# Ethnic Brothers or Migrants: North Korean Defectors in South Korea

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Over the past sixty years, the two Koreas have embarked on completely different paths in almost every respect. One developed into a successful example of democracy with remarkable economic growth, while the other became one of the most oppressive regimes on the planet under a dynastic dictatorship in its third generation. Despite their differences, reunification remains a national goal for both countries. Ethnic identity, connected to the belief that Korea is a single nation destined to be unified, drives this goal. Yet, recent studies indicate the declining importance of ethnic identity among the South Korean people. This chapter, an extension of the discussion on ethnic identity, examines the South Korean public's attitude toward North Korean defectors in South Korea. It first finds that emotional distance between South Koreans and North Korean defectors has not changed much despite their increased encounters. In fact, South Koreans are beginning to see North Korean defectors similarly to how they see migrant groups. Those who do not regard ethnic identity, such as bloodline or nativity, as an important component to being Korean are more likely to have accommodating attitudes toward North Korean defectors as toward other immigrant groups. On the other hand, those with negative opinions on immigrants are more likely to feel greater emotional distance from North Korean defectors. Finally, the perceived security threat level from North Korea also influences one's attitude toward North Korean defectors. As it increases, negative feelings toward defectors also increases, which contributes to the defectors' shaky status in South Korean society.

At the beginning of 2015, the Korean movie market was dominated by the movie *Ode to My Father* (*Kukje Sijang*), a film about the tough life experiences of Korea's war generation. The main character, Duk-soo, survives the Korean War as a child and then experiences the authoritarian government-led developmental period. The movie pays tribute to the generation that laid the foundation of modern South Korea enjoyed by today's youth. It closely follows the format of *Forrest Gump* in that it depicts one man's life against the backdrop of a nation's most important historical events. The movie reaches a climax when the plot arrives at the nationally held television campaign by the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) in 1983 to reunite families separated during the Korean War. Duk-soo finds his younger sister, who was tragically separated from her mother and siblings when they escaped North Korea to sail for the South. *Ode to My Father* was a tearjerker for most South Koreans. Not only did it detail the hardships endured by the so-called terribly stubborn Korean elderly and how they sacrificed their lives for future generations, it also emphasized the long-lasting creed of "divided, but one Korea." But are we really?

This chapter sheds light on this subject by examining South Korean attitudes toward North Korean defectors as members of one ethnic Korea (as conveyed in *Ode to My Father*). Although the situation is different and many years have passed, North Korean defectors do not differ much from Duk-soo and his family who fled from Hamheung, the northern region of the Korean Peninsula, to Busan, a southern port city, as they sought survival. Nonetheless, the passage of sixty years has brought change. South Korean public attitude toward North Korean defectors is analyzed from an important perspective, ethnic identity. First, feelings toward them through the lens of ethnic identity are discussed. The assertion that defectors must be welcomed to South Korea is largely based on ethnic nationalism; they also belong to the Korean ethnic group. How strongly and in which direction ethnic nationalism affects South Korean perspectives on North Korean defectors is explored. Second, whether or not the South Korean public's opinion on migrant groups is associated with those of North

Korean defectors is investigated. Last, I delve into the North Korea effect on South Korean views of defectors. Even though they departed from the North and are living in the South, the fact that they are from "North Korea" cannot be easily forgotten. When a security threat is perceived, how seriously this affects South Korean attitudes toward North Korean defectors is examined. How South Koreans view defectors is related to how they view the North Korean people and to South Korean attitudes toward reunification.

For this study, I use survey data from both the annual survey of the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies at Seoul National University from 2007 to 2013 for the overall trend of attitudes toward North Korean defectors by the South Korean public, and, as the primary source, the Asan Daily Poll conducted on February 14-15, 2014, by the Asan Institute.

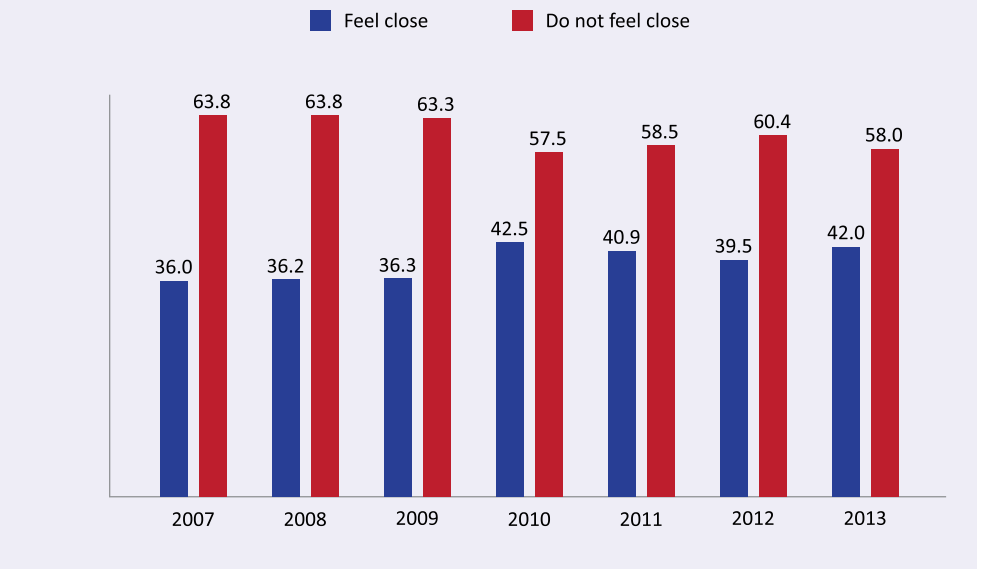
## Attitudes toward North Korean Defectors and Reunification

According to Ministry of Unification statistics, the number of North Korean defectors in South Korea was 27,518 in 2014. Although the influx slowed down from 2012, South Korea is accepting approximately 1,000 defectors from North Korea annually.[1] After the famine in the late 1990s, an increase in the number of North Koreans leaving the country was noticeable. Of course, the number of North Koreans in South Korea is still very small compared with the number of people arriving from Southeast Asian countries and China, which is around 700,000 and 500,000, respectively. Most South Koreans do not oppose the admission of North Korean defectors in general. As a matter of fact, North Korean defectors were once considered almost as heroes or as champions of freedom. In particular, during the authoritarian regime period, North Korean defectors were greeted with open arms because they symbolically legitimized the government of the South. There was no better propaganda device to prove its legitimacy than defectors. But as democracy consolidated in South Korea, the government found defectors less politically useful. Additionally, as the number of defectors increased, salience by rarity declined and perceptions of North Korean defectors began to change.

The Institute for Peace and Unification Studies at Seoul National University has conducted public opinion surveys on South Korean attitudes toward unification since 2007. They ask respondents how close they feel to North Korean defectors. According to the results, even though South Koreans appreciate the courage it takes to come to South Korea, the public does not feel very close to the defectors. In 2007, 63.8 percent of respondents answered that they did not feel close to them, while only 36 percent of them did. Seven years later, in 2013, the number of respondents who did not feel close to North Korean defectors slightly decreased to 58 percent, while the opposite side increased to 42 percent. Yet, a majority of South Koreans still feel estranged from North Korean defectors.

What is more interesting is the level of intimacy that South Koreans are ready to accept with North Korean defectors. For instance, according to the Unification Attitude Survey in 2013, 51.2 percent of South Koreans stated that they did not mind at all having North Korean defectors in their neighborhood. Only 15.3 percent of respondents hesitated to do so and 33 percent answered "so-so." In the case of co-workers, the number who did not mind working with North Korean defectors at the workplace decreased slightly to 48.4 percent. Yet it is still a plurality. As the relationship becomes more intimate, however, South Koreans display

**Figure 1. Sentiment Toward North Korean Defectors by the South Korean Public**




*Source: Institute for Peace and Unification Studies. Unification Attitude Survey. 2007-2013. http://tongil.snu.ac.kr/ipus/.*

more discomfort. Only 27.8 percent of South Koreans were fine with North Korean defectors as a business partner, in contrast to 38.9 percent who did not. What South Koreans were least willing to accept was marriage to a North Korean. When asked how they feel about marrying North Korean defectors, only 23.3 percent answered positively, and as many as 49.8 percent stated that they did not want a marital relationship with them. The result shows that South Koreans hold quite an emotional distance from North Korean defectors.[2]

Opinions have changed on the extent to which South Korea should accept incoming North Korean defectors. If the question had been asked twenty years ago, a solid majority would have answered that all the defectors should be admitted to South Korea because they ran away from the oppressive, brutal, and illegitimate North Korean regime to a democratic South Korea seeking freedom. That turns out to be no longer true. Table 1 indicates changing opinion over admitting North Korean defectors into South Korea. In 2007, slightly more than a majority of the public, 52 percent, thought that South Korea had to accept all defectors, 37.2 percent thought that defectors should be selectively admitted, and 10.8 percent thought that we should no longer accept North Korean defectors. The numbers fluctuated afterward and opinions of "admit everyone" and "selectively admit" moved within the margins of error. In 2013, however, the percentage of people who thought all defectors should be admitted hit its lowest point—42.2 percent—and selective admission reached 45.2 percent. The percentage of people who think South Korea should no longer accept North Korean defectors increased to 12.4, which is the highest for the past six years. All in all, almost one-half of South Koreans think that not all North Korean defectors should be given a free pass to South Korea, and quite a consistent number (about ten percent) of the public oppose admission of the defectors altogether.

**Table 1. Public Opinion on Admission of North Korean Defectors**

| | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Accept all defectors | 52.0 | 43.6 | 46.6 | 43.6 | 47.5 | 43.8 | 42.2 |
| Selectively accept defectors | 37.2 | 46.4 | 43.1 | 47.9 | 43.6 | 46.2 | 45.2 |
| Should not accept any more | 10.8 | 9.6 | 10.3 | 7.8 | 8.8 | 9.9 | 12.4 |

*Source: Institute for Peace and Unification Studies. Unification Attitude Survey. 2007-2013. http://tongil.snu.ac.kr/ipus/.*

**Table 2. Public Opinion on Subsidies to North Korean Defectors**

| | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Support increase | 59.2 | 45.6 | 53.3 | 55.7 | 59.7 | 50.9 | 49.6 |
| Oppose increase | 40.8 | 54.4 | 46.7 | 44.3 | 40.3 | 49.1 | 50.4 |

*Source: Institute for Peace and Unification Studies. Unification Attitude Survey. 2007-2013. http://tongil.snu.ac.kr/ipus/.*

These two results lead to another important issue. Currently, North Korean defectors have to go through an investigation process by the South Korean government upon their arrival. After the process, they check into Hanawon, the facility that educates and helps North Korean defectors safely settle down in South Korea. When they exit Hanawon, defectors receive a one-time subsidy and housing assistance from the government. The subsidy is $6,500 per person ($4,000 for an initial settlement and the remaining $2,500 provided in installments). Assistance for a one-person household is around $11,000. In addition to this financial package, defectors receive government-assisted job training. Of course, they are entitled to register for pensions, healthcare, and tuition exemptions for public schools (including national universities).[3] The number of North Korean defectors is still small, and the amount spent on the subsidy is not large. Yet it is still taxpayers' money. When asked whether the South Korean government should increase the subsidy, there was no clear public opinion over time. In 2007, almost 60 percent approved of the increase, but the response was reversed the following year. What is apparent, however, is that public opinion on government aid for North Korean defectors is almost evenly split.

The younger generations were most reluctant to have any type of relationship with North Korean defectors. In particular, those in their twenties were most skeptical of marrying a defector. According to the 2013 survey, only 15.6 percent—the lowest proportion among all age groups—stated that they would not mind marrying a defector. Looking at this from a different angle, the youngest generation responded with the highest figure of 56 percent that they did not want to marry a defector. To South Koreans in their twenties, North Korean defectors are strangers who are supposedly too different to allow for any intimate relationship, and that attitude is growing.

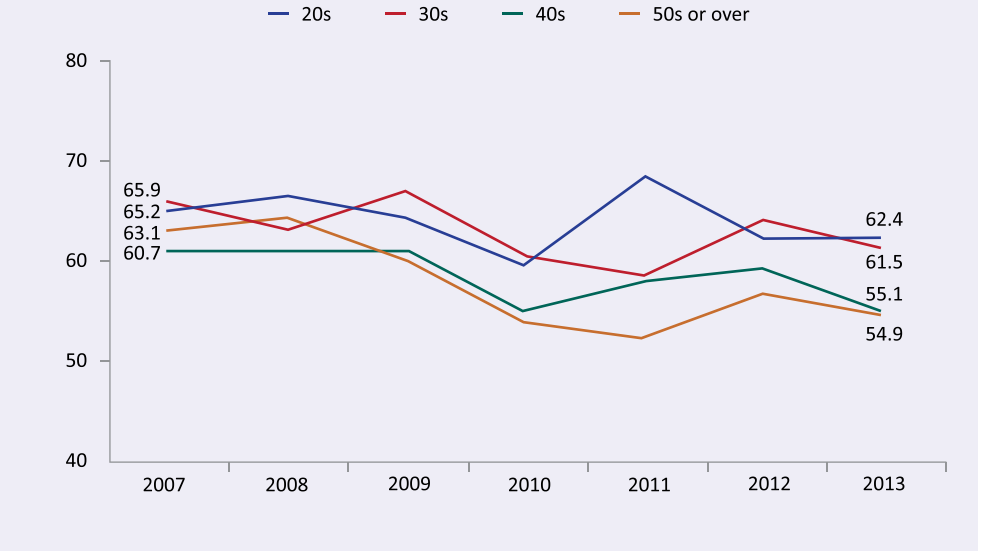
## Who Are They to Us?

Previous poll results reveal that a lingering emotional gap exists between South Koreans and North Korean defectors. North Korean defectors have a very complicated and confusing status in South Korea. They are practically migrants because they were not born in South Korea. A primary reason for them to choose the South over the North is to pursue a better life. In fact, defectors are very similar to migrant workers in South Korea in many respects.[4] As mentioned, what makes them most distinguishable from the other migrant groups is the fact that they are from North Korea. This sometimes is advantageous for the defectors because they are treated quite differently from other immigrant groups. They almost automatically receive citizenship upon arrival and even receive government subsidies. The government also provides appropriate job training, making it easier for them to adjust to South Korea. What should especially ease their lot in acclimating to their new home is that North Korea is not simply a neighboring country but is home to ethnic brothers and sisters of South Koreans. Like reunification discourse in South Korea, ethnic ties between the two Koreas have served as justification for South Korea's special treatment of defectors.

South Koreans' attitude toward North Korean defectors has been unilaterally understood from one conventional perspective, ethnic identity. Because civic identity does not require one's inherent nature such as bloodline or nativity, there seldom is commonality South Koreans can share with North Korean defectors. This is an oversimplified sketch of South Korean perceptions of North Korean defectors, however, especially considering the declining importance of ethnic identity among South Koreans. It is uncertain whether ethnic bond is effective in explaining how welcoming South Koreans are toward defectors.[5] In this section, therefore, I analyze the role of ethnic identity in shaping one's perceptions of North Korean defectors. In particular, I delve into the conventional belief that South Koreans welcome North Korean defectors because they belong to the same ethnic group.

I set up three independent variables to be analyzed relating to one's sentiment toward North Korean defectors: strength of ethnic identity, opinions on immigrants, and evaluation of national security. Conventional wisdom tells us that strong ethnic identity should make the South Korean people warmly welcome North Korean defectors. I first examine this premise. Secondly, opinions on immigrants should be used to explore the psychological lens through which South Koreans take in North Korean defectors. As numerous studies on immigrants and ethnic identity indicate, those who have strong ethnic identity tend to be hostile toward immigrants.[6] Thus, those who have negative opinions on immigrants are likely to possess relatively strong ethnic identity. This should lead to a positive attitude toward North Korean defectors if our conventional belief in the role of ethnic identity relating to the defectors is correct. This line of analysis also serves as an indirect investigation of how differently or similarly North Korean defectors and migrants are perceived by South Koreans. Last, I focus on the peculiarity of North Korea, the enemy of the state, and its security threat. The fact the defectors are from North Korea may be an advantage for them to safely land in South Korea thanks to the financial assistance and ethnic bonds they have with a new home. We cannot exclude, however, the possibility that the security threat taints the image of North Korean defectors as well. Of course, if one fully considers North Korean defectors to be South Koreans, the security threat from North Korea should not affect the attitudes toward them. But, if North Korean defectors are not yet regarded as insider members of South Korea, security threats from North Korea may play a role in forming attitudes toward defectors. Table 3 explains the variables to be used for the analysis.

**Figure 2. Distant Feeling Toward North Korean Defectors: By Age Group**




*Source: Institute for Peace and Unification Studies. Unification Attitude Survey. 2007-2013. http://tongil.snu.ac.kr/ipus/.*

## National Identity and North Korean Defectors

North Korea and reunification are themes widely understood to matter to national identity in South Korea. Of course, North Korea and South Korea went their separate ways in the sixty years since the ceasefire. In addition to their political systems, the two Koreas have different social systems, economic systems, and rule of law. Moreover, these two are practically at war and a military conflict could occur at any point. Nevertheless, the yearning for reunification never disappeared. Last year, President Park Geun-hye created a media frenzy when she stated that "reunification is a bonanza *(taebak)*." Afterward, Park established the Preparatory Council for Reunification under the direct supervision of the president and declared her determination to pursue the goal of reunification. Occasional military provocations by North Korea have never prevented South Korea from citing reunification as an important objective.

A latent rationale for this is the long-lasting belief that Korea is a single nation forged by shared blood and history. For a long time, the story of Dangun—which emphasizes all Koreans are from one ancestry—has been taught in South Korean schools. The clash of the three kingdoms—Baekje, Shilla, and Koguryo—in ancient times was described as an arduous effort to unite the nation. National identity also played an important role in the independence movement against Japanese colonial rule. Well founded or not, the belief that Korea is a single ethnic nation has been a driving force behind reunification.[8]

Essential for national identity is the demarcation of "us" and "them" and how to draw the line. Exclusiveness and inclusiveness is a vital component of national identity, which Anthony Smith categorizes into two categories, "ethnic identity" and "civic identity."[9]

**Table 3. Explanation of Variables**

| Variable | Explanations |
|---|---|
| Attitude toward North Korean defectors | One's attitude toward North Korean defectors[7]<br>0 = Most negative, 10 = Most positive |
| Attitude toward immigrants | One's attitude toward immigrants<br>0 = Most negative, 10 = Most positive |
| Degree of ethnic identity 1 | A Korean should have the same bloodline<br>0 = Disagree, 1 = Agree |
| Degree of ethnic identity 2 | A Korean should be born in Korea<br>0 = Disagree, 1 = Agree |
| Degree of ethnic identity 3 | A Korean should have been living in Korea for most of her/his life<br>0 = Disagree, 1 = Agree |
| Evaluation of national security | One's perception of national security<br>0 = Bad, 1 = Good |
| Opinion of immigrant issues 1 | Immigrants increase crime rate<br>0 = Disagree, 1 = Agree |
| Opinion of immigrant issues 2 | Immigrants take jobs away from South Koreans<br>0 = Disagree, 1 = Agree |
| Opinion of immigrant issues 3 | Immigrants undermine Korean values<br>0 = Disagree, 1 = Agree |

Under civic identity, citizens of a nation share the same set of political and legal principles and values. They also respect the system and do their duty as citizens. A nation from the perspective of ethnic identity is virtually an extended family sharing the same bloodline, culture, and history. On which identity a person puts more emphasis by and large determines the extent to which a person puts others in an in-group or out-group. Apparently, it is ethnic identity that has shaped and maintained the Korean reunification agenda for this long. South Koreans are taught that people with the same history and bloodline must form one nation; therefore, reunification with North Korea, the country that frequently commits military provocations, became the ultimate national goal.

Ethnic identity shapes one's assumptions toward North Korean defectors. They are from North Korea, which, together with South Korea, was once was a single nation, and this peculiarity brings ethnic identity to the fore when it comes to defectors. Therefore, it is presumed that those who have a strong ethnic identity will treat North Korean defectors more hospitably than those who do not, perceiving them as part of the Korean ethnic group. After all, North Korean defectors are ethnically in-group, speak the same language, and share the same pre-Korean War history.

In order to test the hypothesis, I examine one's strength of ethnic identity as it relates to one's attitude toward North Korean defectors. To do this I first I generated a variable that measured attitudes toward North Korean defectors. The Asan Daily Poll asks a respondent how he or she thinks about North Korean defectors, responding with a score on a 0 to 10 scale. If a

respondent does not feel at all close to them, the choice is 0 or close to that. If a person feels very close to North Korean defectors, the respondent chooses 10 or close to that. The higher the score, the person is more sympathetic toward North Korean defectors.

To measure ethnic identity I use three variables. In order to be a Korean, it is important to 1) be born in South Korea, 2) have a Korean bloodline, and 3) live in South Korea for most of one's life.[10] Each variable is recoded dichotomously. Those who think being born in South Korea is important for "Koreanness" have their answer coded as 1, otherwise as 0. The two other variables are coded in the same way. If one thinks having a Korean bloodline is important in determining one's Koreanness, the answer is coded 1. If not, it is coded 0, and if a respondent thinks living in South Korea is an indispensible element for being Korean, it is coded 1, otherwise 0.

First, I compare average closeness scores depending on a respondent's answers to ethnic identity questions. To investigate if the differences of average closeness are significant, I run a *t*-test. Table 4 demonstrates the surprising results. In contrast to the initial hypothesis, those possessing a strong ethnic identity overall tend to be *less* sympathetic toward North Korean defectors. For instance, those who think that having a Korean bloodline is important to be Korean feel less close to North Korean defectors (6.019) than those who do not think the same bloodline is an important element (6.649). A *t*-test confirms that the difference between the two groups' means is statistically significant. A similar tendency is found in the case of nativity for Koreanness. Those who think that being born in South Korea is important to being Korean tend to feel less close to North Korean defectors (6.018) than those who do not (6.505). In this case, the *t*-score is high enough to create a *p*-value of 0.006, which implies a statistically significant difference. The only result that does not show statistical significance is the variable of living in South Korea for most of one's life. Yet the direction of the relationship corroborates the two previous tests. Those who do not think long-time residence in South Korea is an important element for being Korean feel closer to North Korean defectors (6.392) than those who do (6.099).

The results reject the hypothesis that ethnic identity makes South Koreans feel close to North Korean defectors. On the contrary, those who have a stronger degree of ethnic identity tend to feel significantly less close to defectors than those who do not. Apparently, those who think bloodlines and nativity in South Korea are crucial to determining Koreanness are significantly more likely to have negative attitudes toward North Koreans. The same propensity was found when I examined South Korean's attitudes toward immigrants in relation to the three ethnic identity elements.[11] This suggests that South Koreans' perceptions of North Korean defectors resemble their perceptions of immigrants. Ethnic identity does not make the lives of North Korean defectors in South Korea any easier. It is, in fact, quite the contrary.

## North Korean Defectors: Another Immigrant Group

A growing number of studies have recently attributed the public's attitude toward immigrants to one's national identity.[12] Earlier works on national identity and attitude toward immigrants demonstrate that ethnic identity is particularly inversely related to one's attitude toward

**Table 4. Ethnic Identity and Closeness to North Korean Defectors**

| | No. of observation | Mean of closeness to defectors | Difference in means | *t*-score | *p*-value |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Korean bloodline** | | | | | |
| not important | 302 | 6.649 | 0.630 | 3.762 | 0.000 |
| important | 681 | 6.019 | | | |
| **Native born in South Korea** | | | | | |
| not important | 273 | 6.505 | 0.488 | 2.733 | 0.006 |
| important | 560 | 6.018 | | | |
| **Living in South Korea for most of one's life** | | | | | |
| not important | 334 | 6.392 | 0.293 | 1.777 | 0.076 |
| important | 654 | 6.099 | | | |

immigrant groups, while civic identity does not always display a significant relationship with it.[13] Ethnic identity puts emphasis on nativity and bloodline, which immigrants can never acquire. Immigrants are consequently left permanently on the outside. In contrast, civic identity emphasizes respect for the country's political, legal, and value systems, which allow more room for immigrants to gain membership in society.

North Korean defectors are people who have "migrated" from North Korea. Most recent defectors ran away from North Korea not because of the oppressive regime, but for economic reasons.[14] Once they came to South Korea, their living conditions and social status were no better than those of groups recognized as immigrants. Politically, economically, and socially, North Korean defectors are a minority just as are other immigrants in South Korean society.

In fact, there was a highly positive correlation in one's perception of immigrants and North Korean defectors. Those who have a positive attitude toward one are likely to hold a positive attitude toward the other. The correlation coefficient between the two is 0.42.

Table 5 is a crosstab of one's attitude toward immigrants and North Korean defectors. This time, I classify attitudes toward the two groups into three categories—positive, neutral, and negative.[15] A clear association is found in the attitudes toward the two groups. Those who have a negative attitude toward immigrants are significantly more likely than those who do not to have negative attitudes toward defectors as well. About 41 percent of respondents who have a negative perception of immigrants also have a negative perception of defectors. Only 38.2 percent of those who are negative toward immigrants have a positive feeling toward defectors; however, if a respondent is positive about immigrants, he or she tends to also be positive about North Korean defectors. About 79 percent of those who have a positive perception of immigrants answer that they feel positively about North Korean defectors.

Next, I compare opinions toward immigrants with attitudes toward North Korean defectors to see if there exists any meaningful relationship. If defectors are considered special, opinions toward immigrants should have no bearing on attitudes toward defectors, or it may even

**Table 5. Attitude Toward Immigrants and North Korean Defectors**

| | | North Korean defectors | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | **Negative** | **Neutral** | **Positive** | **Total** |
| Immigrants | Negative | 54 | 27 | 50 | 131 |
| | | **41.2** | 20.6 | 38.2 | 100 |
| | Neutral | 51 | 255 | 109 | 415 |
| | | 12.3 | 61.5 | 26.3 | 100 |
| | Positive | 26 | 65 | 343 | 434 |
| | | 6.0 | 15.0 | **79.0** | 100 |
| | Total | 131 | 347 | 502 | 980 |
| | | 13.4 | 35.4 | 51.2 | 100 |

*Pearson chi2(4) = 353.1324*

*Pr = 0.000*

work in the opposite direction, i.e., those who are negative toward immigrants feel positively toward North Korean defectors due to ethnic identity. However, if South Koreans simply regard defectors as a migrant group (or close to one), overall opinion on foreign migrants should apply to defectors as well, demonstrating a positive relationship. Three questions relating to migrants are asked in the survey, and the responses are compared with one's attitude toward North Korean defectors. The questions ask whether or not the person agrees with the following statements: 1) migrants increase crime rates, 2) migrants take jobs away from South Koreans, and 3) migrants undermine Korean values.

It turns out that one's opinions on immigrants are quite closely associated with perceptions of defectors. Contrary to initial belief, the more negatively a respondent thinks about immigrants, the more significantly likely he or she will feel less close to North Korean defectors. If a person thinks that migrants increase crime rates, there is less warmth toward defectors (6.019) than is the case for those who do not agree with the statement (6.361). Also, those who think that migrants take jobs away from South Koreans do not feel as close to North Korean defectors (5.761) as those who disagree with the statement (6.339). The most significant difference is found in the responses regarding migrants and Korean values. Those who think that migrants in South Korea disturb Korean values have the lowest score for defectors (5.525). The difference between the two groups is 1.023 in absolute terms, which produces a high *t*-score and confirms that the groups have distinctively different attitudes toward defectors.

The results show that those tolerant of immigrants are tolerant of North Korean defectors as well. The initial hypothesis was that a person who has a strong ethnic identity would feel closer to North Korean defectors due to the idea that North Koreans are co-ethnics, while being more likely to have a negative opinion of immigrants as confirmed in numerous sources.[16] Thus, those who are negative about immigrants should feel close to North Korean defectors because of ethnic identity. The results turn out to be completely the

opposite. Those who have a negative opinion toward immigrants are also less sympathetic to North Korean defectors. Critical for perceptions of both groups is not ethnic identity but "tolerance" of outsiders.

## North Korea and Security Threat

Since the division of the peninsula after the Korean War, North Korea and its regime have been the enemies of South Korea, which never recognized North Korea as an independent country. When reunification is discussed in South Korea, it is basically one of unilateral absorption of North Korea by the South. Although there have been some brief periods of reconciliation between the two (e.g., the. early 2000s), relations have always been troubled. North Korea's nuclear tests, shutdown of Geumkang mountain tours, and military provocations in 2010, which led to economic sanctions by South Korea, testify to the current tense relations between the two Koreas.

Although most South Korean condemnations target the North Korean regime when these confrontational incidents occur, the impact of these incidents on attitudes toward North Korean defectors is uncertain. A number of scholarly works on the American public's attitude toward Muslim Americans after 9/11 show that Americans tended to have lingering resentment toward Arab and Muslim Americans during the war on terror. For instance, Davis and Silver find that Americans harbored increased hostility toward Arab-Americans after 9/11.[17] Kam and Kinder note that an increased threat perception strengthens one's sense of ethnocentrism which discriminates in-group from out-groups. That is, when the perceived level of threat is substantial, people tend to be ethnocentric, and this increases hostility toward the perceived enemy—out-groups in many cases.[18] Severely negative attitudes toward Arab-Americans were observed in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, and these perceptions have persisted a while.[19]

If we strictly apply this framework to North Korean defectors, we would expect South Koreans to hold negative attitudes toward the defectors whenever there are military provocations by North Korea. Of course, the defectors are not unambiguously members of an out-group. Ethnically, they can be considered in-group members. If the South Korean public considers North Koreans members of South Korean society, threats from North Korea would not have much impact on people's attitudes toward them. If not, threats from North Korea may affect the public's attitude toward the defectors in the way that American attitudes toward Arab-Americans were affected. In order to examine this relationship, I compare one's perceived security threat with attitudes toward North Korean defectors. Table 6 presents the results. When asked about current national security, 434 respondents positively evaluated national security, while 380 did so negatively. The score for attitudes toward North Korean defectors for those who positively evaluated national security is 6.551, whereas those who had negative evaluations were much colder to defectors (5.837). The difference between the two groups is 0.714, and this is statistically significant. That is, those who more seriously perceive the security threat posed by North Korea feel less close to North Korean defectors than those who do not. Perceived security threat, therefore, is adversely related to attitudes toward defectors and significantly worsens them among South Koreans. The result cannot confidently prove that the defectors are regarded as out-group members, but shows ethnic bloodline is not sufficient to protect them from the taint of North Korea's perceived belligerence.

**Table 6. Perceived National Security Situation and Attitude Toward North Korean Defectors**

| | No. of observation | Mean of closeness to defectors | Difference in means | *t*-score | *p*-value |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agree | 434 | 6.551 | 0.714 | 4.161 | 0.000 |
| Disagree | 380 | 5.837 | | | |

**Table 7. Opinion on Migrants and Attitude Toward North Korean Defectors**

| | No. of observation | Mean of closeness to defectors | Difference in means | *t*-score | *p*-value |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Immigrants increase crime rates** | | | | | |
| Agree | 424 | 6.019 | -0.342 | -2.046 | 0.041 |
| Disagree | 457 | 6.361 | | | |
| **Immigrants take jobs away from South Koreans** | | | | | |
| Agree | 238 | 5.761 | -0.579 | -3.169 | 0.002 |
| Disagree | 699 | 6.339 | | | |
| **Immigrants undermine Korean values** | | | | | |
| Agree | 278 | 5.525 | -1.023 | -5.979 | 0.000 |
| Disagree | 640 | 6.548 | | | |

## Conclusion

North Korean defectors were once welcomed with open arms in South Korea. They are truly Korean; they share the same blood and belong to the same ethnic line as South Koreans. Perceptions of North Korean defectors, however, have changed. It is reported that North Korean defectors are most dismayed when being treated as members of just one of many migrant groups.[20] From their perspective, they should be treated differently from other migrants coming into South Korea. After all, the Constitution of South Korea declares the territory of South Korea to consist of the Korean Peninsula and its adjacent islands. Government policy is seen as only a weak acknowledgment of their special status. North Korean defectors receive citizenship upon their arrival and subsidies for settlement in South Korea. This kind of support is completely absent for other immigrant groups. However, perceptions of North Koreans by the South Korean people do not conform to government policy. They began to think of North Korean defectors as just another migrant group. The fading ethnic bond with defectors is not coming from the defectors themselves. Rather, South Koreans no longer feel close to North Korea itself. The division has brought numerous societal changes to the fore. Perhaps it has become impracticable to ask South Koreans to maintain their once-strong ethnic bond with North Koreans. After all, two generations have passed since the two halves of the peninsula became separate nations.

One important implication of this study is the outlook for a unified Korea. North Korean defectors are still a tiny segment of the South Korean population. This implies that they are a group with little impact. Whether embracing them as co-ethnic Koreans or treating them as just another migrant group, the South Korean societal fabric would hardly wrinkle. Once unified, however, South Koreans will have to face a much more sizable and visible presence. Koreans from the north would then comprise one-third of the total population of a unified Korea and could essentially be an independent force in establishing a powerful political bloc. It is uncertain how South Koreans would greet this idea.

President Park was correct to be aware of the South Korean public's dubiousness toward reunification due to economic costs. Numerous studies indicate that the greatest determinant in turning South Koreans against reunification would be the potential economic burden of doing so. It is on this point that Park attempted to persuade the public. Nonetheless, a more fundamental disparity between the North and the South comes from the loss of an ethnic bond, which was previously thought to be the driving force behind the pursuit of reunification. How to deal with this increasing emotional distance should also be a priority for the current and future presidents.

## Endnotes

1. *Major Statistics in Inter-Korean Relations*, Ministry of Unification, http://eng.unikorea.go.kr/content.do?cmsid=1822 [accessed January 5, 2015].
2. *Unification Attitude Survey*, Institute for Peace and Unification Studies, http://tongil.snu.ac.kr/ipus/ [accessed 2013].
3. "Bukhanitaljoomin Keojuji Jeongchakjiwon Manual," Ministry of Unification, http://www.unikorea.go.kr/content.do?cmsid=1566&mode=view&cid=33381 [accessed January 5, 2015],
4. According to the IPUS study, those who are more tolerant toward multiculturalism tend to be more generous to North Korean defectors. Institute for Peace and Unification Studies, "Damunhwa, Bukhan i-taljoominae daehan taedowa jungchijeok sunghyangui kwankye," *Unification Attitude Survey* (2012), pp. 147-81.
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6. Anthony F. Heath and James R. Tilley, "British National Identity and Attitudes Toward Immigration," *International Journal on Multicultural Societies*, 7 (2005): 119-132; Mikael Hjerm, "National Identities, National Pride and Xenophobia: A Comparison of Four Western Countries," *Acta Sociologica* 41 (1998): 335-347; Frank Jones and Philip Smith, "Diversity and Commonality in National Identities: An Exploratory Analysis of Cross-National Patterns," *Journal of Sociology,* 37 (2001): 45-63; Samuel Pehrson, Vivian L. Vignoles, and Rupert Brown, "National Identification and Anti-Immigrant Prejudice: Individual And Contextual Effects Of National Definitions," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 72, no. 1 (2009): 24-38.
7. For convenience, I made the variable binary, simply coded 0 as negative and 1 as positive.
8. Gi-Wook Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea: Genealogy, Politics, and Legacy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).
9. Anthony D. Smith, "The Myth of the 'Modern Nation' and the Myths of Nations," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 11 no. 1 (1988): 1-26. Rogers Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).
10. This scheme follows Kang and Lee's scheme used in their work on changing Korean nationalism. Kang Won-Taek and Lee Nae-Young, *Hankookin, urinun nooguinka? Yeoron josarul tonghae bon Hankookin ui jeongcheseong* (Seoul: East Asia Institute, 2012).

11. For instance, the closeness score for immigrants was lower as a person thinks that bloodline is important to be a Korean (5.649 vs. 6.442). Regarding nativity of a person, those who think that being born in Korea is an important element to be a Korean tend to feel closer to immigrants (5.770) compared with those who do not (6.273). Similarly, those who do not think living most of one's life in Korea is important to be considered Korean were more tolerant to immigrants (6.086) than those who do so (5.774).
12. Matthew Wright. "Diversity and the Imagined Community: Immigrant Diversity and Conceptions of National Identity," *Political Psychology*, 32 (2011): 837-862.
13. Jones and Smith, 2001; Pehrson, Vignoles and Brown, 2009.
14. According to Jang Joon-oh's survey on North Korean defectors in 2007, about 37.9 percent of them came to the South because of poverty and 16.8 percent of them to look for a job. In total, 54.7 percent of them migrated to South Korea at the risk of their own lives for economic reasons. Political reasons took priority for only 19.2 percent. Joon-Oh Jang and Sung-Ho Go, *North Korean Defectors: Crime & Countermeasures* (Seoul: Korean Institute of Criminology, 2010).
15. If a score for closeness to immigrants or North Korean defectors is below 5, it is coded as "negative," and "neutral" if is exactly 5. If a score is higher than 5, the respondent is coded as "positive."
16. Heath and Tilley, 2005; Hjerm, 1998; Jones and Smith, 2001; Pehrson, Vignoles and Brown, 2009. I also reexamined the relationship between the degree of ethnic identity and the attitude toward immigrants using this survey data. The result confirms earlier research. The stronger degree of ethnic identity, the more likely the person tends to see immigrants negatively.
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