



**South Korean Identity
Under Park Geun-hye:
Crosscurrents & Choppy Waters**

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South Korea's nation-building project during the Cold War relied heavily on strong state direction designed to generate a sense of cohesion and national identity. These strategies were conceived and executed during the Cold War under the authoritarian leadership of developmental dictators Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan. The environment was also defined by South Korea's dependence on its alliance with the United States. During the early stages of South Korea's national development, the leaders mobilized the people primarily through appeals to anti-communism focused on North Korea and through anti-imperialism focused on the historical legacy of Japanese imperialism and Korea's lost nationhood. Although South Korea's developmental success came at a high cost to personal freedoms, South Korea's largely peaceful democratic transition and continued economic success generated a positive record of achievement, which itself has become a source of pride and has emerged as a component of its national experience that developing countries seek to emulate. As evidence of the magnitude of South Korea's economic and political transformation, consider that the South Korea that freely chose to elect Park Geun-hye president in 2013 had a per capita GDP of over \$24,000 and a college-age population of which 90 percent entered college. This is a far cry from the country that her father Park Chung-hee took over militarily in 1961. In that year, its per capita GDP was \$1,458, 15 percent of South Koreans lived in poverty, and only 8 percent attended college.¹

South Korean confidence deriving from the success of its modernization and its democratization has been accompanied by a sense of vulnerability that has grown under Park Geun-hye's leadership. In her 2013 inauguration speech, Park identified the country's potential vulnerability to the global economic crisis and North Korea's growing nuclear threat as major challenges. She invoked confidence borne of South Korea's experience of national resilience as a resource necessary to face these twin challenges and restated her goal of bringing happiness to the Korean people. Yet, she has so far struggled throughout her administration to find answers to these vexing issues.² In part, Park's efforts to address these issues have included recalibrating the sources and manifestations of South Korea's national identity.

During her campaign for the presidency in late 2012, Park referred to Asia's paradox, which has seen economic growth and geopolitical fissures in Northeast Asia at the same time, pointing specifically to relations with North Korea, historical differences with Japan, and the prospect of a rising Sino-U.S. arms race as potential threats to South Korea's well-being. In so doing, she identified longstanding sources of Korean national identity that would have to be transformed for "Asia's paradox" to be resolved: anti-communism with North Korea, anti-colonialism with Japan, and the "shrimp among whales" paradigm in which South Korea is presumed to have little freedom of action due to its relative weakness compared to the great powers in the region. Park's regional prescriptions for multilateral cooperation, the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative and the Eurasian Initiative, derive in part from an ambitious effort to build a new foundation for Korea's national identity as a "network" node or middle power, but these initiatives also reveal the limits and vulnerabilities of South Korea's regional diplomacy. Interestingly, the steps necessary to fully address each element of Park's Asian paradox require transformation, not only in South Korea's international relations, but also in South Korea's conception of its national identity. I now turn to a more detailed analysis of each of these elements of diplomacy under Park with special reference to their implications for conceptions of national identity.

TRUSTPOLITIK & PREPARATION FOR KOREAN UNIFICATION

Park Geun-hye's initial policy toward North Korea was presented in a *Foreign Affairs* article as "trustpolitik." The article called for North Korea to keep its agreements with South Korea and the international community and pledged "assured consequences for actions that breach the peace." The strategy essentially called upon North Korea to show itself trustworthy in the eyes of the international community as the essential prerequisite for building a positive relationship. In addition, Park emphasized the importance of "alignment" of peninsular and international efforts toward North Korea.³ Park further elaborated on her long-term vision for integration of the two Koreas in her Dresden speech in March 2014, which presented a phased process of inter-Korean integration involving first, humanitarian cooperation, second, "co-prosperity through the building of infrastructure that supports the livelihood of the people," and finally, "integration between the people of North and South Korea." However, expansion of inter-Korean cooperation to large-scale economic projects was conditioned on North Korea's denuclearization.⁴

In addition to these policy statements, Park's emphasis on the likelihood, importance, and benefits of Korean unification has distinguished her from her predecessors to the extent that her pronouncements involve a reframing of questions of identity related to the objective of national unification. Park's approach is arguably shifting the narrative in inter-Korean relations from one that has been defined primarily in terms of a final victory in the ideology-based inter-Korean competition for legitimacy into a narrative that argues for unification as a development that would end inter-Korean confrontation and bring tangible benefits to both South and North Korea; Park used the word "taebak," or bonanza, to describe Korean unification in a January 6, 2014 press conference.

Unification has always been a powerful narrative in inter-Korean relations as an expression of shared ethnic identity to end the suffering from the tragedy of division, both at the family level and at the national level. However, the discussion of reunification from one that had primarily focused on costs, a deferred timetable, and a cooperative process under progressive South Korean presidents, transformed under Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye into one that focused on the benefits of a unification that implicitly would be likely to result from North Korea's vulnerability. This focus on the benefits of an early unification process has shifted the frame of discourse on the likelihood and prospects for unification.

Aside from a rhetorical emphasis on the unification "bonanza," Park's main tool for pursuing a reframing of the national unification narrative has been the establishment of the Presidential Committee on Preparation for Unification, a committee chaired by Park to prepare for the security, political, legal, economic, and social implications of unification. In presenting national unification as an opportunity that required active preparation, Park offered a view of unification as a benefit and a fulfillment of Korea's national destiny rather than as a component of the longstanding ideological competition between the two Koreas. However, the inability of the committee to provide greater understanding to the public regarding the likely process or driving forces that would presage unification have been factors that limit public support.

An Asan Institute for Policy Studies report released in 2015 illustrates that a plurality of the Korean public supported efforts to achieve dialogue and cooperation and viewed the conservative policies of Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye as insufficiently forward-leaning in their efforts to engage with North Korea. But the report also shows that Park's emphasis on "*taebak*" may have represented and/or accelerated a shift in the rationale for pursuing unification within the public from one based on shared ethnicity to one based on shared economic interests. The report records a drop from 59 percent of Koreans who placed importance on shared ethnicity as a motivation for reunification in 2007 to 40 percent of Koreans in 2014, with younger generations rating the importance of shared ethnicity much lower than their seniors. This is notable because younger Koreans appeared more likely to respond to the economic rationale for pursuing unification than that based on shared ethnicity.⁵ These data suggest the decline of anti-communism as a major component of identity versus the North and that the best prospect of building a long-term rationale in support of unification is likely to be presenting unification as beneficial to the mutual economic interests of both Koreas. Conversely, the survey results imply that the economic gap between the two Koreas could be a major factor weakening public support for Korean unification if not handled skillfully. By shifting South Korean identity discussions vis-à-vis unification from one that has relied on outmoded ideology-based competition for legitimacy to a narrative that anticipates shared economic benefits and prosperity, Park has taken a step forward in reframing identity on the issue of national unification.

THE COMFORT WOMAN ISSUE & JAPAN-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

The second issue Park identified as a component of "Asia's paradox" involved the need for Japan to come to a "correct view of history"⁶ through "corresponding steps from the region's main historical and wartime aggressor."⁷ As I argued with Brad Glosserman in our book, *The Japan-South Korea Identity Clash*, the roots of this conflict over Japan's acknowledgement of its historical legacy on the Korean Peninsula ultimately can be framed in terms of identity. However, this means that in order to positively influence the trajectory of the relationship, proactive efforts to change the dynamic of the Japan-South Korea relationship ultimately would involve efforts to redefine South Korea's identity in relationship to Japan and vice versa. Since the bulk of nation-building efforts since the establishment of the ROK have been defined by opposition to Japan's historical role as colonial aggressor, South Koreans historically have been sensitive about Japan's willingness to come to terms with its imperial past. During the 2012 presidential campaign, Park expressed the hope to see Japan do more to acknowledge its historical role. However, when viewed through the framework of identity, the question of whether Japan has sufficiently acknowledged and paid for its past wrongs would also require South Korea to be able to accept and forgive past Japanese injustices toward it.

The specifics of Park Geun-hye's approach to South Korea's relationship with Japan once she became president were shaped by several factors. First, South Korea's Constitutional Court had ruled in 2011 that the government had not done enough on behalf of the "comfort women" in negotiations with Japan, making this issue a focal point and sticking point in management of relations with Japan. Second, the reelection of Abe Shinzo as prime minister, who is widely perceived to hold revisionist views on Japan's historical role, arguably made

management of a stable Japan-South Korea relationship even more challenging. In fact, Abe's decision to visit the Yasukuni Shrine in December 2013 exacerbated Japan-South Korean tensions and catalyzed U.S. efforts to stabilize the bilateral relationship. Following a trilateral meeting among Obama, Abe, and Park at The Hague on the sidelines of the 2014 Nuclear Security Summit, Japan and South Korea agreed to address differences over the "comfort woman" issue in periodic talks held at the director-general level of their foreign ministries. However, a Japanese government review of the background of the Kono statement launched at the same time seemed to validate South Korean fears that historical revisionism in Japan would further undermine the basis for efforts to improve the Japan-South Korea relationship. The results of the review, however, were ambiguous and did not serve to undermine the validity of the statement, as Japanese conservatives had hoped.

Although director-general level talks on the "comfort woman" issue dragged on for over a year with no apparent progress, the two sides made modest steps toward the restoration of a normal relationship. Park made a Liberation Day speech on August 15, 2014 that hinted at a willingness to improve relations with Japan despite a failure to settle this issue. In the run-up to the 50th anniversary of diplomatic normalization, cabinet level ties between the two countries were normalized, and Park and Abe appeared at parallel receptions held in Tokyo and Seoul respectively on June 22 to commemorate the anniversary. Park sent conciliatory signals to Japan the day after Abe's August 14 speech commemorating the anniversary of the end of World War II despite the feeling among most Koreans that the speech had fallen short of taking responsibility for Japan's historical role. During a September visit to Beijing to attend China's commemoration of the end of World War II, Park successfully restarted plans for the China-Japan-ROK trilateral summit, held on November 1 in Seoul. Following that summit, Abe and Park held their first bilateral summit on November 2, after which South Korea once again urged Japan to come to an agreement on the "comfort woman" issue by the end of the year.

A significant force in support of governmental efforts to stabilize the Japan-South Korea relationship were public opinion polls in both countries such as the joint NPO Forum/East Asia Institute poll released in the spring of 2015 that showed that large majorities in both Japan and South Korea held negative views regarding the relationship and wanted the situation to improve. An Asan Institute poll conducted in the summer of 2015 suggested that most Koreans would support a resumption of summit-level interactions between the two leaders even prior to the resolution of the "comfort woman" issue. These polls showed that despite the mutual decline in public perceptions, there was recognition that the two governments should better manage the relationship.

Against this backdrop, Seoul and Tokyo made a surprise announcement on December 28, 2015 that they had come to a final agreement on the "comfort woman" issue. The government of Japan issued a statement in the name of the prime minister that acknowledged the pain of the victims and pledged payment to the government of the ROK to establish a foundation to provide restitution to the Korean "comfort women" and their families. The ROK acknowledged the settlement of the issue as "final and irreversible" and pledged to open discussions with South Korean non-governmental organizations about moving the "comfort woman" memorial statue located outside the Japanese embassy in Seoul. The South Korean public's initial response to the agreement was divided. Korea's Realmeter poll recorded that 51 percent opposed the agreement and 43 percent supported it. Moreover, almost three quarters of Koreans supported keeping the "comfort woman" statue in its current location.⁸

Perhaps most important from an identity perspective, however, is that the very decision by the Korean government to bring the issue to resolution required it to challenge anti-Japanese sentiment that had come to be part of the expression of Korean identity. The agreement reflected a willingness by the South Korean government to accept a settlement with Japan despite the fact that it would open the government to criticisms that Japan had not gone far enough in expressing its responsibility and remorse for its historical legacy.

Park Geun-hye's public statement to the Korean people acknowledged that, for some Koreans, there could be no satisfactory settlement of these issues, but then stated, "the Korean government made every effort to have the Japanese government acknowledge its responsibility and officially express remorse and apologies for the comfort women. And based on the judgment that sufficient progress was made within the boundaries of feasibility, we reached agreement." She then called on the Japanese government "to squarely face history while faithfully implementing the agreement" and called on the Korean public and the victims to "view the agreement with largeness of heart and to stand together for the future of our nation." In voicing these sentiments, Park asked the South Korean public to pursue a mix of pragmatism, principle, and forgiveness that, in sum, represented a half step away from the cycle of rupture and rapprochement in Korea-Japan relations, if indeed it is possible for the agreement to be implemented in good faith.

SINO-U.S. RELATIONS & KOREA'S DILEMMA

The third area of concern in Park's Asian paradox thesis is the danger posed by the possibility of "accelerated military competition" in Northeast Asia. A specific area of concern is related to the U.S.-China relationship and the negative implications of increasing regional tensions for South Korea. While calling for a "forward-looking" U.S.-China relationship, Park states categorically that a rising China and America's pivot to Asia are not "mutually exclusive," and that South Korean ties with these two powers "are not premised on choosing one over the other."⁹ Yet one consequence of drastically increased tensions in Sino-U.S. relations would be that South Korea would have to choose one over the other, limiting or even eliminating South Korea's freedom of action as it navigates the space between its larger neighbors. The second consequence of heightened Sino-U.S. tensions is that it would limit the prospects for Korean unification. Thus, South Korea has a profound interest in strengthening regional cooperation and in promoting the "thickness" of regional institutions as vehicles for deepening Sino-U.S. cooperation beyond the bilateral component of the Sino-U.S. relationship.

Park has pursued efforts to strengthen the Sino-South Korean relationship, but always on the foundation provided by a solid U.S.-ROK alliance, which itself was established as a logical follow-on to South Korea's identity as a weak state or as a "shrimp among whales." However, the efforts with China are premised on the idea that South Korea has the capability to be a constructive convener and arbiter of Sino-U.S. interests, especially as they relate to North Korea. One initiative Park has tried to promote has been the establishment of a formal trilateral Sino-U.S.-ROK dialogue on North Korea. Although one track 1.5 meeting was held in the summer of 2013 among Chinese, American, and South Korean specialists, the initiative did not stimulate sufficient interest among Chinese and American counterparts to take root as an official forum despite ongoing South Korean diplomatic efforts. This initiative shows South Korea's desire to play a coordinating role with its larger neighbors so as to avoid its historic position as the object of major power maneuvering for advantage, i.e., a "shrimp among whales."

Several forces have influenced the Sino-ROK-U.S. dynamic. One is the question of mutually exclusive choices versus overlapping and reinforcing interests. For instance, Park's efforts to develop closer relations with China and with Xi Jinping have occasionally been subjected to criticism from those who worry that the Sino-South Korean relationship might develop at the expense of the U.S.-ROK alliance. However, Park's diplomacy with China has been undergirded by assiduously close consultation between Seoul and Washington as a result of regular diplomatic briefings at senior levels regarding South Korean relations with China before and after almost every major interaction, and President Obama offered explicit support for good Sino-ROK relations in his October 2015 joint press conference with Park Geun-hye. In this way, the United States has continuously supported South Korean efforts to engage more comprehensively with Beijing.

The second dynamic of interaction has been driven by Chinese efforts to force South Korean choices in ways that drive wedges in or bind the U.S.-ROK alliance. For instance, Xi Jinping's efforts to win South Korea over to China's side through appeals to criticize Japan's position on history issues were also perceived by many as an indirect test of the U.S.-ROK alliance. South Korea also gained points for opposing Xi's effort to win support from the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia for a statement that would directly criticize U.S. alliances as a source of tension in Asia. In addition, China challenged South Korea to resist the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system to South Korean territory because of Chinese concerns that this system had dual uses that could also target China. In each of these cases, China indirectly or directly challenged South Korea's identity as an alliance partner of the United States. In some cases, South Korea's interest in redoubled cooperation with the United States has been driven by its negative perceptions with regard to China's hegemonic pretensions.

Third, the nature and depth of the U.S.-ROK alliance have evolved substantially through the establishment and upgrading of trade and nuclear cooperation agreements and through the expansion of cooperation on non-traditional security issues on a global scale in the areas of public health, international development, and post-conflict stabilization. This evolution has transformed the alliance from a patron-client relationship to a security partnership in which South Korea is no longer solely the object of protection and consumer of international security resources. While these elements of cooperation are unrelated to China for the most part, identity shift within the alliance strengthens the relationship against criticisms from China that the alliance can be defined solely in terms of threat, especially in the event that the threat posed by North Korea were to be neutralized or eliminated as a rationale for U.S.-ROK cooperation. However, because of South Korean interest in maintaining a positive relationship with both Washington and Beijing, it is premature to say whether policy toward China will emerge as a source of contention or cooperation within the alliance framework.

Within this context, trends in South Korean public opinion toward China and the United States have been moving in opposite directions; anxieties about China have grown as support for the U.S.-ROK alliance has increased. Pew Research polling shows that favorability toward the United States has gradually increased from around 50 percent in 2002 to the 70 percent range in 2013, while South Korean attitudes toward China have declined from the 60 to the 40 percent range during the same period.¹⁰

Finally, South Korea has sought an active role in strengthening multilateral cooperation through promotion of forums that require involvement of both the United States and China to succeed. In so doing, it seeks to maximize its leverage and influence with both Beijing and Washington by building engagement with China on the foundation provided by the alliance.

SOUTH KOREA'S MULTILATERAL INITIATIVES: CJK, NAPCI, & THE EURASIAN INITIATIVE

South Korea's efforts to promote regional and multilateral diplomatic initiatives further challenge its longstanding identity as a "shrimp among whales," in part by appropriating network concepts to augment South Korea's geographic position, adding the spatial and functional idea of Korea as a node in a network or as a connector. The rationale to pursue such cooperation in the context of "Asia's paradox" has been that institutionalization of multilateral cooperation in Northeast Asia is an effective way to "build political and military confidence, intensify economic cooperation, and attain mutually beneficial human security dividends." Such initiatives are also in line with the South Korean foreign ministry's "middle power" concept, which seeks to use South Korean "hosting diplomacy" and "network diplomacy" as means by which to exert South Korea's influence despite its relative weakness compared to neighboring major powers. Efforts under Park to establish an identity as convener and networker as a means of challenging South Korea's geographic constraints have experienced mixed success. Networking is only effective in an environment that is conducive to connection as opposed to confrontation. Yet, rising rivalries in Northeast Asia have acted as an inhibitor to efforts to promote regional multilateralism. Under the Park administration, three cases are worthy of close examination.

First, Park's inauguration coincided with South Korea's turn as host of the annual trilateral China-Japan-Korea (CJK) summit that had been established in 2010 as an outgrowth of dialogue among the three countries that had occurred on the sidelines of ASEAN + 3 meetings. However, tensions between China and Japan over the Senkakus and questions about Abe's tendencies toward historical revisionism emerged as obstacles to holding a CJK summit in 2013 and 2014. The primary immediate benefit of Park's decision to participate in Chinese World War II commemoration activities in Beijing in September 2015 was to secure a Chinese commitment following Abe's 70th anniversary statement to resume the CJK trilateral, which was subsequently held on October 31, 2015. Although Park's efforts to hold the summit encountered many obstacles and delays, she was ultimately successful in winning cooperation from China and Japan to resume it and to expand political space for the accompanying activities of the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS).

Second, in her article on Asia's paradox published during her presidential campaign, Park mentioned her Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI), which seeks to foster functional cooperation and regional integration following the model of the Helsinki Process in Europe. In pursuing this initiative, Park has placed Korea at the center of a multilateral process designed to foster Northeast Asian networks on a wide range of functional issues with the idea this would help to overcome mistrust within Northeast Asia. While the impulse to play a regional connecting role has been a theme of Korean diplomacy for over two decades, it is an excellent illustration of efforts to build a Korean identity as a convener and networker as a means to escape the dilemma of being a weak power among competing great powers.

Third, Park has invoked the virtues of connection between Europe and Asia through her Eurasian Initiative, which seeks to strengthen energy and transportation linkages between the two continents. This particular initiative has shown the least development, in part because the international response to Russia's aggression in the Ukraine has upended prospects for tangible cooperation. South Korean firms have explored possible investments in and utilization of a Russian-constructed railway from Russia to the North Korean port at Rajin, but plans for other forms of cooperation have not materialized. In addition, it remains to be seen whether this concept intersects in Northeast Asia with China's One Belt One Road initiative, i.e., whether the two concepts for regional development will evolve in a competitive or a cooperative fashion. Regardless of the success of these three initiatives, each case illustrates how Park has sought to use concepts of network diplomacy with South Korea as a convener or node to challenge the limitations of its geographical identity as a weak power trapped at the vortex of major power rivalry.

CONCLUSION

Park Geun-hye has entered the fourth year of her single five-year term in February 2016 and faces National Assembly elections in April 2016. The pattern of presidential power reveals that the greatest opportunities to secure the accomplishments necessary to achieve a tangible legacy occur in the first three years, and that legacy-burnishing accomplishments are a harder lift as Korean presidents approach the twilight of their ability to exercise power. Park's prescriptions regarding Asia's paradox made in 2012 before she assumed the presidency have proven accurate, but her ability to effectively influence or resolve the major elements of the paradox have been mixed. Korean confidence accrued as a result of its economic success and democratization are increasingly being challenged by a more dangerous regional security environment, inducing a rising sense of vulnerability within Korean society.

Park has not dodged or sugar-coated the magnitude or severity of the problems South Korea faces. Instead, she has confronted these challenges, even when they have challenged long-held strains of identity that may now require adaptation for South Korea to move forward. Nevertheless, the task of pursuing solutions that challenge long-held components of Korean national identity may reduce the likelihood of tangible success, has reduced the capability of her supporters to claim an immediate set of impressive accomplishments, and underscores the severity of the diplomatic challenges South Korea is likely to face. But as Park attempts to refashion elements of Korean identity in order to generate a way forward for diplomacy, she has invoked another crucial strand of South Korea's post-war identity that she identified in her inaugural address when she noted "the resilience and the potential of our dynamic nation."¹¹ It is that resilience and dynamism on which South Korea will have to rely in order to successfully respond to diplomatic challenges it is likely to face.

ENDNOTES

1. Scott Snyder, *Korean Choices*, Great Decisions 2016, Foreign Policy Association, p. 51.
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