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Korea’s Domestic Policies and Their Influence on Asia
South Korean National Identity and its Strategic Preferences

Andrew Kim, Princeton University
– recommended by Gilbert Rozman, Princeton University
Natural disasters are known to draw nations closer together. The 2004 tsunami relief efforts of various states, especially the United States, were widely credited with improving relations with Indonesia. An outpouring of sympathy and, especially, a major assistance program, elicited public gratitude at a time of great need. Yet, heightened sensitivity in the aftermath of a tragic disaster holds the potential for negative sentiments as well. Readiness to believe that other nations regard the disaster as fitting punishment can translate into exaggerated reactions, especially in this age of Internet postings and blogs. In 2008, China suffered a major earthquake. In 2011, Japan experienced an earthquake, tsunami and nuclear reactor leakages. South Korea is located between these two states, and the way its response to these devastating events were interpreted by its neighbors opens a window into its dynamic national identity and how such developments shape its strategic outlook.

South Korean hypersensitivity to Japan since the end of Japanese colonial rule in 1945 is widely recognized. As recently as the period of Roh Moo-hyun’s presidency, mutual accusations reached a peak rarely seen in the Post-Cold War years. Although in the wake of normalization of relations in 1992, South Korea and China appeared to be building an increasing level of mutual trust, in 2004 the Koguryo historical dispute revealed a high level of sensitivity among South Koreans even though the Chinese public seemed to be less aroused by the issue. South Korea is positioned at the crossroads between these two East Asian great powers. Their contrasting reactions to its response to natural calamities are not only indicative of ongoing trends in their perceptions, but also a reflection of changes in South Korean national identity since the end of the Cold War, driven by South Korea’s transformation into an affluent and democratic society.

The Sichuan Earthquake’s effect on public perceptions between China and South Korea was decidedly negative. Chinese netizens caught wind of a small number of South Korean blog posts that painted the tragedy as deserved punishment to the Chinese people and launched a smear campaign against South Korea as a whole. Despite the fact that President Lee Myung-bak was among the first leaders to issue condolences and even made a surprise visit to the earthquake-hit region, what was most notable about South Korea’s attempts to politically capitalize on the event was its failure to gain any traction. To this day, Chinese perceptions of South Korea have not recovered from the incident, as earlier admiration toward South Korea’s modernization and affinity toward the “Korean Wave” has become mixed with a fashionable netizen sub-culture of Korea bashing.

On the other hand, what has been most striking about South Korea’s response to the 3/11 triple disaster is that beyond the larger quantity of aid, the qualitative tone associated with that aid, on both the giving and receiving ends, has been overwhelmingly positive and politically beneficial. As in the case of the Sichuan Earthquake, a similar minority of South Korean netizens has responded to the crisis with hateful and racist commentary, but the Japanese public has not given this inflammatory group any attention. Rather, Japan has been taken aback by the “truly touching mood in South Korea,” as even former ‘comfort women’ have
set aside their grievances and taken up the cause to raise donations for Japan’s crisis. Particularly compelling is the fact that it has been precisely those groups most typically critical of Japan that have reprimanded those making inflammatory declarations that the crisis was deserved punishment for Japan’s militarist past.

Why this divergence? The most immediate observation is its apparent consistency with recent strategic trends in the region. In light of the emerging standoff between an increasingly assertive China and the tightening US-Japan-South Korea virtual alliance, South Korea’s bilateral relations with China and Japan have moved in opposite directions. Perceptions of Chinese recalcitrance in an otherwise united front condemning North Korea’s sinking of the South Korean corvette Cheonan and artillery attack on Yeonpyeong Island have brought the Sino-South Korean relationship to unprecedented lows since normalization in 1992. On the other hand, shared concern over China’s rise and aggressive behavior in the past two years has not only strengthened trilateral relations vis-à-vis the US alliance structure, but has also explicitly boosted bilateral defense cooperation between Japan and South Korea. Mutual recognition of common security threats have brought the two countries closer together than ever before, despite lingering sensitivities over the legacies of Japanese colonialism and militarism.

Without a doubt, China’s aggressive behavior in the short-run and the effect of its rise on the Northeast Asian balance of power in the long-run provide a compelling explanation for South Korea’s bilateral preferences. A perspective focused on power configurations alone, however, fails to identify the more subtle forces that have gradually shaped South Korea’s preferences toward favoring Japan over China. In other words, while strategic realities are consistent with the recent strengthening of Japanese-South Korean ties and weakening of Sino-South Korean relations, they do not sufficiently explain the broad societal affirmation of this trend.

In fact, the weakening of Sino-South Korean relations began well before China’s strategic break in 2008. After reaching its peak at the height of anti-American sentiments in the early 2000s, South Korean perceptions of China fell dramatically with the Koguryo controversy, in which a Chinese government-funded archeological project concluded that one of South Korea’s founding kingdoms was in fact a Chinese vassal state. Neither have improvements in Japanese-South Korean relations purely been the product of strategic alignment. To the contrary, the processes of democratization and development in South Korea have been forging common values and mutual identification between the two countries over decades, providing an increasingly formidable counterbalance to perennial disputes over the legacies of Japanese colonialism.

This paper argues that both of these phenomena, including the divergent responses to the Tohoku Earthquake and Sichuan Earthquake, have less to do with power and more to do with national identity. Rather than shifts in the configuration of power, shifts in the configuration of the ethnic and civic components that compose South Korean national identity are what drive deepening suspicion toward China and greater affinity toward Japan. Rather than focusing on the divergent Chinese and Japanese perceptions of South Korea, this paper concentrates on South
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Korea’s divergent perceptions of its neighbors. It places views of the two neighbors in the context of an evolving South Korean national identity. Both countries have figured importantly in the history of South Korean national identity, and, increasingly since 2000, are becoming intertwined in the external dimension of identity formation along with the United States. The first part of this paper focuses on South Korean national identity by itself, discussing the origins and evolution of its ethnic and civic components. The second part of this paper examines how these components influence the way South Korea views Japan and China. Consistent with widely acknowledged external strategic factors that have shaped the evolution of South Korea’s bilateral relations, this paper draws upon a national identity framework to isolate the more subtle internal factors that have been shaping South Korea’s strategic preferences throughout its domestic transformation.

AN OVERVIEW OF SOUTH KOREAN NATIONAL IDENTITY

South Korean national identity maintains a deep-seated tension between primordial and civic elements. The primordial elements are emphasized in minjok (ethnic) identity, which appeals to consanguineous membership in the Korean nation. Civic elements, on the other hand, are embodied in gukmin (civic) identity, which appeals to the shared experiences of the citizens of the South Korean state. Minjok identity remains a strong determinant of South Korean attitudes toward international relations. It is because of minjok identity that South Koreans express great pride in their ethnic homogeneity and widely subscribe to hyper-nationalized historiographies. The minjok perspective is fixated on the artificial division of the Korean people by foreign powers, tempered only by the belief that their destiny lies in the emancipation of their political divisions through their common essence. Gukmin identity, on the other hand, distinguishes South Koreans from Koreans. It is because of gukmin identity that South Koreans identify their country as a thriving, affluent democracy. The gukmin perspective is fixated on South Korea’s impressive achievements, from outperforming many of the world’s most advanced nations in fields as varied as technical innovation and hosting the Olympics.

Neither of these identity elements, in their current form, is intrinsic to the South Korean psyche. They are the product of historical events and remain susceptible to further evolution, which remains the case for all national identities around the world. Nonetheless, the extraordinary circumstances surrounding the formation of the South Korean state complicate the typical model of ethnic-civic tension in national identity formation. In the typical model of the nation-state, the nation is bound by an ethnic identity, and civic identity emerges smoothly out of ethnic identity from the politicization of the nation into the state. However, the formation of the South Korean state was a testament to the failure of that process. In other words, the very existence of South Korea was evidence of the Korean nation’s failure to manifest its full political vision of a unified Korean state with a harmonious ethnic-civic identity.

Minjok identity was forged as an alternate narrative to the crumbling Sino-centric Confucian order in the late 19th century. For the first time, revisionist historians
began to place Korea at the center of Korean history, reversing Korea’s identity as a subordinate to Beijing under the tributary system. Throughout the 20th century, minjok identity was at the core of national solidarity in the face of foreign intrusion, providing a means for the Korean nation’s survival under the rule of a Japanese state. Minjok identity, therefore, is deeply tied to the Korean people’s narrative of resistance and yearnings for independence. Its power stems from the fact that it not only emphasizes the common essence of the Korean people, but also their common suffering throughout the course of history.

The power of minjok identity in South Korea also stems from the fact that the state, and thus gukmin identity, is perceived as less legitimate and even an aberration of what Korea is destined to be. Minjok identity rests on claims widely accepted in both Koreas, such as the homogeneity of the Korean nation and a long history of common suffering as a people. Gukmin identity, on the other hand, was born out of the arbitrary designation of the 38th parallel as a political border. During democratization, minjok identity was a potent fuel for demonstrations and defiance against a conservative authoritarian government, which at all costs sought to legitimize that political border to emphasize the inherent value of the South Korean state over pan-Korean empathy. The popular anti-US/pro-North Korea streaks in the progressive platform up to the end of Roh Moo-hyun’s presidency, therefore, were founded on minjok identity.

While the process of democratization in South Korea was partially justified by minjok-based sentiments, the success of democratization has actually paved the way for gukmin identity’s emergence. Though lacking legitimacy in its origins, gukmin identity has gained legitimacy by virtue of the South Korean state’s reification through its successes. Beyond democratization, the hosting of the 1988 Olympics, the success of companies like Samsung, the popularity of South Korean culture abroad vis-à-vis the “Korean Wave,” and steadily rising prominence in countless sectors of global competition have shown South Koreans why their state is intrinsically valuable as a political entity distinct from the broader Korean nation. In stark contrast to the minjok narrative, the story of South Korea is one of tangible glory, not merely the abstract promise of glory. The positivity of gukmin identity, therefore, has increasingly emerged as a counterbalance to the victimization of minjok identity.

National Identity and the Improvement of Japan-South Korea Relations

Though Northeast Asia is notorious for national identity conflicts and historical grievances, Japan-South Korea relations have traditionally stood out as particularly vitriolic. From comfort women to Dokdo/Takeshima to Yasukuni Shrine visits to revisionist history textbooks, the Japan-South Korea relationship has been plagued with a laundry list of perennial identity-based conflicts. It remains just as true today as at any point in the post-colonial history of Japan-South Korea relations that controversy over issues concerning national identity can explode at even the slightest provocation.
Each of these national identity flashpoints in the relationship provokes minjok identity in South Korea. They appeal to the member of the Korean nation, as opposed to the citizen of the South Korean state, since they are reminders of Japan’s crimes against the abstract Korean nation. Yet there are reasons to be optimistic about the future of Japan-South Korea relations. The rise of gukmin identity relative to minjok identity discussed above has positive implications. Even the tensest moments of the Roh-Koizumi era were a marked improvement over the twenty-year gap of hostile non-recognition and the public rage that ensued in South Korea following the wildly unpopular decision to normalize relations in 1965. What changes in national identity have led to this gradual improvement, and how might Japan and South Korea seek to dampen the effect of, if not completely avoid, the perpetual conflicts noted above? The first answer to these questions concerns a structural change in South Korean national identity and, more specifically, shifts in generational attitudes. At the beginning of the post-war period, the South Korean view of Japan was “dualistic.” On the one hand, there was the obvious contempt toward Japan’s actions during the colonial era, but on the other hand, there was a sense of admiration for Japan’s advanced industry and culture. According to Won-Taek Kang, the most common South Korean responses to the questions “Which country do you detest the most?” and “Which country do you want South Korea to emulate?” were interestingly the same: Japan.

Seen through the lens of national identity, the first question provokes minjok identity, while the latter draws a response from gukmin identity. It should be expected, then, that with the rising prominence of gukmin identity, the balance presented in this dualism should gradually lean to the side of the second question—in other words, that South Koreans would begin to see Japan more through the perspective of what kind of country they want South Korea to look like than through the perspective of what Japan’s transgressions to the Korean nation have been. Indeed, Kang notes that this dualism has begun to change amongst the younger generation in South Korea, which has been further removed from the colonial experience that made minjok identity so salient and also has been born into a prosperous and democratic South Korea conducive to a robust gukmin identity. Some have even begun to use gukmin identity’s empathy for Japan as a reason for tempering minjok identity’s claims on Dokdo. As one South Korean observer notes: “It is hoped that the grave situation in Japan and the subsequent possibility of better bilateral relations will prompt even those Koreans who have been enraged by Japan’s territorial claims on Dokdo Island and its accounts of past history to display greater tolerance.”

South Korean gukmin identity has not only become stronger, but has also become more similar to Japanese national identity—indeed, South Korea itself has become more similar to Japan. Likewise, Japanese respect and affinity toward South Korea has grown tremendously in the post-WWII period, with the development of South Korea’s democracy, its growing sensitivity to human rights, and the global success of its companies. One commentator even notes that “now... [South Korea’s]
democracy has taken root to the extent Japan somewhat envies.”8 Sony’s early dominance has been surpassed by Samsung; Japanese interest in Korean food, language, and popular culture has increased; moreover, beyond their “virtual alliance” vis-à-vis the United States, according to a 2008 survey, no two countries have expressed greater anxiety with regard to China’s rise than South Korea and Japan (with 78% and 88% of all respondents, respectively, stating that the idea of Chinese leadership in Asia makes them “uncomfortable”).9 It is important to note that this survey was conducted well before the recent surge of China’s aggressive behavior. Even as China played a constructive role in hosting the Six Party talks prior to this period, its authoritarian rule and different conception of human rights highlighted the substantial convergence of South Korean gukmin identity and Japanese civic identity.

**NATIONAL IDENTITY AND THE DETERIORATION OF SINO-SOUTH KOREAN RELATIONS**

Compared to Japan-South Korea relations, the Sino-South Korean relationship traditionally has not struggled with national identity conflicts to the same extent. In fact, what was remarkable about Sino-South Korean rapprochement was the historical amnesia of both sides. In a region that is otherwise mired in the traumas of the 20th century, China and South Korea were remarkably successful in looking past the atrocities both sides committed during the Korean War and the fifty years of mutual antagonism that followed.

The Koguryo issue, however, quickly rid the South Korean psyche of that useful amnesia and shook minjok identity to the core. In June 2003, researchers of the Chinese government-funded Northeast Project published an article presenting a set of controversial findings on Koguryo’s history.10 The authors rejected the Korean understanding of Koguryo—which was also the view traditionally held by most Chinese scholars—and boldly stated that the “Koguryo Kingdom was an ethnic local government in China’s northeast region,” directly assaulting an integral part of Korean national identity.11 These claims exploded into controversy in 2004 when the Chinese foreign ministry’s official website erased Koguryo from its discussion on Korea’s ancient history, signaling a quiet official endorsement of the project’s findings.12

The South Korean public and media responded radically. Warnings of China’s Sinocentric intentions became ubiquitous in the South Korean news. According to the author’s count, the number of articles containing the word Sinocentrism (Junghwa sasang) in the Chosun Ilbo, a major South Korean newspaper, increased from sixteen in 2003 to forty-four in 2007.13 The percentage of parliamentarians expressing positive sentiments toward China dropped sharply from 80% to a mere 6% within a span of months.14 The controversy marked an unprecedented deterioration in the South Korean public’s view of China, actualizing latent anti-Chinese sentiments and fears in the South Korean national psyche.
The conclusions of the Northeast Project constituted a direct assault on minjok identity, since Koguryo represents the pinnacle of the mythical Korean nation’s glory and strength. Without Koguryo, minjok identity has no reference point of pride and glory. Minjok identity as such would fail to provide a historical basis upon which the Korean nation could hope for a strong, unified Korean state, independent of China. From a minjok identity perspective, therefore, the conclusions of the Northeast Project attacked the Korean nation at a fundamental level, threatening to erase a sacrosanct line of separation between itself and the Chinese nation.

Unfortunately, while the rise of gukmin identity has positive implications for Japanese-South Korean relations, the same is not true for Sino-South Korean relations. Gukmin identity’s perspective of China does not act as a counterbalance to minjok identity’s view of China. To the contrary, they are mutually reinforcing in a negative direction. The Koguryo controversy cast a dark shadow over the Sino-South Korean relationship, causing South Koreans to perceive not only the immediate contradiction of minjok identity but also the negative implications a Sino-centric historiography could have on the foundations of gukmin identity, i.e. the economic interests and political values of the contemporary South Korean state. What pre-Koguryo gukmin identity had once eagerly looked to as opportunities, post-Koguryo gukmin identity now warns against as potential constraints. While gukmin identity had earlier encouraged South Koreans to look past existing anti-Chinese stereotypes to embrace the advantages of closer relations, for the sake of economic benefit to the South Korean state, it now holds onto those same stereotypes more tightly, out of fear for South Korea’s long-term security. Mutual economic benefit has become economic overdependence. And what was once described as a potential strategic alternative to the United States is now more frequently described as a revisionist power seeking to reclaim its traditional sphere of influence.

The Korean War was very influential in shaping South Korean prejudices toward China. Chinese soldiers were often sent to the frontlines without the proper equipment in overwhelming numbers, seeding a view prevalent among South Koreans that the Chinese have a less sanctified view of human life. In the contemporary context, as gukmin identity places greater importance on liberal values such as democracy, public health, and human rights, South Korea has come to view China with an “alien quality.” This gukmin identity-based aversion to China’s “alien quality” surged with a series of trade disputes. Though once the basis for China and South Korea’s “special relationship,” incidents involving quality and safety issues with regard to imported Chinese goods often triggered episodes of deepening distrust and fear of China through gukmin identity.

Starting in September 2005, South Korea’s media began reporting that unusually high amounts of lead were found in Chinese kimchi imports. By October 21st, despite initially rejecting the media’s claims, the South Korean Food and Drug Administration reported that parasite eggs had been found in Chinese kimchi, sparking a media frenzy that stigmatized Chinese goods. Though the kimchi dispute was quickly resolved in the diplomatic sphere, it remained a potential
trigger of anti-Chinese sentiment based on gukmin identity. The South Korean media blamed China’s lack of adequate food safety measures. Gukmin identity’s foundation in the values of an affluent democratic society explains this propensity to perceive Chinese goods as intrinsically low-quality and unsafe.

This strain of negative attitude towards Chinese goods resurfaced again in South Korea’s reaction to the detection of melamine—a toxic substance first discovered in Chinese domestic powdered-milk that causes infant kidney damage and death—in various Chinese exports around the world. The opening statement of one Chosun Ilbo report encapsulates the harsh, accusatory attitude that gukmin identity has perpetuated toward Chinese goods:

Many [Chinese] must have known about [the melamine contaminations], but kept mute. Many babies died from taking the melamine-tainted powdered milk, but the Chinese government disclosed the fact only after the Olympic Games. China was sure Chinese.

The melamine crisis did incite similar media responses around the world, producing or, as in the South Korean case, reinforcing similar public biases toward Chinese goods. Yet considering the shifts in South Korea’s gukmin identity noted above, combined with the fact that as of 2008, 80% of all processed food in South Korea is imported from China, it is understandable why South Korea was significantly more sensitive to the possibility of importing melamine contaminated Chinese goods than other nations (Japan being an exception).

The Evolving Bilateral Preferences of South Korean National Identity

In terms of both minjok identity and gukmin identity, the strategic implications of South Korea’s national identity in its bilateral relations with Japan and China seem to be pointed in opposite directions. China’s claims on Koguryo not only invoke the victimization narrative of minjok identity but also add to it. The findings of the Northeast Project extend the period of Korea’s subordination under China further back into ancient history and eliminate the triumphant declaration of independence and distinctiveness from the perennial “other” that Koguryo represents. South Korea’s disputes with Japan, however, all stem from a mere sub-plot of the grand victimization narrative. As traumatic as it was, the colonial era lasted for a span of decades, while the tributary system, according to the minjok narrative, kept Korea from recognizing its political emancipation for centuries.

Not all national identity conflicts are equal. The comfort women issue, textbook revisions, and Yasukuni Shrine visits all strike a sensitive chord in minjok identity, but none of them pose the type of existential threat to the foundation of minjok identity itself as the Koguryo issue. To be reminded of Japan’s temporary domination over the Korean nation is one thing. To declare that the most powerful founding kingdom of the Korean nation was not in fact Korean—and thus that Koreans are essentially Chinese—is quite another.
Additionally, no matter how frequently and adamantly the Shimane Prefecture declares Japan’s claims to Dokdo/Takeshima as legitimate and legal, it is difficult to imagine a scenario in which Japan would attempt to forcibly take control of the islets. South Koreans will always maintain a basic sense of security in the fact that the South Korean government maintains physical control over Dokdo/Takeshima. On the other hand, how can South Koreans have that same tangible assurance with regard to an abstract—yet crucial—piece of history like Koguryo? Indeed, the fact that China now maintains sovereignty over part of the land that Koguryo used to occupy reflects the opposite of South Korea’s implicit sense of security with regard to the Dokdo/Takeshima issue. Moreover, as Koguryo historically spanned over modern North Korean territory as well, it remains uncertain what influence this new history will have in shaping China’s self-perceived role in the case of North Korea’s collapse and the Korean Peninsula’s unification.

As noted in preceding sections, compared to the generation born during the Colonial Era, the younger generation of South Korean society has reaped the benefits of democratization and economic affluence, gradually shifting national identity away from its traditional fixation on the Colonial Era and towards areas that increase affinity for being a democratic and capitalist ally of the United States. The younger generation’s greater emphasis on various aspects of gukmin identity—from South Korea’s political and economic institutions to its popular culture—has thus had the double effect of weakening the salience of minjok identity and also strengthening areas of mutual gukmin values and identity with Japan.

While gukmin identity has partially tempered the negative tendencies of minjok identity in Japanese-South Korean relations, minjok identity has interestingly exacerbated South Korea’s gukmin identity-based views of China. China’s attack on South Korea’s minjok identity vis-à-vis the Koguryo issue has triggered deep insecurities, which have in turn caused South Korea to search for other ways in which to express its superiority over China. One of the strongest manifestations of this search has been South Korea’s reaction to controversies surrounding the quality of Chinese imports. Despite China’s overwhelming superiority in realist terms, these instances reveal South Korea’s sense of moral or value-based superiority over China through stereotypes based on recollections of the Korean War.

As stated at the outset of this paper, these trends are highly consistent with the strategic alignments that have emerged in the wake of China’s aggressive behavior. Since 2008, South Korea has been growing closer to Japan and more distant from China. As this analysis shows, however, the seeds of this shift were planted long ago, and the evolution of minjok and gukmin identity has pointed in this direction for quite some time. To rely only on extrinsic factors and a narrow realist calculus of power configurations to argue South Korea’s bilateral preferences is therefore utterly incomplete.
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