

Beyond the Radar: Economic Coercion, Narrative Warfare, and the China–South Korea THAAD Dispute

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Abstract

In 2016, South Korea's decision to deploy the U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system prompted a coordinated campaign of informal economic coercion by China. Although Beijing denied any official retaliation, regulators shuttered Lotte retail stores, state-backed media amplified consumer boycotts, and the China National Tourism Administration quietly ordered a halt to group tours to South Korea. This case study reconstructs the timeline of coercive actions using primary sources including tourism data, corporate disclosures, and government statements. It assesses China's use of informal tools—regulatory harassment, cultural sanctions, and market-based pressure—to signal displeasure while maintaining plausible deniability. The paper also considers South Korea's countermeasures and policy responses, including WTO consultations and the “Three No's” policy. While China inflicted tangible economic costs, especially in the tourism and retail sectors, it ultimately failed to reverse the THAAD deployment. The case illustrates both the capabilities and limitations of informal geoeconomic coercion in regional security disputes.

Keywords: Economic coercion, geoeconomics, informal sanctions, narrative warfare, ballistic missile defense, THAAD, China, South Korea, United States

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1. Strategic Context

In July 2016, the United States and South Korea jointly announced the planned deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system on South Korean soil. The decision followed a series of missile launches by North Korea that raised concerns in Seoul and Washington about the growing sophistication of Pyongyang's capabilities (Barnes 2014; Kim 2014; U.S. Department of Defense 2016). The THAAD deployment was intended to enhance missile interception capability of potential North Korean launches and bolster the U.S.–ROK alliance's deterrent posture.

However, Beijing opposed the system from the outset. Chinese officials argued that the powerful radar associated with THAAD—the AN/TPY-2—could peer into northeastern China and thereby undermine its strategic deterrent.¹ On July 8, 2016, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a formal protest, calling on Seoul to “stop the deployment process” and warning of “necessary measures” in response (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2016).

2. Economic Interdependence and Leverage

At the time, China and South Korea were deeply economically interdependent. China was South Korea's largest trading partner, accounting for roughly 25% of its exports and serving as the most important destination for Korean cosmetics, entertainment, and automobiles (KOTRA 2016). China also accounted for just under half of all inbound tourists to South Korea in 2016, some 8.06 million visitors—totaling over USD 18 billion in revenue for the nation (KTO 2017; KOTRA 2018).

This created conditions of asymmetric dependence: while South Korea benefitted significantly from access to Chinese markets and consumers, China could credibly threaten to withdraw that access in retaliation for strategic decisions it opposed. China would stand to lose a lot less than South Korea, giving them an upper hand in the coercive balance.

3. Triggering Event

Although the THAAD deployment was announced in mid-2016, China's coercive actions intensified in early 2017 after South Korea's Lotte Group, a major firm with

¹ China's objections were rooted in the logic of nuclear deterrence. A secure second-strike capability, central to mutually assured destruction (MAD), requires that a state's retaliatory forces remain survivable even after absorbing a first strike. Beijing feared that the AN/TPY-2 radar, with its 1,000 km+ range, could enhance U.S. missile defenses by providing early tracking of Chinese ICBMs launched from the northeast, potentially eroding China's confidence in its nuclear deterrent and undermining strategic stability. For more information on MAD, Secure Second Strike, and ballistic missile defense, particularly in this case, see Fox, 2006; Glaser, 2016; and Palmore, 2002.

extensive business operations in China, agreed to a land-swap deal with the Ministry of National Defense. On February 27, 2017, Lotte formally transferred a golf course in Seongju County to the South Korean military to serve as the deployment site. (Reuters 2017) This corporate action became the immediate trigger for targeted retaliation, particularly against Lotte’s Chinese operations.

TABLE 1. Key Actors in the China–South Korea THAAD Dispute

Actor Name	Actor Type	Role	Position / Action Taken
Government of China	State	Initiator	Opposed THAAD; associated with informal coercive measures while denying official involvement.
Government of South Korea	State	Target	Authorized THAAD deployment; later issued “Three No’s” to normalize ties.
Lotte Group (South Korea)	Corporation	Targeted Entity	Provided land for THAAD; suffered regulatory and consumer retaliation in China.
China National Tourism Administration (CNTA)	State Agency	Instrumental Regulator	Imposed unannounced ban on group tours to South Korea (March 2017).
Chinese Consumers and Tour Operators	Public / Private	Enforcement Mechanism	Participated in boycotts, canceled tours, and rejected Korean products.
U.S. Government	State	Ally of Target State	Partnered with South Korea to deploy THAAD; background actor in regional strategic calculus.

Note: The table identifies selected actors most relevant to the case analysis and is not intended to be exhaustive. The “Role” and “Position / Action Taken” columns reflect the author’s interpretation of each actor’s relevance to the THAAD dispute and China’s informal economic pressure campaign.

Source: Author’s compilation and analysis based on sources cited in the article.

4. Timeline of Events

After the joint U.S.–South Korea announcement in July 2016 to deploy the THAAD missile defense system, Chinese opposition initially took the form of formal diplomatic protests. Despite characterizing the decision as a threat to national security, overt retaliation was not immediately forthcoming.

The turning point occurred on February 27, 2017, when South Korea’s Lotte Group signed a land-swap deal with the government, providing the Seongju golf course that would host the THAAD battery. This move brought a prominent South Korean corporation into the spotlight and triggered a swift escalation. Although the Chinese government continued to deny that it was imposing sanctions, its actions caused harm over multiple Korean sectors.

Within days, the China National Tourism Administration (CNTA) reportedly instructed domestic travel agencies to suspend sales of group tours to South Korea (Huang 2017) By early March, major travel platforms such as Ctrip and Tuniu had removed Korean travel packages entirely. In parallel, Chinese regulators launched extensive fire and tax inspections of Lotte Mart stores, leading to the closure of over 80 of the company’s nearly 100 outlets across China.

In March 2017, South Korea raised the issue at the World Trade Organization’s Trade Policy Review Body, asserting that China’s actions were discriminatory and lacked transparency. Meanwhile, South Korean public sentiment hardened against China’s behavior (Turcsányi et al. 2022; Silver 2017).

By October 2017, the two governments reached a diplomatic resolution. South Korea articulated the “Three No’s” policy: no additional THAAD deployments, no participation in a U.S.-led missile defense network, and no trilateral military alliance with Japan and the U.S. In response, China agreed to normalize exchanges, and informal restrictions began to ease gradually from November onward to return toward the status quo.

TABLE 2. Timeline of Key Events in the THAAD Dispute

Date	Actor	Action	Source
February 12, 2013	North Korea	DPRK conducts underground nuclear test.	Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (2017)
May 18, 2013	North Korea	DPRK launches three short-range missiles into the waters off of its east coast.	Smith-Spark (2013)
May 2014	United States	Considers deploying THAAD; South Korea expresses support.	Barnes (2014), Kim (2014)
July 7, 2016	U.S.–ROK	U.S. and ROK governments announce alliance decision to deploy THAAD.	U.S. Department of Defense (2016)
July 8, 2016	China	Publicly condemns the deployment announcement.	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China: July 8, 2016 (2016)
February 27, 2017	Lotte Group	Signs land-swap deal, transferring golf course to South Korean military for THAAD site.	Reuters (2017)
March 2, 2017	China National Tourism Administration (CNTA)	Reportedly instructs major travel agencies to suspend all group tours to South Korea (not published publicly).	Huang (2017) Financial Times (2017)

TABLE 2. *Continued*

Date	Actor	Action	Source
March 3, 2017	Chinese travel platforms	Major Chinese travel agencies (e.g. Tuniu, Ctrip) remove all South Korea-related tour products.	Huang (2017)
March 6, 2017	Local Chinese regulators	Shut down 87 of Lotte’s 99 stores in China, citing “fire code” and other regulatory violations.	Yonhap News (2018)
March 15, 2017	Chinese airlines	Slash over 1,000 flights to South Korea for April (20–25% reduction).	Lu (2017)
March 17, 2017	ROK Ministry of Trade	Raises issue at WTO Trade Policy Review Body, citing “discriminatory” and “unjustified” Chinese actions.	BBC (2017)
October 31, 2017	ROK and PRC Foreign Ministries	Agree to normalize relations; South Korea announces “Three No’s” policy.	Kim and Blanchard (2017) Westcott and Suk (2017) Moon (2021) Su (2017)
November 1, 2017	China National Tourism Administration (CNTA)	Begins limited resumption of group tour permissions to Korea following thaw.	Sung-jin (2017)

Note: The timeline identifies selected events most relevant to the case analysis and is not intended to be exhaustive.

Source: Author’s compilation and analysis based on official documents and sources cited in the article.

5. Instruments and Mechanisms Used

China’s coercion campaign in response to the THAAD deployment was notable not for formal sanctions or legal prohibitions, but for its use of informal, non-military, and opaque instruments. The measures operated through a combination of administrative pressure, commercial leverage, and social mobilization. This strategy allowed Beijing to inflict significant economic costs while denying responsibility and avoiding formal accountability under international law.

The first and most visible tool was the disruption of tourism. Though no law or public order was issued, on March 2, 2017, China’s National Tourism Administration reportedly instructed major travel agencies to halt all group tours to South Korea. (Huang 2017) Within 24 hours, travel platforms such as Tuniu and Ctrip removed Korea-related tours. (Lim and Ferguson 2019) Chinese airlines soon followed, canceling or cutting hundreds of scheduled flights. These restrictions were never formally acknowledged, allowing China to claim that market conditions or consumer preferences explained the sudden decline. Beijing’s approach can be seen as a form of

coercive signaling – it delivered a warning to both South Korea and other regional actors by inflicting pain informally. The ambiguity maintained plausible deniability, which is a strategic signal in itself: it communicates resolve and displeasure while trying to avoid international legal repercussions. This tactic also constitutes reputational coercion, sending a message to third-party audiences ('this could happen to you') and thereby leveraging South Korea's punishment to bolster China's overall deterrence credibility.

Regulatory pressure was the second major channel. In the days following the Lotte land deal, Chinese authorities launched a wave of fire safety and tax inspections at Lotte Mart stores (Kim Oi-hyun 2017). Over 80 of the company's 99 Chinese locations were closed within weeks. Lotte's application for a planned USD 2.6 billion theme park in Shenyang was also rejected by local authorities (Sohee Kim 2017). These actions, while not officially announced as being in response to defense issues, were widely understood to be politically motivated.

Third, China employed consumer and media mobilization. State-linked media outlets such as *Global Times* published repeated editorials condemning THAAD and accusing Lotte of "selling out national interests." (Ge 2017; Ide 2017; Liao 2017). This created space for spontaneous-looking consumer boycotts and nationalist protests targeting Korean goods, cosmetics, and entertainment content. Korean celebrities and TV dramas were quietly removed from Chinese streaming platforms, and performance visas were frozen. No official policy ban was ever declared, but cultural exports to China dropped dramatically (Ga-young 2016).

This approach reflects China's evolving geoeconomic toolkit—favoring informal enforcement that circumvents WTO rules and trade retaliation norms. By acting through regulatory opacity and commercial actors, Beijing created plausible deniability while maximizing strategic signaling. This approach also allowed the PRC to modulate pressure, easing or intensifying specific measures without formal diplomatic or military escalation.

6. Responses and Outcomes

South Korea's initial response to China's economic retaliation was restrained and cautious. Despite mounting economic costs, the South Korean government refrained from escalating the dispute through reciprocal trade measures or public condemnation. This restraint reflected a strategic calculation: Seoul sought to avoid further deterioration of ties with Beijing, preserve economic relations, and maintain diplomatic space with both China and the United States.

However, by mid-March 2017, South Korea began raising the issue through international channels. On March 17, 2017, Seoul submitted a complaint to the World Trade Organization (WTO), alleging that China's actions constituted a violation of trade norms, particularly the principles of transparency and non-discrimination. While

no formal dispute case was filed, the issue was discussed at the WTO’s Trade Policy Review Body, where South Korea highlighted the informal and opaque nature of China’s coercion (BBC 2017).

Public sentiment in South Korea hardened significantly after the THAAD deployment. A 2022 CEIAS survey reported that 81% of South Koreans viewed China negatively, the highest in the sample, citing the THAAD controversy as a turning point in bilateral frustration. (Turcsányi et al. 2022; Silver 2017). South Korea’s political leadership faced a dilemma. With a presidential election looming in May 2017 (following the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye), the Moon Jae-in administration was cautious not to inflame tensions while seeking to balance ties with both Washington and Beijing.

In October 2017, the two governments reached a diplomatic accommodation. South Korea issued what became known as the “Three No’s”: (1) no additional THAAD deployments, (2) no participation in a U.S.-led regional missile defense system, and (3) no formation of a trilateral alliance with the U.S. and Japan. China accepted this as a de facto political reassurance, and informal sanctions began to ease, though full normalization was gradual and partial.

Although China succeeded in imposing short-term economic pain, it failed to reverse the deployment or secure a formal apology. Moreover, the episode damaged China’s image in South Korea, eroded public goodwill, and raised long-term questions about the risks of economic dependence on China.

TABLE 3. Economic, Political, and Strategic Effects of China’s THAAD Pressure Campaign

Impact Area	Targeted Actor / Sector	Observed Effects	Source
Retail and Property	Lotte Group	>70 of 99 stores shut by Chinese regulators; USD 1.3 billion in losses; exit from supermarket business in China.	Yonhap News (2018)
Tourism Sector	South Korean tourism industry	Inbound Chinese tourists fell by ~48% (from 8.06 million in 2016 to 4.17 million in 2017); approximately USD 7 billion in estimated losses.	KTO (2017)
Airlines and Flights	Korea-bound Chinese carriers	Over 1,000 flights canceled; major drop in capacity between China and South Korea in spring and summer 2017.	Ji-yoon (2017) Goh (2017)
Public Opinion / Soft Power	Chinese and Korean publics	Anti-China sentiment in South Korea reached historic highs; trust in China plummeted; long-term reputational harm to PRC soft power.	Turcsányi et al (2022) Silver (2017)

TABLE 3. *Continued*

Impact Area	Targeted Actor / Sector	Observed Effects	Source
Policy Signaling	South Korean government	“Three No’s” policy adopted to defuse tensions; partial diplomatic normalization achieved by late 2017.	Westcott, Suk (2017) Su (2017)
Strategic Objective (THAAD)	U.S.–South Korea alliance	Deployment completed in 2017 as planned; China failed to reverse or delay the core strategic decision.	Martin (2023)
Automotive Sector	Hyundai, Kia	Hyundai-Kia China sales plunged 52–65% (March–June 2017); ~510 Korean auto suppliers ran at 40–50% capacity.	Kim (2017)
South Korean Sentiment towards China	South Korean citizens	From 2015 to 2017, “Unfavorable opinions” increased by 24 percentage points while “favorable opinions” decreased by 27 percentage points.	Pew Global Attitudes Database (2025)

Note: Effects are selective and intended to summarize major reported consequences of the THAAD dispute; they are not a complete impact assessment. Monetary figures are reported in USD unless otherwise stated.

Source: Author’s compilation and analysis based on sources cited in the article.

7. Wider Analytical Insights

This case underscores how China has integrated economic coercion with narrative and information operations to constrain and influence target states. While informal sanctions—such as tourism bans, regulatory enforcement, and consumer boycotts—inflicted billions in losses on South Korea, they were amplified and normalized via coordinated media and public mobilization strategies.

China’s deployment of informal tools in the THAAD case exemplifies weaponized interdependence: economic networks leveraged to advance security interests without overt military confrontation. Its methods align with the Three Warfares doctrine, which involves public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare (Martin 2021).² In THAAD-related discourse, state media such as

² China’s Three Warfares Doctrine was formalized 2003–2005. The THAAD episode illustrates all three components of China’s ‘Three Warfares’ in practice. Public opinion warfare was evident in how state media and nationalist protests shaped narratives to turn Chinese public sentiment against South Korea (and pressure Seoul via public anger). Psychological warfare emerged in sowing fear among South Korean businesses and politicians that Chinese markets might remain closed to them – a morale impact short of kinetic conflict. And legal warfare (lawfare) appeared in the pretextual use of regulations (fire code inspections, etc.) to justify punitive actions. By exploiting legal technicalities domestically, China could claim to be acting lawfully while still punishing Lotte and others – a classic lawfare tactic aimed at complicating any legal challenge in forums like the WTO.

Global Times functioned as conduits for nationalist messaging, portraying Lotte as the face of Korean betrayal and labeling South Korea's actions as threats to Chinese sovereignty (Gang 2017).

More broadly, China's coercion tactics have escalated across multiple cases. For example, Australia experienced informal trade restrictions in 2020 after calling for a COVID-19 origins investigation. Japan faced rare-earth export curbs in 2010 following the Senkaku Islands dispute. These parallel episodes reflect a continuity in Beijing's strategic narrative: dissent or deviation from China's preferences invites geoeconomic and informational retaliation. By making an example of Seoul, Beijing signaled to others (like Australia, Canada, Japan) what forms of punishment they too might incur if they cross China's perceived red-lines. This pattern has since repeated: e.g., Australia's call for a COVID-19 probe led to Chinese tariffs on Australian wine and barley, and Canada's detention of a Huawei executive saw China suddenly blocking Canadian canola and meat imports. In each instance, China's response is not only about the bilateral dispute but also about deterring third parties – shaping a reputation that 'China will retaliate if provoked.'

8. Narrative Warfare and Information Control

During the THAAD episode, China conducted a subtle form of narrative warfare rather than overt cyber-disinformation.³ State media stoked nationalist sentiments by hosting voiceover pieces and opinion columns demanding boycotts of South Korean firms like Lotte; it allowed grassroots protests to gain visibility. Meanwhile, official spokespeople cast the measures as market-driven, claiming China "did not forbid tourism" in public statements, facilitating plausible deniability while influencing public belief. This dual track closely aligns with tactics described in PLA's "Three Warfares."

While direct cyber campaigns were not a visible part of the THAAD episode, the dispute highlighted China's reliance on narrative warfare as a complement to economic coercion. State-linked media and officials framed retaliation as the defense of national sovereignty and dignity, portraying South Korea as the disruptive actor. This pairing of pressure with narrative framing has since become a hallmark of Chinese coercive

³ By 'narrative warfare,' we mean China shaped the story around THAAD to its advantage without resorting to outright fabrications. Unlike a typical disinformation campaign (which might spread false facts or conspiracy theories), this was about framing and emphasis – Chinese media acknowledged THAAD's deployment but framed Lotte as a traitor and THAAD as a dire security threat to China. The state amplified certain truths (e.g. Lotte provided land for THAAD) with emotional, patriotic commentary. This type of information operation is powerful because it builds on reality, steering public perception through selective framing rather than lies. It showcases Beijing's skill in controlling the narrative: by the time officials insisted 'China did not forbid tourism' publicly, the domestic audience had already internalized a nationalist framing in which avoiding South Korea was the only patriotic choice. In short, narrative warfare in this case was about spinning facts to achieve strategic effect, as opposed to creating fake news.

statecraft. Similar strategies were evident in later cases, such as trade restrictions against Canada during the Meng Wanzhou affair and media attacks on Japan amid semiconductor disputes (Cullen 2024). Together, these episodes show that THAAD was not an isolated incident but an early test case for a broader coercive toolkit that fuses economic measures with information operations to shape international perceptions.

9. Strategic Lessons and Policy Implications

The THAAD incident offers several broader lessons:

- **Informal coercion remains asymmetric but self-limiting.** China extracted short-term compliance in symbolic ways (Three No's), but it gained little on core security posture. South Korea deepened its alliance with the U.S., indicating that coercion can backfire strategically.⁴
- **Information discipline is central to coercion's effectiveness.** Beijing's ability to mobilize domestic nationalism and shape domestic Korean discourse allowed much of the pressure to look like popular backlash rather than state-ordered sanctions, reducing legal exposure.
- For target states and allies, enhancing **resilience** requires not only economic diversification but also **information resilience**: countering narrative campaigns, exposing CCP media manipulations, and educating publics about disinformation techniques.⁵
- China demonstrates increasingly sophisticated use of a **whole-of-society** approach to national security, responding to a perceived security threat with calibrated use of the economic and information instruments of power, rather than a military or diplomatic response.

10. Conclusion

The THAAD dispute illustrates both the sophistication and the limits of China's economic coercion. Beijing was able to mobilize informal instruments—tourism bans, regulatory pressure, consumer boycotts—in ways that inflicted billions of dollars in

⁴ This reflects a classic coercion dilemma: compellence is harder than deterrence, as states may endure costs rather than concede on core sovereignty. China's sanctions imposed pain but failed to reverse THAAD, while fueling public backlash that undercut its soft power.

⁵ "Information resilience" involves public education, government counter-messaging, and cooperation with media platforms to expose propaganda. In South Korea's case, this means openly highlighting instances of Chinese pressure and explaining the strategic logic of THAAD to inoculate the public against Beijing's framing.

losses and extracted symbolic concessions such as Seoul's "Three No's." By the PRC's measure of success, these tools demonstrated considerable reach and effectiveness.

Yet this success came with enduring costs. South Korea completed the THAAD deployment despite the pain, highlighting the difficulty of compellence when core security interests are at stake. More importantly, Chinese pressure triggered a lasting collapse in South Korean public sentiment toward China, with unfavorable views rising to major highs. What Beijing gained in leverage, it lost in legitimacy: the episode hardened skepticism in Seoul, deepened reliance on the U.S. alliance, and left China's soft power badly diminished.

In this sense, the THAAD case is a cautionary tale. It shows how sophisticated economic coercion can yield tactical wins but also generate strategic blowback—damaging the very influence Beijing sought to expand.

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