Critical and Practically Significant Distinction Between Beijing's "One China Principle" and Others' "One China" Policies

For both understanding *why* Korea-Taiwan relations have been so narrowly bounded after 1992 and assessing the *possibility* of future change, it is first critically important to highlight a factor that is not as determinative as is often assumed: Korea's official position on 'One China'. As described above, the distinction between what the PRC unilaterally claims regarding Taiwan's status and the language Seoul actually agreed to in the 1992 Normalization Communique is subtle, but fundamental. A brief comparative analysis of official positions and the degree and nature of subsequent engagement with Taiwan between Korea and the U.S. and Japan, Taiwan's two most important international partners after 1949, is revealing.

As Table 1 highlights, Tokyo's, Washington's, and Seoul's normalization communiques with Beijing all share one essential feature: they adopt an ambiguous position that does not recognize Beijing's claim of PRC sovereignty over Taiwan. Instead, they merely acknowledge *Beijing's* position

⁶⁴Chang-geun Choi, 'Hanguk-Daeman Dangyo ihu Daemangwallyeon Jeojangmul Yeongu:1992–2015' [2015] 7 Daeman Yeongu 113, 126; Zhonghua Minguo 108nian Waijiao Nianjian (n 51) 85–86.

⁶⁵Taeho Kim, 'Daemanui Jeollyakjeok Jungyoseong Hangugui Sigak' [2018] 13 Daeman Yeongu 30.

⁶⁶Zhonghua Minguo 96nian Waijiao Nianjian' (Waijiaobu (ROC), 2007) <https://multilingual.mofa.gov.tw/web/web_UTF-8/almanac/almanac2007/html/01.html> accessed 24 October 2021.

⁶⁷Zhongtong huijian Hanguo qian Datongling Jin Yongsan' (Zhonghua minguo zontongfu, 26 July 2001) <<https://www.president.gov.tw/NEWS/2387>> accessed 6 October 2021.

⁶⁸Zhonghua Minguo 108nian Waijiao Nianjian' (n 51) 85–86.

⁶⁹Past VIP visits are listed in Taiwan's annual diplomatic yearbooks, available at <https://www.mofa.gov.tw/News.aspx?n=245&sms=109>. The lack of description of the business conducted or with whom individuals met makes it difficult to assess these visits' practical significance.

⁷⁰Han (n 52) 70.

⁷¹'2019 Oegyobaekseo' (Oegyobu, 29 November 2019) <https://www.mofa.go.kr/www/brd/m_4105/list.do>> accessed 21 October 2021; '2020 Oegyobaekseo' (Oegyobu, 5 February 2021) <https://www.mofa.go.kr/www/brd/m_4105/list.do> accessed 21 October 2021.

Table 1. Japan, USA, and ROK positions on “One China” (as expressed in their normalization communiques with the PRC).

The PRC’s “One China principle” (baselined upon 1972 Japan-PRC Communique)	Japan (9/29/1972)	USA (1/1/1979)	ROK (8/24/1992)
<p>“the People’s Republic of China [is] the sole legal Government of China.”</p> <p>“中華人民共和國政府は中国の唯一の合法政府である”</p> <p>“中华人民共和国政府是中国的唯一合法政府”</p>	<p>“The Government of Japan recognizes the Government of the People’s Republic of China as the sole legal Government of China.”</p> <p>“日本国政府は、中華人民共和國政府が中国の唯一の合法政府であることを承認する。”</p> <p>“日本国政府承認中華人民共和國政府是中国唯一的合法政府。”</p>	<p>“The United States of America recognizes the Government of the People’s Republic of China as the sole legal Government of China.”</p> <p>“美利坚合众国承认中华人民共和国政府是中国的唯一合法政府。”</p>	<p>“The Government of the Republic of Korea recognizes the Government of the People’s Republic of China as the sole legal government of China..”</p> <p>“대한민국정부는 중화인민공화국정부를 중국의 유일 합법정부로 승인하며...”</p> <p>“大韩民国政府承认中华人民共和国政府为中国的唯一合法政府...”</p>
<p>“Taiwan is an inalienable part of the territory of the People’s Republic of China.”</p> <p>“台湾が中華人民共和國の領土の不可分の一部である”</p> <p>“台湾是中华人民共和国领土不可分割的一部分”</p>	<p>“The Government of Japan fully understands and respects this stand of the Government of the People’s Republic of China, and it firmly maintains its stand under Article 8 of the Potsdam Proclamation.”</p> <p>“日本国政府は、この中華人民共和國政府の立場を十分理解し、尊重し、ポツダム宣言第八項に基づく立場を堅持する。”</p> <p>“日本国政府充分理解和尊重中国政府的这一立场并坚持遵循波茨坦公告第八条的立场。”</p>	<p>“The Government of the United States of America acknowledges the Chinese position that there is but one China and Taiwan is part of China.”</p> <p>“美利坚合众国政府承认*中国的立场即只有一个中国台湾是中国的一部分。”</p> <p>(Note: The English version is authoritative on the U.S.’ position; PRC (mis-)translated “acknowledges” as “承认,” instead of as认识到 (as it did in 1972); see Romberg 2003, 99-100)</p>	<p>“The Government of the Republic of Korea [...] respects the position of the Chinese side that there is but one China and Taiwan is part of China.”</p> <p>“대한민국 정부는 [...] 오직 하나의 중국만이 있고 대만은 중 AD6D의 일부분 이라는 중국의 입장을 존중한다.”</p> <p>“大韩民国政府 [...] 尊重中方只有一个中国、台湾是中国的一部分之立场。”</p>

The Japan-PRC and U.S.-PRC normalization communiques are available in Japanese, Chinese, and English at “The World and Japan” Database, <https://worldjpn.grips.ac.jp/documents/indices/JPCH/index.html> and <https://worldjpn.grips.ac.jp/documents/indices/USC/index-ENG.html>, respectively. The ROK-PRC normalization communique excerpts are sourced from “Zhong Han jianjiao lianhe gongbao” (Zhongguowang, August 24, 1992), <http://43.250.236.5/GB/shizheng/8761/8754/8759/20020812/797689.html>, and ‘Han-Jung Oegyogwanye’ (n 41), respectively. The English translations of the latter are the authors’ own.

that Taiwan is part of the PRC (in Korea's case, 'the position of the Chinese side').⁷² Though Beijing today actively seeks to distort global discourse by promoting a myth of 'consensus'—namely, that its self-defined 'One China principle' is a 'basic norm of international relations and universal consensus in international society' (*guoji guanxi jiben zhunze he guoji shehui pubian gongshi*) and implies strongly that all countries that have normalized relations with the PRC have agreed to it—this is best understood as propaganda, not empirical fact. Neither Washington, Tokyo, nor Seoul (or many other U.S. allies) recognize Beijing's claim of PRC sovereignty over Taiwan.⁷³

As noted earlier, at least as important as a foreign government's official position on the abstract notion of 'One China' are its leaders' subsequent political decisions about how to *operationalize* it through practical policies toward and extent of engagement with/support of Taiwan. The empirical record since the PRC's establishment in 1949 shows that the combination—often referred to as a government's 'One China' *policy*—not only vary widely among countries (i.e. across cases), but can also vary over time (i.e. within cases). Thus, a foreign government's effective 'One China' policy can be—but is not necessarily—dynamic, changing in response to the vagaries of PRC policies toward Taiwan or its leaders' evolving assessments of national interests and domestic and international political vicissitudes.⁷⁴

Though space constraints prevent a lengthy discussion of the U.S. and Japan cases, existing scholarship demonstrates both (1) the distinctions between Beijing's 'One China principle' and Washington's and Tokyo's official positions regarding Taiwan; and (2) the remarkable political flexibility in how those decades-old positions have bounded (or not) subsequent practical engagement with Taiwan.⁷⁵ Far from disengaging after official diplomatic ties with Taipei ended in the 1970s, both Tokyo and Washington—the latter most famously and assertively—have pursued extensive, if nominally 'unofficial', political, economic, and de facto diplomatic engagement with Taiwan. Much to Beijing's chagrin, Washington even has a robust military and arms sales relationship with Taiwan. And in recent years, key U.S. treaty allies in Europe and beyond—who also have official diplomatic relations with Beijing—are expanding symbolic support for and practical engagement with Taipei, all without modifying their official positions on 'One China'.⁷⁶

The U.S., Japan, and Others' Evolving Policies Toward Taiwan

As briefly summarized below, the U.S. and Japanese cases in particular demonstrate governments' considerable flexibility and the political conditionality in how they *choose* to operationalize the vague-by-design 'One China' framework in terms of effective policy toward Taiwan, even after recognizing Beijing. These and other cases also reveal the spectrum of possible pathways Seoul conceivably could have pursued—or could in the future choose to pursue—given sufficient political will and judgments about Korea's national interest.

⁷²The differences in nuance between Washington's "acknowledge", Seoul's "respect", and Tokyo's "fully understand and respect" are subtle and inherently subjective. There is, to the authors' knowledge, no public PRC judgment on their respective meanings. However, what is of greatest relevance here is that all three governments stopped short of the language Beijing demanded – "recognize" – while also not openly challenging Beijing's position.

⁷³Liff and Lin (n 42). For example PRC assertions, see 'Waijiaobu Fayaren Geng Shuang Jiu Youguan Guojia Gaoguan Zhuhe Taiwan Diqu Xuanjushi Da Jizhe Wen' (Waijiaobu (PRC), 12 January 2020) <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/fyrbt_673021/dhdw_673027/t1731294.shtml> accessed 24 October 2021; 'Zhongfang zenyang kandai Meiguo duitai zhengce? Wang Yi qiangdiao sandian' (Huanqiuwang, 7 March 2021) <<https://lianghui.huanqiu.com/article/42D2zpy7SfH.>> accessed 24 October 2021.

⁷⁴Liff and Lin (n 42). Drun sorts foreign governments' official positions on "One China" in normalization communiques with Beijing into three categories: those which adopt Beijing's position; those which make no mention of Taiwan; and those which acknowledge the PRC position but do not take a clear position on it. Jessica Drun, 'One China, Multiple Interpretations' (ccpwatch, 28 December 2017) <<https://www.ccpwatch.org/single-post/2017/12/29/one-china-multiple-interpretations>> accessed 3 August 2021.

⁷⁵The U.S. case is most famous, but the same basic logic applies in other important cases, as well. On the U.S. case, see Romberg (n 6); Bush (n 6). For a more general and recent overview beyond the U.S. case, see Liff and Lin (n 42). For the Japanese case, see Shin Kawashima, et al. (eds.), *NitTai Kankeishi: 1945–2020* (Tokyo Daigaku Shuppansha 2020); Adam P. Liff, 'Japan, Taiwan, and the 'One China' Framework After 50 Years' [forthcoming] *The China Quarterly*.

⁷⁶On Europe, see Scott Brown, 'Fraying at the Edges? An Analysis of the EU's One China Policy/Policies' [forthcoming] *The China Quarterly*.

The practical flexibility of U.S. ‘One China’ policy became apparent immediately after the Carter Administration ‘acknowledged’—but did not recognize—the PRC’s claim to Taiwan in the 1979 U.S.-PRC Normalization Communiqué.⁷⁷ Congress passed the 1979 *Taiwan Relations Act* (TRA), which stipulates, inter alia, that the U.S. will ‘provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character; and[.]maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people on Taiwan.’⁷⁸ Over the forty-three years since, successive U.S. administrations have cited the *TRA* and subsequent documents, policy statements, and legislation as a basis for the U.S.’ ‘longstanding commitments’ and effectively evolving policy toward Taiwan. Simply put, U.S.-PRC normalization and Washington’s acknowledgment of Beijing’s claim did not translate into a U.S. commitment to silence or disinterest about a peaceful resolution of the cross-Strait dispute; nor did it lock in a particular level or type of engagement with Taipei. Rather, over time successive U.S. administrations—to say nothing of Congress—have sought deeper cooperation, including defensive arms sales and higher-level engagements. U.S. officials also repeatedly express opposition to unilateral changes to the status quo by either side and call on differences to be resolved peacefully and, with Taiwan now a mature democracy, in a manner acceptable to the people in Taiwan. Furthermore, recent administrations openly criticize PRC behavior perceived as destabilizing, and adjust effective policy as circumstances change, all-the-while stating that the approach ‘remains consistent with [U.S.] One China policy ... and our longstanding commitments under ... the Three Joint Communiqués’ with Beijing.⁷⁹ Yet in the 1979 U.S.-PRC Normalization Communiqué Washington, like Seoul 13 years later, also recognized the PRC ‘as the sole legal government in China’.

In the 1972 Japan-PRC Normalization Communiqué, Tokyo noted that it ‘fully understands and respects’ *Beijing’s* ‘stand’ that Taiwan is part of the PRC.⁸⁰ But Japan’s official position on the sovereignty question ever since has been that it has no position.⁸¹ Since 1972 it, too, has repeatedly called for ‘peaceful resolution of cross-Strait differences’ (*heiwateki kaiketsu*).⁸² Especially in recent years, the ambiguity of Japan’s stance has facilitated considerable mutually-beneficial cooperation, and significant flexibility in the degree of effective engagement vis-à-vis Taiwan. The past decade of deepening, if nominally ‘unofficial’, Japan-Taiwan relations is a case-in-point.⁸³ The two sides have signed numerous bilateral agreements and even launched annual maritime cooperation dialogues involving representatives from the two sides’ de facto embassies and government agencies.⁸⁴ Over the past decade the Japanese government has subtly stopped referring to Taiwan as merely an ‘economic region’; instead, it now officially identifies Taiwan’s importance to Japan as an ‘extremely crucial partner and an important friend’ with whom Japan shares ‘fundamental values’—a phrase that had until that point referred almost exclusively to Washington and other U.S. democratic allies.⁸⁵ In 2017, Tokyo even changed the decades-old name of Japan’s de facto embassy in Taiwan from the ambiguous ‘Interchange Association’ to the ‘Japan-Taiwan Exchange Association’, which one expert called ‘the most significant breakthrough’ in

⁷⁷See Table 1.

⁷⁸Taiwan Relations Act’ (American Institute in Taiwan, 1 January 1979) <<https://www.ait.org.tw/our-relationship/policy-history/key-u-s-foreign-policy-documents-region/taiwan-relations-act/>> accessed 24 October 2021.

⁷⁹e.g. ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy’ (The White House, 13 February 2022) <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>>.

⁸⁰Zhonghua renmin gongheguo zhengfu he Ribenguo zhengfu lianhe shengming’ (Waijiaobu (PRC), 29 September 1972) <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/yz_676205/1206_676836/1207_676848/t163708.shtml> accessed 23 October 2021.

⁸¹Yasuhiro Matsuda, ‘Anteika suru ChuTai Kankei shita de tenkai suru NitTai Kankei: 2008-16nen’ in Shin Kawashima, Urara Shimizu, Yasuhiro Matsuda, and Yongming Yang (eds), *NitTai Kankeishi: 1945–2020* (Tokyo Daigaku Shuppansha 2020) 247.

⁸²Naotaka Fujita, ‘Taiwan mondai no ‘heiwateki kaiketsu’’ *Asahi Shimbun* (Tokyo, 24 May 2021) <<https://www.asahi.com/articles/DA3S14913969.html>> accessed 24 October 2021.

⁸³Liff (n 75).

⁸⁴Urara Shimizu, ‘Ushinawareta koki’ to shinka suru tsumiageshiki jitsumu kankei’ in Shin Kawashima, Urara Shimizu, Yasuhiro Matsuda, and Yongming Yang (eds), *NitTai Kankeishi: 1945–2020* (Tokyo Daigaku Shuppansha 2020).

⁸⁵Liff (n 75).

Japan-Taiwan relations since Tokyo recognized Beijing in 1972.⁸⁶ As with the U.S., recent years have also witnessed unprecedentedly high-level Japanese government representatives visiting Taipei—albeit within limits.⁸⁷

In response to Beijing's increasingly assertive efforts to isolate Taiwan internationally, Tokyo and Washington are also expanding coordination to jointly show support for and expand practical cooperation with Taiwan. For example, both governments have repeatedly called for Taiwan's participation in the WHA as an observer and in 2019 Japan formally joined the U.S.-Taiwan Global Cooperation and Training Framework.⁸⁸ Most recently, the uptick in Chinese military operations near Taiwan has prompted unprecedentedly mainstream and high-level discussions about U.S.-Japan security cooperation to bolster cross-strait deterrence.⁸⁹ Several weeks before the Biden-Moon meeting, the April 2021 Biden-Suga summit statement also 'underscore[d] the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait' and additionally 'encouraged the peaceful resolution of cross-strait issues'. Significantly, and distinct from the Biden-Moon statement, it referred to China by name, including expressing 'concerns over Chinese activities that are inconsistent with the international rules-based order'.⁹⁰ That June, Japan and Australia adopted identical language in their own bilateral 2 + 2 joint statement (notably, the U.S. was not a party).⁹¹ The following month, Japan's 2021 defense white paper stressed that 'stability of Taiwan's situation is important for both Japan's security and the stability of the international community'.⁹² Again, all these developments have occurred despite the fact that neither the U.S. nor Japan's vague official 1970s-era positions on 'One China' and Taiwan's status have changed.

Beyond the U.S. and Japan cases, one additionally noteworthy recent development is that Australia and key U.S. allies in Europe have also become more forward-leaning with statements of concern and concrete efforts to bolster unofficial ties with Taiwan and support its international engagement. Examples abound. The 2021 Japan-EU (May), U.S.-EU (June), G7 (June), and Australia-France (August) statements all expressed concern about peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. Some governments also explicitly called for Taiwan's involvement in international organizations for which statehood is not a requirement.⁹³ That September, a European Parliament Foreign Affairs Committee report on EU-Taiwan relations called for closer partnership with Taiwan, exploring a bilateral investment treaty, and renaming the European Economic and Trade Office in Taiwan. By a vote of 580–66, in October the full European Parliament called for 'upgrading' relations with 'Taiwan as a key EU partner and democratic ally'.⁹⁴ Lithuania discounted Beijing's protests when it established a representative office (de facto embassy) that includes 'Taiwan' (as opposed to 'Taipei') in its official name.

⁸⁶Waijiao zhongda tupo! jiaoliu xiehui gengming 'Ri Tai jiaoliu xiehui' (Ziyou shibao dianzibao, 28 December 2016) <<https://news.ltn.com.tw/news/politics/breakingnews/1930324>> accessed 8 October 2021; Madoka Fukuda, 'Japan-Taiwan Relations in the Second Term of the Tsai Presidency' *Public Jurist* (September 2020) 27 accessed 8 October 2021.

⁸⁷Shimizu (n 84) 271–72.

⁸⁸'Global Cooperation and Training Framework Programs' (American Institute in Taiwan, n.d.) <<https://www.ait.org.tw/our-relationship/global-cooperation-and-training-framework-programs-gctf/>> accessed 11 October 2021.

⁸⁹Adam P. Liff, 'The U.S.-Japan Alliance and Taiwan' [2022] 17(3) *Asia Policy* <<https://www.nbr.org/publication/the-u-s-japan-alliance-and-taiwan/>> accessed 27 July 2022.

⁹⁰'U.S.-Japan Joint Leaders' Statement' (The White House, 17 April 2021) <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/16/u-s-japan-joint-leaders-statement-u-s-japan-global-partnership-for-a-new-era/>> accessed 13 May 2021.

⁹¹'Ninth Japan-Australia 2 + 2 Foreign and Defence Ministerial Consultations' (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 9 June 2021) <<https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/marise-payne/media-release/ninth-japan-australia-22-foreign-and-defence-ministerial-consultations>> accessed 9 June 2021.

⁹²Boei Hakusho (Boeisho 2021) <https://www.mod.go.jp/j/publication/wp/wp2021/pdf/wp2021_JP_Full.pdf>.

⁹³Australia and France called for 'Taiwan's meaningful participation in international organizations ... to strengthen global cooperation. "Inaugural Australia-France 2 + 2 Ministerial Consultations"' (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 30 August 2021) <<https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/marise-payne/media-release/inaugural-australia-france-22-ministerial-consultations>> accessed 31 August 2021.

⁹⁴'EU-Taiwan Relations: MEPs Push for Stronger Partnership' (European Parliament, 21 October 2021) <<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20211014IPR14926/eu-taiwan-relations-meps-push-for-stronger-partnership>> accessed 22 October 2021.

Amid an alleged effort by Beijing to frustrate Taiwan's efforts to purchase COVID-19 vaccines, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland all joined the U.S. and Japan in sending massive shipments to Taiwan.⁹⁵ In early October, a former Australian prime minister, former French defense minister, and a group of French senators all met with Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen (2016-) in Taipei.⁹⁶ Many countries have also expressed support for Taiwan joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and attaining observer status at the WHA (Beijing opposes Taiwan's involvement in either).⁹⁷ Yet, as with the U.S. and Japan, none of these moves required the aforementioned parties to make any change to their (vague) official positions on 'One China'.

In sum, even as Beijing's power, influence, and market grow, unilateral, bilateral and multilateral engagement (across various policy domains) with and in support of democratic Taiwan—though nominally 'unofficial'—appears stronger today in Washington, Tokyo, Canberra and many other U.S. democratic allies than ever before—despite these countries' decades-old and officially unchanging official positions on 'One China' and Taiwan's status. A major takeaway from the aforementioned examination of other cases is clear: the similar ambiguity at the heart of Seoul's 1992 official position on 'One China' left significant space for Korea's political leaders to more actively engage Taiwan over the past three decades, independently and/or in concert with the U.S. and other democratic allies and partners. In theory at least, it continues to today, if Korean leaders wished to do so.

The Biden-Moon Summit: An Inflection Point for Korea-Taiwan Relations?

As noted above, against the backdrop of widespread concerns about cross-Strait stability and Beijing's efforts to militarily intimidate and isolate democratic Taiwan internationally, 2021 witnessed an unprecedented cascade of statements of concern about peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait and varied expressions of support for Taiwan from U.S. allies. As influential scholar Lai I-chung argued at the time, the May 2021 Biden-Moon statement was considered particularly noteworthy—especially since many did not expect Moon to take this step. A progressive ROK president jointly agreeing with his U.S. counterpart to 'emphasize the importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait' seemed to herald a new era. It implied a Korean commitment to support the U.S.-led effort to 'internationalize and multilateralize' concerns about cross-Strait stability—especially with fellow democracies in Europe and the Indo-Pacific.⁹⁸ It also raised intriguing questions about prospects for a meaningful shift in Korea's effective Taiwan policy, even if its official 1992 position on 'One China' was extremely unlikely to change.

Nevertheless, with both a year of hindsight and viewed across a longer three-decade time horizon, the 'unofficial' Korea-Taiwan relationship appears remarkably static. The Moon Administration's engagement of Taipei after the 2021 Biden-Moon summit remained limited in its ambition and scope—especially when measured against the more dynamic U.S. or Japanese responses and forward-leaning statements and political discourse in Tokyo and Washington, or even in Brussels, Canberra, and Vilnius. Though the future is unknowable, the practical significance of the Biden-Moon summit must be measured against Korea's observable official rhetoric and policies before and since.

In short, though the May 2021 presidential statement was undoubtedly historic and symbolically significant, developments since then do not yet indicate a major change in perspectives or policies in

⁹⁵'Taiwan + Indo-Pacific + EU China Policy' (Merics, 16 September 2021) <<https://merics.org/en/merics-briefs/taiwan-indo-pacific-eu-china-policy>> accessed 8 October 2021.

⁹⁶'French Senators' Visit to Taiwan, a Challenge to China' *AsiaNews.it* (Taipei, 21 September 2021) <<http://www.asianews.it/news-en/French-senators-visit-to-Taiwan,-a-challenge-to-China-54106.html>> accessed 28 September 2021.

⁹⁷Longhong Shi, Shu Chen, and Chenghao Wang, 'Guotaiban: fandui Taiwan diqu canyu renhe you guanfang xingzhi de zimaoyanpai' *Xinhuaawang* (Beijing, 29 September 2021) <http://www.news.cn/2021-09/29/c_1127916874.htm> accessed 23 October 2021.

⁹⁸Lai (n 2).

Seoul. In contrast to the U.S., Japan, Australia, and many other U.S. allies during that period, in its final year the Moon administration remained conspicuously taciturn concerning major issues related to Taiwan's international space, such as Taipei's quest for WHA observer status—even in a pandemic. Early in 2021, more than 50 countries, including Japan, Australia, the United States, and the entire G7, all expressed their support for Taiwan to participate in the WHA.⁹⁹ The U.S. Congress even called on Korea to support Taiwan. But Seoul declined to make any specific reference to Taiwan and the WHA.¹⁰⁰ Even the Biden-Moon statement reference to the 'importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait' was rather anodyne; a single-sentence in a statement that did not even mention 'China' (or 'Taiwan') explicitly. The Moon administration later repeated it twice at the ministerial level, but only in the context of meetings involving the United States—again suggesting U.S. pressure as the cause.¹⁰¹ Unlike its Japanese or Australian counterparts, for example, Moon's government did not subsequently mention the Taiwan Strait publicly in high-level meetings where the U.S. was absent.

Conclusion

Against the backdrop of unprecedentedly widespread global concerns about cross-Strait frictions, the U.S.-led effort to internationalize and multilateralize concerns about peace and stability and deepen international support for Taiwan, and worsening frictions between the U.S., major democratic allies in Asia and Europe, and Beijing, this article analyzed Korea-Taiwan relations in historical and comparative perspective. It sought to address important gaps in the existing literature and connect the Korea case to wider academic conversations on the 'One China' framework in international politics. Prompted by the historic May 2021 Biden-Moon statement and the 30th anniversary of ROK-PRC normalization, its analysis focused on describing Seoul's official 1992 position on 'One China,' assessing how ROK leaders have operationalized it in terms of Korea's effective policies toward Taiwan over the three decades since, and explaining why.

In 1992, Korea's first democratically-elected government was clearly eager to normalize relations with Beijing. Nevertheless, it did *not* give in to pressure to recognize Beijing's 'One China principle' as it concerns the essential claim that Taiwan is part of the PRC. Coupled with this study's historically-grounded case study and comparative analysis with the similarly vague U.S. and Japanese official positions and other countries' ever-evolving 'One China' policies, this reality demonstrates that Seoul's relative reluctance to publicly express support for or significantly expand practical cooperation with Taiwan is best understood as due to a succession of ROK leaders' subjective political judgments about what is in Korea's national interest—not any putative commitment made to Beijing thirty years ago.

This study's analysis thus also supports a larger point: that precise diplomatic phrasing in political communiques is hardly determinative of foreign policies. Much is left to political leaders to interpret and operationalize. Accordingly, it is critically important for scholars to both carefully analyze the wording of official statements, but not necessarily to take their significance at face value. Seoul's effective operationalization of Roh's call for the 'highest level of unofficial relations' with Taiwan over the past thirty years appears far closer to PRC preferences than Tokyo's and, especially, Washington's respective approaches. But that trajectory was not locked in by the ROK-PRC normalization

⁹⁹'Japan Supports Taiwan's Bid to Attend World Health Assembly' *Japan Times* (Taipei, 9 May 2019) <<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/05/09/national/politics-diplomacy/japan-supports-taiwans-world-health-assembly-bid/>> accessed 8 October 2021; Nike Ching, 'G-7 Countries Back Taiwan's Observer Status in World Health Assembly' *VOA* (5 May 2021) <https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific_g-7-countries-back-taiwans-observer-status-world-health-assembly/6205478.html> accessed 29 September 2021.

¹⁰⁰Jae-cheol Lee, Jeong-hoon Ahn and Eun-joo Lee, 'U.S. Congress calls on S. Korea to vote for Taiwan's WHO observer status' *Maeil Business News Korea* (Seoul, 15 May 2020).

¹⁰¹'53rd Consultative Meeting Joint Communique' (U.S. Department of Defense, 2 December 2021) <<https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/2858814/53rd-security-consultative-meeting-joint-communique/>> accessed 3 March 2022; 'Joint Statement on the U.S.-Japan-Republic of Korea Trilateral Ministerial Meeting' (Republic of Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), 15 February 2022) <https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5674/view.do?seq=320710&page=1> accessed 3 March 2022.

communiqué. Rather, the contemporary distance between these erstwhile 'blood allies' is best understood as the result of political preferences and vicissitudes.

Indeed, the comparative analysis in the section titled *Korea-Taiwan Relations in Comparative Perspective* demonstrates that, at least in theory, Seoul's effective policies toward Taiwan could have been very different. And they could still evolve in the years ahead—even if Seoul's 1992 position on 'One China' does not change and the Korea-Taiwan relationship remains officially 'unofficial'.

The first three decades of Korea-Taiwan 'unofficial relations' and developments since the Biden-Moon summit do not suggest that is likely anytime soon, however. On this and other matters—e.g. Beijing's continued blocking of Taiwan's participation in the WHA during a global pandemic—Korea has stood out primarily for its taciturn, passive stance. Taipei seems to have noticed. In her October 2021 National Day Address, just days after an unprecedented 149 Chinese military aircraft provocatively entered Taiwan's air-defense identification zone over a four-day period, President Tsai lauded Taiwan's enhanced cooperation with democracies, mentioning Washington, Tokyo, Canberra, Brussels, the G7, NATO, and EU and thanking 'democratic friends willing to stand up for us'. She did not mention Seoul.¹⁰²

Though over the past few years Korea appears to be something of an outlier among major democratic U.S. treaty allies in its reluctance to publicly express support for and significantly deepen its 'unofficial' relations with democratic Taiwan, or to even have major public policy debates about cross-strait issues, what apparently is today is not necessarily what shall forever be. Only a few years ago, few would have anticipated the Biden-Moon statement, the sharp deterioration of Korean sentiment vis-à-vis Beijing, cross-strait peace and stability becoming a front-burner policy issue in Japan, the European Parliament referring to Taiwan as a 'key partner and democratic ally' and calling for 'upgrad[ing]' relations, or the broad multilateralization and internationalization of concerns about 'peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait' and/or Taiwan's international space. Nevertheless, in the Korean case, concerns about the DPRK—and Seoul's apparent judgment that Beijing is a necessary partner in addressing the multi-faceted threat posed by Pyongyang that it cannot afford to antagonize—appears as a relative constant.

However, the region is fast evolving. So, too, is Korean popular sentiment and the domestic politics of China policy. Korea's newly-inaugurated conservative president (Yoon Suk Yeol) has emphasized stronger cooperation with the United States and its democratic allies—especially Japan and Australia. In the first joint statement between Biden and Yoon (May 2022), the two leaders 'reiterate[d] the importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait', adding that it is 'an essential element in security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region'.¹⁰³ It is too early in Yoon's term to assess whether his new administration will join the U.S., Japan, Australia, and other major democracies in Europe in becoming more outspoken and substantively supportive of Taiwan in the face of increased pressure from Beijing. Thus, it will be important to soberly observe future statements and actions as Korea's foreign policy under Yoon and future leaders takes form. Developments related to the DPRK, and changes in Seoul's threat perceptions vis-a-vis Pyongyang and/or Beijing could also alter Seoul's calculus. Finally, a major crisis in the Taiwan Strait could refocus Seoul's (and the region's) attention. One thing is certain on the 30th anniversary of ROK-PRC normalization: this is an important space for scholars to watch, and this study's analysis should be updated as new evidence emerges.

¹⁰²Ing-wen Tsai, '2021 National Day Address' (TECO Australia, 10 October 2021) <https://www.roc-taiwan.org/au_en/post/11919.html> accessed 14 October 2021.

¹⁰³'United States-Republic of Korea Leaders' Joint Statement' (The White House, 21 May 2022) <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/21/united-states-republic-of-korea-leaders-joint-statement/>> accessed 24 May 2022.

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Notes on contributors

Chaewon Lee is a graduate student in the East Asian Languages and Cultures (EALC) Department at Indiana University's Hamilton Lugar School of Global and International Studies.

Adam P. Liff is associate professor of East Asian international relations at Indiana University's Hamilton Lugar School of Global and International Studies (EALC Department). His research website is <https://adampliff.com/>.