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Pacific Focus, Vol. XXIII, No. 1 (April 2008), 421.
<https://hdl.handle.net/10945/50676>

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Korean Nationalism in a Divided Nation: Challenges to US Policy

Edward A. Olsen

Korean nationalism poses challenges for Koreans dwelling in each half of the divided Korean nation because each half of the nation must simultaneously deal with both their own and the other half's form of semi-nationalism and also with peninsular pan-nationalism. Coping with these three forms of nationalism is also a problem for US policy toward each Korean state and toward inter-Korean relations. Understanding the historical evolution of these dynamics is crucial to all three players, but their perspectives on that historical legacy differ – adding to the complexity of the issue. The ways in which China, Russia and Japan cope with Korean nationalism further complicates matters for US policy. Over time, as a unified Korea's nationalism becomes more likely, the USA shall have to adapt its policy toward Korea in a more creative manner.

Key words: *nationalism, ethnicity, identity, inter-Korean, anti-Americanism, unification.*

The USA's relations with Korea are complex on many levels. At the most basic level the USA has relations with two Koreas – the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the Democratic Republic of Korea (DPRK). Each of these relationships is shaped by how the USA views each of these states and, in turn, how the USA is perceived by the people and leaders of each Korea. The complexities of these issues are compounded by the organizational approaches that each of these three governments, and the societies they represent, utilize in their relationships dealing with diplomacy, security, politics, economics and the cultural nuances which influence such affairs. Further intensifying such complexities is the fundamental issue of how Koreans in each half of their divided nation aspire to ending that division by recreating a united Korean nation state; the ways they approach that issue; when and how it may occur; and the degree to which the Korean peninsula's neighbors are prepared to deal with all these possibilities.

This situation also poses challenges to the USA too because of uncertainty regarding how well American leaders are prepared for coping with such possible changes in Korea. All of these complexities relating to US policy have been addressed by many scholars, think tanks and government studies on different levels.¹ One aspect of this set of policy issues that has not received enough attention from the US policy perspective is how Korean nationalism functions in a reuniting divided nation. This lack may have a significant impact on US policy as the reunification process evolves. In order to assess that impact this analysis shall examine five key themes: i) some of the key characteristics of traditional Korean nationalism on the Korean peninsula; ii) how nationalism is simultaneously similar and different in each half of the peninsula's domestic affairs; iii) the roles of Korean nationalism in each Korea's foreign affairs; iv) the impact of Korean nationalism on inter-Korean affairs; and v) lastly, how Korean reunification could be influenced by nationalism and how Korean nationalism might shape the roles of external players in Korean reunification. After surveying these nationalist themes, their probable consequences for US policy toward a reuniting Korea shall be assessed.

The historical roots of Korea as a nation are complex.² On one level, in a manner similar to many other ethnic nations in Asia and elsewhere in the world, the concept of the Korean people as a nation (*minjok*) can be traced to a legendary founder. This legendary founder of Korea was named Tangun whose spiritual teachings are rooted in Mt. Paektu on the present border between North Korea and China. According to these legends Tangun was the offspring of a deity called Hwan-ung who supposedly came to Paektu-san with a band of followers in response to spiritual prayers from a female bear and female tiger and then mated with the bear after she was transformed into a human woman, yielding their son – Tangun. This reputed son of a deity is considered to be the founder of Korea in 2333 BC. Another supposed founder of Korea is called Kija (Chitzu in Chinese) who was a Chinese prince of the Shang Dynasty who supposedly founded Korea in southern Manchuria in 1122 BC. For most Korean nationalists Tangun is far more ethnically plausible and emotionally popular. In reality

1. For a relatively balanced group of assessments of the issue, see: Selig S. Harrison, *Korean Endgame, A Strategy for Reunification and US Disengagement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); John Feffer, editor, *The Future of US-Korean Relations, The Imbalance of Power* (London: Routledge, 2006); Doug Bandow, *Tripwire: Korea and US Foreign Policy in a Changed World* (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, 1996); Young-Nok Koo and Dae-sook Suh, editors, *Korea and the United States: A Century of Cooperation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984); Wonmo Dong, editor, *The Two Koreas and the United States* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2000); Tong Whan Park, editor, *The US and the Two Koreas* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1998); and David I. Steinberg, editor, *Korean Attitudes Toward the United States, Changing Dynamics* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2005).

2. For in-depth assessments of Korea's historical roots, which are succinctly summarized here for contextual purposes, see: Michael J. Seth, *A Concise History of Korea, From the Neolithic Period through the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006); Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997); Kenneth B. Lee, *Korea and East Asia, The Strategic Phoenix* (Westport: Praeger, 1997); and Woo-Keun Han, *The History of Korea* (Honolulu: East-West Center/University Press of Hawaii, 1974).

Korea's roots as an ethnic nation are much older than either of these figures, but Tangun serves as a symbolic way to explain how a complex blend of tribal Asian and proto-Caucasoid people (whose descendents are known as Ainu in Japan) interacted and merged ethnically and linguistically into what became the people of Chosun (land of the morning calm) and Kija helps to explain the partially Chinese cultural roots of the Korean nation.

Against that legendary background the ethnic Korean people's efforts to create a system to bring these people together spawned a sequence of separate states using the early Korean term for what became Korea – "han" – which is why South Korea is Hanguk and North Korea to South Koreans is succinctly "buk han." These fledgling "han" states – Chin-han, Ma-han, and Pyon-han – evolved into three stronger kingdoms, Koguryo (56 BC), Shilla (37 BC), and Paekche (18 BC). These three states are known as Korea's "Three Kingdoms" period, lasting until they evolved into the peninsula's first unified Korean nation state under Shilla in 668 AD. It is important to note that before and after this unification process not all of Korea was embodied by all of the ethnic groups on the peninsula. For most of the so-called Three Kingdoms period there was a fourth kingdom on the southern end of the peninsula – called Kaya by Koreans and Mimana by the offshore Japanese who had ethnic cultural ties to it. It was absorbed by Shilla. Similarly, one of the three kingdoms, Koguryo, was based well into Manchuria because that was where its roots were as the Han tribal people gradually migrated into the peninsula. Under Unified Shilla, however, and its successor, the Koryo dynasty (918–1392), some Koreans with ethnic bonds to the Manchus to the north created another state, Palhae. Under Koryo's version of a united Korea, the portion of Palhae that was on the peninsula became part of what the world knows as the Korean peninsula today, however the northern part of it remained with the Manchus and later on with China. The Koryo dynasty lasted until 1392 when a Manchurian controlled Yuan Dynasty in China changed the dynamic that surrounded Korea, causing the creation of the Yi Dynasty which lasted until the early 20th century.

Korean nationalists in both of the current Korean states take enormous pride in how their ancestors created an ethnic Korean nation state and how they generally coped with pressures from neighboring – but not always neighborly – China and, later on, Japan. However, the ways Korean culture interacted with China produced a great deal of philosophical, religious, literary, political and other forms of Sinic influence on what constituted Koreans' sense of who they were and where they fit into the world as they could perceive it.³ This is not to suggest that they lost their Korean-ness, but they did adapt much of China's cultural attributes and interacted with China in a two-way street fashion, especially in the Confucian/neo-Confucian

3. For more detailed background on Korean nationalism and its context, see: Hyung Il Pai and Timothy R. Tongherlini, editors, *Nationalism and the Construction of Korean Identity* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1998); Chung-In Moon and Seung-won Suh, "Burdens of the Past, Overcoming History, the Politics of Identity, and Nationalism in Asia,"

philosophical arena. One interesting aspect of this mix is how Korea's location between China and Japan made the earlier rival states of Korea into facilitators for the migratory patterns that shaped early Japan. This helped to cause many of the former leaders of the Paekche kingdom to migrate to Japan after Shilla took control, bringing a Sinified version of Korean culture to what helped to shape Nara Japan. Later on, because of the two-way street aspects of Sino-Korean cultural interaction, this also put Koreans in a position of greater long term rapport with China⁴ than with Japan.⁵

These aspects of Korea's pre-modern history created a profound legacy for the entire Korean nation and its sub-regional linguistic and ethnic heritages. The desire among Koreans to retain and strengthen those bonds as they coped with inter-regional provincial biases and tensions within their ethnic nation accentuated Korean needs to differentiate a Korean identity in contrast to that of China and Japan. Given how long most of the Korean ethnic nation had managed to remain intact as a nation state and had cultivated great pride in its origins, past achievements and where it stood vis-à-vis the country which was the most powerful in the world as the Koreans knew it for centuries – China – it is no surprise that Korean national pride was severely hurt by Japan's relations with Korea. Koreans have strong historical memories of what Japan under Toyotomi Hideyoshi had done to Yi dynasty Korea during a protracted invasion (1592–98) which enormously damaged Korea and over time led it to become more explicitly part of a Sino-centric geopolitical system. The Chinese buffer for Korea weakened as a result of Imperial Japan's 19th century rejection of its Tokugawa era largely isolationist approach to international affairs which yielded a Japanese quest to join the Western approach to imperial colonialism.

Korean leaders presumed that China's efforts to cope with the European and Japanese pressures on China would either distract the foreign empire builders to Korea's advantage or would shelter Korea from such meddling. These presumptions were plausible for a while, but by the 1860s and '70s Korea had to directly confront Western and Japanese pressures. Some Korean reformers wanted to adapt Japan's modernization paradigm based

Global Asia, Vol. 2, No. 1, (Spring 2007); Chong-Shik Chung and Jae-Bong Ro, editors, *Nationalism in Korea* (Seoul: Research Center for Peace and Unification, 1979); Andrew C. Nahm, "Korean Nationalism: Its Origins and Transformation," *Korea Journal* (February 1983); and Sung Chul Yang, "The Evolution of Korean Nationalism: A Historical Survey," *Korea Journal* (Fall 1987).

4. For coverage of the legacy for contemporary Asia of China–Korea historical roots, see: Chae-Jin Lee, *China and Korea: Dynamic Relations* (Stanford: Hoover Press, 1996); Chae-Jin Lee, *China's Korean Minority* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1986); Jae Ho Chung, *Between Ally and Partner: Korea–China Relations and the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

5. For coverage of the legacy for contemporary Asia of Japan–Korea historical roots, see: C.I. Eugene Kim and Doretha E. Mortimore, editors, *Korea's Response to Japan: The Colonial Period, 1910–1945* (Kalamazoo: Center for Korean Studies, Western Michigan University, 1997); Young-Sun Ha, editor, *Korea and Japan; Past, Present and Future* (Seoul: Center for International Studies, Seoul National University, 1997); Chong-Sik Lee, *Japan and Korea, The Political Dimension* (Stanford: Hoover Press, 1985).

on Western models to Korea's need to adjust to external circumstances and some Japanese reacted well to that notion, however, on balance Japanese tensions with China and Russia undercut that concept. Korea in the late 19th century got entangled in events which yielded the Sino-Japanese War (1894–95) and then the Russo-Japanese War (1905–05).⁶ These circumstances were early examples of what Gregory Henderson insightfully labeled – vis-à-vis the post-World War II era – the “politics of the vortex.”⁷ Korea, because of where it was located and how it perceived China and Tsarist Russia became a victim of Japan's wars with China and Russia.

All of this led to Japan's incremental absorption of Korea through socio-economic inroads in the 1880s and '90s at the expense of would be Chinese and Russian mentors, establishing a protectorate relationship with Korea in the wake of the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, and compelling Korean leaders to sign in 1910 a treaty of annexation that made Korea part of the Japanese empire. How the Korean nation was thoroughly brought under Japanese control from 1910 until Japan's defeat in World War II proved to be a major event for Koreans' national consciousness because of the oppressive manner in which Japan exerted control over Korea. Many Koreans had formally rejected Japan's role in Korea via support for a diplomatic effort to argue against Japanese colonialism via the creation of a Korean “provisional” government based in China; also by support for militant resistance via underground activities within the peninsula; or by joining armed campaigns against Japan in China, the USSR, and Manchuria. These methods were symbolic of the anti-Japanese core of Korean nationalistic sentiments. Just as Koreans' national pride was severely hurt by Japan's oppressive approach to Korea, the way in which that context spawned intense Korean nationalistic desires to kick the Japanese out of the peninsula was a major development for how Korean nationalism became valued by Koreans.

This proved to be deeply ironic because Korean national pride was torn in two, literally, by how liberation from Japan and the emergence of the Cold War caused a long united Korea to become the divided nation it is now.⁸ Had Korea been liberated from Japanese Imperialism in the form of one Korean nation state, there is ample reason to assume Koreans throughout the peninsula would have relished regaining their sovereignty and would have worked together to make the transition to a post-colonial independent state. Obviously, the ways in which two countries allied with each other throughout most of the Second World War – the USA and the Soviet

6. For insightful assessments of the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars, see: S.C.M. Paine, *The Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895: Perceptions, Power, and Primacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Dennis Ashton Warner and Peggy Warner, *Tide at Sunrise: A History of the Russo-Japanese War, 1904–1905* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2004).

7. Gregory Henderson, *Korea, The Politics of the Vortex* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968).

8. Korea's postwar liberation is assessed in James I. Matray, *The Reluctant Crusade: American Foreign Policy in Korea, 1941–1950* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984); and James Cotton and Ian Neary, editors, *The Korean War in History* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1989). See also, the author's: *US Policy and the Two Koreas* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988), and *Korea, The Divided Nation* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2005).

Union – dealt with Japan’s defeat and how they helped Korea make the transition to the post-Japan era had major consequences. Because of the US–USSR frictions that would spawn the Cold War, each of these countries approached the Korean peninsula from the perspective of their respective national interests, causing the peninsula to be administratively divided.

Although the Korean peninsula’s liberation was not initially a major concern for either the USA or the Soviet Union, it rapidly became a divisive issue between them because of how the USA’s postwar occupation of Japan prevented a significant Soviet role in that occupation. This caused the Soviet Union to try to make use of a sizeable group of Koreans who had been part of communist-backed anti-Japanese movements in the Soviet Union, China and Japanese controlled Manchuria in guiding the future of liberated Korea. While the USA made some use of its connections with the former Korean “provisional” government’s representatives in the USA – notably including Syngman Rhee – overall, the USA was initially not as focused on a coordinated approach to southern Korea as the Soviet Union was toward northern Korea. American leaders assumed things in Korea would work themselves out “in due course,” meaning in the relatively near future with China’s assistance.⁹ Obviously as numerous historical studies of Korean affairs have observed, things did not work out in that manner. Korea’s temporary division hardened, yielding two formally separate Korean states in 1948 which created circumstances that led to the Korean War and its aftermath, over half a century of peninsular geopolitical tensions. Just as the Korean nation was divided by all of this, so too were the perspectives of the Koreans living in each half of that nation divided.

Consequently, when people talk about nationalism in Korea today they have to be careful. While there is a remnant of overall “pan-Korean nationalism” left¹⁰ which shall be assessed in the context of inter-Korean affairs, what exists today in South Korea and North Korea amounts to “semi-nationalism.” This is a concept which clearly annoys many Koreans. Similarly, when analysts and students with whom the writer has interacted refer to ROK or DPRK state interests as “national interests” it is always useful to ask them – what nation? While policy makers in Seoul and Pyongyang are no doubt strongly influenced by their ethnic nation’s heritage and how each half of today’s Korea thinks the other half should perceive it, clearly they apply that heritage very differently to how their portion of Korean society functions. Despite underlying similarities drawing on the historical legacy summarized above, Koreans in each Korean state have evolved in different manners since the mid-1940s.¹¹

9. The author explored that “in due course” metaphor in greater detail in: *Toward Normalizing US–Korean Relations, In Due Course?* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002).

10. See: Jiyul Kim, “Pan-Korean Nationalism, Anti-Great Power-ism, and US–South Korean Relations,” Nautilus Institute, *Policy Forum*, Online 06-01A, 4 January 2004, <www.nautilus.org>.

11. For coverage of inter-Korean relations, see: Samuel S. Kim, editor, *Inter-Korean Relations: Problems and Prospects* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Hugo W. Kim, *Korean Americans and Inter-Korean Relations* (Centreville, VA: East–West Research Institute, 2003); Bruce Cumings, *The Two Koreas* (New York: Foreign Policy Association, 1984); and William J. Barnds, editor, *The Two Koreas in East Asian Affairs* (New York: New York University Press, 1976).

Authoritarian communism in the DPRK and politically pluralistic capitalism in the ROK has driven a major wedge between the two halves of the divided nation, clearly blurring what nationalism can mean to Koreans in each Korea today. The anti-imperial global vision of what could be called Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism-Kimism which guides North Korea's brand of semi-nationalism is not very compatible with the divisive nature of strident nationalism. Similarly, although with different roots, South Korea's embrace of economic globalism, pride in the success embodied by the cultural impact of the "Korean wave" in international media, and the great pride South Koreans display in having Ban Ki-moon as the Secretary General of the United Nations, do not encourage blatant displays of South Korea's brand of semi-nationalism. Although both Koreas today share the traditions of Korean nationhood and nationalism, how they can express it for the ROK and DPRK is simultaneously similar and different in each Korea's domestic affairs. Each Korea's form of nationalism shall be succinctly described and assessed.

North Korea's social and political environment was profoundly shaped by the legacy bestowed upon it by the former Soviet Union. Even though Stalinism faded over time in the USSR as its system evolved, the Stalinist paradigm of a rigidly hierarchical Marxist bureaucratic structure led by a renowned leader who is to be perceived as the epitome of the communist ethos rang a cultural bell in North Korea. This is not to suggest that Korea's cultural roots had an affinity for the Marxist-Leninist brand of communism with a Stalinist dictatorial leader at the apex. While the Soviet Union's geopolitical clout and its role as one of the liberators of Korea from Japanese oppression undoubtedly drew North Korea's aspiring leaders into the Soviet-led camp and caused Kim Il-Sung and his supporters to rally around a Stalinist model, there were other factors which helped to shape that process.

Given Korea's generic cultural heritage of clan-based hierarchicalism and strong-willed leaders (who cultivated clan-based loyalties that had an authoritarian aura) compounded by how such traditions had been reinforced in response to Japanese colonial rigidity, the ways in which North Koreans embraced the Soviet model can be attributed as much, if not more, to Korean cultural motivations as to Soviet pressures to get on board. Hence, the father and son team of "Great Leader" and "Dear Leader" – Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il – utilized an authoritarian hierarchical brand of leadership which can be traced to Korean cultural roots as much as to a Stalinist paradigm. Even though their form of government is frequently described by Western analysts as a hard core Stalinist regime¹² – with some salience because of DPRK–USSR ties – this can be a misleading label

12. For examples of Western usage of the Stalinist label, see: Howard G. Chu-Eoan, "Kim Jong Il: Now It's His Turn," *TIME*, July 18, 1994; Aidan Foster-Carter, "Is North Korea Stalinist?," *Asia Times*, September 5, 2001; Michael Sheridan, "Chairman Kim's Dissolving Kingdom," *The Sunday Times*, 30 January 2005; and Andrei Lankov, "The Natural Death of North Korean Stalinism," *Asia Policy*, January 2006.

because Stalin's approach to dictatorial power was partially based upon his ethnic roots as a Georgian rather than a Russian. This caused oppressive enforcement of his control as the "man of steel" which is what his adopted name "Stalin" means¹³ and is totally apart from the rationales behind North Korean adaptation of this Soviet-based authoritarian paradigm. Therefore there are solid reasons to avoid describing the brand of authoritarianism of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), run by Koreans in Korea, as literally Stalinist.

North Korea's brand of totalitarianism draws upon the legacy of Korean clan-based hierarchicalism and appeals to the instinctive affinity of the North Korean masses for such hierarchicalism. Because of this the DPRK's authoritarian system effectively plays to Korea's pre-modern authoritarianism in the name of both "Koreanism" and communism. This combination amounts to a very nationalistic form of socialism. Also, because of the isolated North Korean regime's affinity for its *juche* doctrine of self-reliance with nationalist overtones, the DPRK sees itself as less tainted by external factors. Drawing upon these two forms of authoritarianism, the DPRK can make use of a de facto form of ethnocentric cultural and political nationalism. This is what constitutes North Korea's form of semi-nationalism domestically.¹⁴

While South Koreans are clearly in a different environment, they too can draw on the legacy of the Korean nation's past in terms of political and social structures to cope with factionalism and provincial regionalism within their Korean society. In part, because of the ways South Koreans in the formative stage of the Republic of Korea (ROK) were exposed to many American military officials after Japan's ouster from Korea and because they knew the US military's occupation of Japan was achieving positive results, a case can be made that South Koreans got off on the proverbial wrong foot in terms of perceiving a Western political paradigm. When this was combined with what South Koreans understood to be occurring in North Korea under Soviet guidance, with how Cold War tensions underscored the role of the major powers' militaries in Northeast Asia, and – in a truly major fashion – the Korean War's impact on South Korean perceptions of their state's interests in military-oriented geopolitical terms, it became clear that South Korea was also adapting an authoritarian paradigm.

Despite the ROK's early democratic elections which were obviously different from, and better than, the political processes occurring in North Korea, the ways in which South Korean political leaders relied on networks

13. How Josef Djugashvili adopted the name "Stalin" is covered in Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Young Stalin* (New York: Knopf Publishing, 2007).

14. For insights into North Korea's domestic dynamics, see: Bruce Cumings, *North Korea, Another Country* (New York: The New Press, 2004); Han S. Park, editor, *North Korea: Ideology, Politics, Economy* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1996); Young Whan Kihl and Hong Nak Kim, editors, *North Korea, The Politics of Regime Survival* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2006); Andrew S. Natsios, *The Great North Korean Famine* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2001); and Ken E. Gause, *North Korean Civil-Military Trends: Military-First Politics to a Point* (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2006).

of hierarchical cliques and clan-linked networks illustrated how the ROK also was drawing on Korea's traditional culture to form a civilian led authoritarian democratic system. The ROK became even more authoritarian after the military coup led by Park Chung-hee fostered a couple of decades of a less democratic democracy. These trends were not particularly salient to Korea's traditional culture, but the socio-economic successes achieved by those governments created a new hierarchical dynamism in the ROK, which did resonate with what South Korean traditionalists wanted to restore. Because of the growing prosperity among South Koreans and the pride it generated about how their society was spawning the far more successful portion of the Korean peninsula without abandoning their roots, South Koreans became increasingly confident that the ROK was revitalizing Korea's heritage. This amounted to different facets of South Korea's semi-nationalism such as industrial pride based on the ROK's economic achievements yielding what amounted to techno-nationalism, well received international cultural exchanges yielding what could be considered pop-culture semi-nationalism, and – due to how South Korean politicians restored full fledged democracy – an enormous level of genuine political semi-nationalism based on how South Koreans could effectively draw on Korean cultural traditions to create a form of political nationalism that the world at large could respect and that the North Koreans should envy.

In this environment South Koreans are making progress on the domestic semi-national front, but the ROK's involvement in a globalized economy has exposed many more South Koreans than North Koreans to inter-cultural and inter-racial activities in a manner that ethnic ultra-nationalists in both halves of the Korean peninsula disdain, which is raising some uncomfortable questions about how genuinely Korean South Korea's brand of semi-nationalism can be. South Koreans clearly have more freedom to express the sentiments of their semi-nationalism, but also are constrained by international pressures and by a desire to avoid playing into the hands of North Korean leaders by acknowledging how the North Korean system has peculiarly strong ties to Korea's ethnically nationalistic past.

On their separate domestic political fronts, the two Koreas are engaged in a contest to see whose brand of semi-nationalism can be more effective. From each side's perspective, each is confident it is prevailing in nationalistic terms. What is far less clear to each Korea is the degree to which its approach to Korean nationalism will enable it to prevail over the other Korea in the international arena and how that context can have influence over prospects for Korean reconciliation and reunification.

In this setting each Korea's form of semi-nationalism has repercussions for its foreign policy. The DPRK's rambunctious international tendencies as well as its manifest scorn for the countries it disdains – notably the USA and Japan – display a form of blatant ethnocentric nationalism. Because both of those relationships are important for the stability of Northeast Asia as a region, how North Korea approaches them using its semi-nationalism is an important issue. Although the DPRK's aversion to what the USA stands for internationally is the cornerstone of North Korea's overall foreign policy, which is focused on resisting US pressures to change how

North Korea functions,¹⁵ most of that aversion is not predicated on the DPRK's ethnocentric semi-nationalism. The majority of the DPRK's resistance to US policy is based on what, from a North Korean perspective, is a logical approach to coping with and rejecting American hegemonism. In those terms, and despite the ways most Americans do not perceive North Korean "logic" as very logical, these relationships nonetheless do not stir the emotions of each country's ethno-nationalists. Even though such semi-nationalism in North Korea can include anti-American overtones shaped by North Korean dislike of what the USA represents as a multiethnic society and the ways in which that societal paradigm is part of the globalist system which influences South Korea so much, the North Koreans do not overtly emphasize that issue very much in the DPRK's approach to the USA.

As long as the North Koreans do not choose to stress such an issue in bilateral contacts with the USA, the DPRK's ethnocentric semi-nationalism – as deep as it is beneath the surface – will probably not become a disruptive issue. That could change were the DPRK to do something overtly racist regarding US representatives dealing with North Korea because of their ethnic background – such as someone of mixed heritage, partially Korean and partially of European or African background. To the USA such background could be a major asset if it entailed substantial expertise in Korean affairs and language. In addition, to many Americans, having such an individual effectively represent the USA in North Korea would be sending a very positive signal about the USA just as the USA has done repeatedly in South Korea over the years. Because of the potential for such an event, it clearly would be to South Korea's advantage vis-à-vis inter-Korean relations for the ROK to send subtle signals to North Koreans about why they should avoid making a racist blunder of that magnitude.

While DPRK–US relations clearly are stressed by North Korean views of the USA and the DPRK's semi-nationalistic anti-American overtones are obvious,¹⁶ on balance, these factors vis-à-vis the USA do not play as large a role in North Korea's overall foreign policy as the same sort of factors do vis-à-vis Japan. North Korean anti-Japanese attitudes are shaped by extremely negative memories of what Imperial Japan did to Korea; by ideologically skewed views of how postwar Japanese governments influenced American attitudes toward Korea in ways that made US policy in Northeast Asia very Japanocentric; and by distorted views of how postwar Japanese economic leaders reached out to South Korean reformers in order to draw the South Korean economy into a Japanese-led free market system in East and Southeast Asia. Although all of those issues have some salience

15. For critical assessments of North Korea and its approach to the USA, see: Paul French, *North Korea, The Paranoid Peninsula* (London: Zed Books, 2005); Tim Beal, *North Korea, The Struggle Against American Power* (London: Pluto Press, 2005); and Andrei Lankov, *North of the DMZ* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2007).

16. See: Luis Ramirez, "N. Korea Uses Anti-American Sentiments to Promote National Cohesion," *Voice of America*, 9 November 2005. <www.voanews.com>.

in terms of what happened in and around Korea due to Japanese policies, the ways in which North Korea's leadership manipulated the facts in an almost paranoid manner made the DPRK's ethnocentric semi-nationalism extraordinarily anti-Japanese. The Japanese government has tried to address the Imperialist legacy with both Korean states (as well as China and Taiwan). The US–Japan geopolitical rapport has succeeded regionally, and South Korea's economic reformers took the initiative regarding a Japanese paradigm and have enjoyed tremendous success. Ironically, all of these factors made North Korea's past anti-Japanese policies very flawed and put North Korea in a poor position internationally. They also exacerbated the much publicized disputes between North Korea and Japan over the “comfort women” issue of the past and the more recent “abductees” issue.¹⁷ Such disputes were intensified by North Korea's nuclear weapons program and the DPRK missile testing program – including firing a Taepodong missile over Japan in 1998. Collectively all of this undermined North Korea's sporadic attempts to improve its relations with Japan.

While North Korea's policy friction and ethnocentric semi-nationalism are most apparent regarding Japan and the USA, these factors are also influential in the DPRK's relations with its two northern neighbors, China and Russia. This is not to suggest that there is a serious level of ethnicity-based anti-Sinic or anti-Slavic attitudes shaping North Korea's policies toward the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia. To the degree that such tensions exist, they are largely due to North Korean views of how far northern Korean territorial sovereignty should extend into land now under PRC and Russian control. While both areas are issues of concern to North Koreans, China receives more semi-nationalistic attention from the DPRK due to Beijing's claims in its “Northeast Project” that both Koreas misunderstand how past Chinese dynasties shaped what became Korea and that all Koreans should never contemplate claiming areas inside the borders of the People's Republic of China (PRC) as part of a future unified Korean state. This issue is controversial in both Koreas, but it is felt far more acutely in the DPRK because all of that land is directly across its northern border.¹⁸ Russia has not made a big issue of this topic, but it is safe to assume that Russians would not dissent from the Chinese perspective due to the risk of losing Russian territory to a united Korea. Because of the negative attention both Koreas paid to Beijing's historical assertions, on balance the level of anti-Chinese critiques had a greater impact on

17. For assessments of how the “comfort women” and “abductee” issues aggravate North Korea–Japan relations, see: Unattributed, “Japan presses N. Korea on abductions,” *International Herald Tribune*, February 1, 2006; Gavan McCormack and Wada Haruki, “The Strange Record of 15 Years of Japan–North Korea Negotiations,” *Japan Focus*, September 2005; Yoshimi Yoshiaki, *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in The Japanese Military, During World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Robert Marquand, “In Japan, North Korea abductees are national obsession,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 15 November 2006; Norimitsu Onishi, “Japan Rightists Fan Fury Over North Korea Abductions,” *New York Times*, 17 December 2006; and Unattributed, “A Wrong turn in Tokyo, Military Brothels tarnish Japanese diplomacy,” *The Economist*, 21 March 2007.

18. For coverage of China's “Northeast Project” and how it is perceived in both halves of Korea, see: James Brooke, “Seeking Peace in a Once and Future Kingdom,” *New York Times* (25 August 2004);

DPRK–PRC relations than on ROK–PRC relations due to the damage done to the Korean War vintage bonds between the two communist states characterized as “lips and teeth” cooperation. This impact is underscored by North Korea’s relative poverty and backwardness compared to South Korea which makes the DPRK’s criticism of Beijing’s historical claims easier for China to discount. The PRC’s views of North Korea became so negative that one American analyst observed, “many Chinese view the North Koreans as ingrates.”¹⁹ The PRC’s relatively greater sensitivity to South Korea’s criticism of China’s historical stance, because of PRC–ROK economic relations,²⁰ adds to the problems related to North Korean semi-nationalism.

Similarly, the ways in which North Korea adopted and adapted its Juche doctrine of self-reliance verging on autarky, while rooted in the DPRK’s struggle to survive intact, also ended up projecting internationally a brand of North Korean semi-nationalism that appears to be deeply rooted in the Korean nation’s past. The Juche doctrine’s ideological base is supposed to be Marxist in the ways it rejects capitalistic economic principles. That doctrine has evolved in a relatively innovative manner for a rigid state like the DPRK so that North Korea can adapt to changing circumstances in ways that permit it to avoid admitting any pursuit of reforms which would compel North Korean leaders to admit past mistakes. The Juche doctrine is perceived internationally as a de facto reincarnation of Korea’s “hermit kingdom” paradigm, when, during the late Yi dynasty, Koreans displayed nationalistic ineptitude when trying to avoid addressing international pressures to adjust to a changing dynamic. Subsequently, this doctrine sends mixed signals about North Korea’s form of nationalism. While it is doubtful that North Korean leaders today literally aspire to making North Korea a genuine “hermit” state, the DPRK’s brand of semi-nationalism rather clearly rejects South Korea’s embrace of globalism and aspires to a form of abstention until North Korean views of what is good for all of Korea can gain traction.

The ROK’s foreign policy setting is far more nuanced and complex than that of North Korea. Given the socio-economic development of the ROK that led South Korea down the path to globalism, on balance the ROK has been far less nationalistic in its approach to foreign affairs.²¹ Nonetheless,

and Hwy-Tak Yoon, “China’s Northeast Project: Defensive or Offensive Strategy?” *East Asian Review*, Vol. 16, No. 4, Winter 2004. For broader coverage of worsening PRC–DPRK relations, see: You Ji, “China and North Korea: A Fragile Relationship of Strategic Convenience,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 10, No. 26, 2001; Andrew Scobell, *China and North Korea: From Comrades-In-Arms to Allies At Arms Length* (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2004); and International Crisis Group, “China and North Korea: Comrades Forever?” *Asia Report*, No. 112, 1 February 2006.

19. Scobell, op. cit., p. 19.

20. Richard Spencer, “Seoul Protests At Chinese Claims To Ancient Kingdom,” *London Daily Telegraph*, 19 August 2004.

21. This South Korean globalist approach is well assessed in Samuel S. Kim, *Korea’s Globalization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). For assessments of the broader context of South Korean society’s political-social context, see: Charles K. Armstrong, *Korean Society; Civil Society, Democracy and the State* (London: Routledge, 2007).

South Koreans' concerns about how their government deals with the three major powers which have the most influence over ROK interests, the USA, the PRC and Japan, have caused many instances in which South Korean activists assertively challenge these countries in order to get Seoul to stand up for ROK interests. There have been numerous displays of anti-American frustration by South Koreans on issues such as defense ties, policies toward North Korea, policies toward China and US–Japan closeness.²² To many Americans the efforts of these activists come across as South Korean nationalism running amok. South Korea's closer economic ties with China are often seen by Americans as part of a nationalistic effort to balance Korean ties with the USA and Japan.²³ While that is partially accurate, South Korea's economic ties with China also cause some tensions due to how the USA and Japan respond and due to how the PRC has used its weight to put pressure on both Koreas to acknowledge a crucial Chinese role in Korea's origins.

While this has had a role in nudging the ROK and the DPRK closer together on this issue, it also has underscored South Korean semi-nationalism toward the broader consequences of the "rise" of China for Sino-centrism in Asia.²⁴ The more China "rises," the more this trend becomes a mixed factor for South Korean foreign policy. On one hand, there are sound reasons for South Koreans to feel pride when observing China's rise. A case can be made that the PRC learned considerable lessons from how the ROK's leaders adapted Japan's version of a Western-based form of capitalism to a Korean brand of authoritarian hierarchicalism. The PRC leaders could relate to this adaptation because of their perceptions of Sino-Korean cultural linkages and because the South Korean adapters did things that enabled them to avoid being accused of becoming clones of the Japanese. On the other hand, if China were to rise to the global level that many observers speculate about – perhaps making China could become the world's largest economy – this could have unsettling consequences for South Korea, or even for a reunified Korea, drawing primarily upon the South Korean heritage. In such circumstances South Koreans could envision being tightly within China's socio-economic orbit, making it the kind of client state beholden to China. Nearly all Koreans deny that this was ever the case in the dynastic past when China was a hegemonic power looming over its neighbors. Despite these very real potentials, with the exception of South Korean ethnocentric nativist reactions to the PRC's claims that the

22. For coverage of those attitudes, see: Katrin A. Fraser, "Reflections on Anti-American Sentiment in Korea," *The Korean Society Quarterly* (Spring 2002); Seung-Hwan Kim, "Anti-Americanism in Korea," *The Washington Quarterly* (Winter 2002–03); Peter S. Goodman and Joohee Cho, "Anti-US Sentiment Deepens in S. Korea," *Washington Post*, January 9, 2003; Robert Marquand, "Young South Koreans see a menacing US," *Christian Science Monitor*, March 24, 2003; and Myongsob Kim, Suzanne L. Parker, and Jun Young Choi, "Increasing Distrust of the USA in South Korea," *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 27, No. 4, 2006.

23. For example, see: James Brooke, "China 'Looming Large' in South Korea As Biggest Player, Replacing the US," *New York Times*, January 3, 2003.

24. For early insights, see: Jae Ho Chung, "South Korea Between Eagle and Dragon, Perceptual Ambivalence and Strategic Dilemmas," *Asian Survey*, Vol. XLI, No. 5, September/October 2001.

ancient Korean state of Goguryo had Chinese roots, generally, South Koreans' semi-nationalism is inclined toward pragmatism with regard to China.

South Korea's semi-nationalism versus Japan is much more explicit than it is versus China. However, even though both the ROK and DPRK share nationalistic resentment over the legacy of the colonial era under Japan, when compared to North Korea's anti-Japanese sentiments, South Korea's approach to Japan is far more balanced. This is the result of South Korea's use of a Japanese economic paradigm as its developmental model and South Koreans' awareness of the strategic connections between the US-ROK and US-Japan alliances that have produced what many American analysts perceive as a "virtual" strategic triangle which implies a de facto alliance between South Korea and Japan.²⁵ While less overt, South Koreans' perceptions of Japan's role in balancing China's rise also contributes to this balance.

There is, however, one issue where South Korean semi-nationalism's anti-Japanese sentiments are more pointed than North Korea's – namely ROK-Japan territorial disputes. While both Koreas share a peninsular perspective vis-à-vis Japan's territorial claims, the ways in which North and South Korea differ with each other over territorial disputes largely prevents the DPRK from supporting the ROK's push for maritime territorial concessions from Japan in the East Sea (Dong Hae), better known as the Sea of Japan (Nihon Kai), especially over Dokdo island (Takeshima). This issue causes stridently semi-nationalistic statements about Japan from South Koreans,²⁶ and Seoul puts great pressure on the USA to get Japan to do what Seoul wants. Because the USA has not responded to South Korea's pressures, and Japan has not budged, this situation results in an odd mixture of anti-Japanese and anti-American sentiments within South Korea's semi-nationalism.²⁷ Fortunately this territorial issue does not dominate the ROK's overall foreign policy agenda – thereby permitting both Japan and the USA to maintain largely positive relations with South Korea.

These forms of semi-nationalism in both of the Koreas produce an odd combination of results for inter-Korean relations. Overall, each Korea tries to outdo the other half of the peninsula in asserting its credentials as the most plausible successor to Korea's past dynasties. North Korea's form of authoritarian hierarchicalism and well publicized attention to ethnic purity, when coupled with its hermit kingdom image, gives the DPRK major assets for making a case that it is the true descendent of Korea's historical heritage. Some South Korean ardent ethnic nationalists acknowledge the

25. For coverage of the virtual triangle, see: Victor Cha, *Alignment Despite Antagonism: The United States-Korea-Japan Security Triangle* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); and Ralph Cossa, *US-Korea-Japan Relations: Building Toward a "Virtual Alliance,"* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1999).

26. Anna Fifield, "Island Dispute Sets Off Nationalist Frenzy in Korea," *Financial Times*, 15 May 2006.

27. The author assessed this issue for the Northeast Asia History Foundation (in Seoul) and the Korean Association of International Studies at a conference on "Territorial Disputes in Northeast Asia: From the Perspective of International Relations" in a paper on "The Role of the United States in Northeast Asian Territorial Disputes Resolution: The Significance of Dokdo," 22 November 2007 which shall be included in a forthcoming book at the History Foundation.

ethnicity factor which reinforces North Korea's semi-nationalistic assets within inter-Korean relations. However, South Korea's far greater socio-economic successes, its resulting regional and global stature, and the far more sophisticated ways in which South Koreans are able to project their semi-nationalistic pride to all other countries²⁸ – including the one on the other half of the peninsula – tremendously bolsters South Korea's position within the inter-Korean dynamic. Nonetheless, for as long as the Korean nation remains divided the two Koreas' semi-nationalisms shall contend with each other.

While each Korea has had some success in their nationalistic contest, on balance, the ROK has a much more plausible track record and clearly it is the most likely half of Korea to shape the nature of Korean reconciliation and reunification. The future united Korean nation state is far more likely to resemble the ROK than the DPRK. Nonetheless, because of the need within that forthcoming process to foster a compatible dialogue it is likely that some degree of consensus shall have to be achieved. In that context, and given North Korea's complaints that South Koreans are not as "Korean" as they should be – due to globalism and the cultural and linguistic impacts of other countries, migration into South Korea, and fairly significant levels of inter-marriage with people from all over the world – North Korea's position resonates with some ethnic ultra-nationalists in the ROK in ways that South Korean officials cannot ignore. Consequently, despite South Korea's far greater clout compared to the DPRK in inter-Korean affairs, what amounts to a form of pan-Korean nationalism seems to be more salient for the inter-Korean dynamic than it was in the past. Given the framework of these other issues, it is very likely that Korean reunification shall be influenced by nationalistic sentiments.

In turn, that prospect is likely to cause the external powers with major stakes in the Korean unification process and its future results to become far more attentive to why Korean nationalism matters to reshaping Korea. The two countries most likely to be influenced by this are Japan and China in terms of what each wants, expects, and fears from a reunifying Korea. Both of them, but especially Japan, have major reasons to discourage Koreans from playing too strong a nationalist card in re-creating their nation state. Because of the risks inherent in this situation, both the USA and Russia also have significant reasons to help shape the process in ways that would tone down any chance of excessive Korean nationalism. All four of the major outside players should be attentive to these shared Korean concerns that could exacerbate pan-Korean nationalism and do their utmost to help both Koreas get through this process in ways helpful to all concerned.

If the Korean reunification process takes as long as many South Koreans hope it will take – i.e., thirty to forty years so that the ROK can avoid the kinds of financial pressures put on West Germany when the two Germanies unified so rapidly – and if China's rise has reached major heights by that

28. See the website for the Korean Nationalists Association <www.kimsoft.com/kna>.

point, China may well become the most important external player in assisting Korea's reunification. Koreans in both the ROK and DPRK should prepare for that possibility. However, other possibilities must also be considered. If China's rise fails to achieve the stature most analysts assume will occur or if a successfully "risen" PRC remains distracted by its failure to have unified with Taiwan, China may not be able to play a constructive role in helping the two Koreas reunite whenever that occurs. Another possibility is more plausible than those two, namely that Korean reunification could occur much more rapidly than South Koreans would like it to occur – perhaps within five to fifteen years – compelling the ROK to cope with the remnants of a recovering North Korea. In these circumstances the USA should be prepared to be called upon to play some sort of supportive and coordinating role.

If that were to happen extremely suddenly, it is obvious that the USA today has not done any serious planning for such a possibility. There clearly is a need for the USA to develop a more coordinated approach to this policy issue. Similarly, there is need for leaders in both Koreas to encourage the USA to pursue such planning. Obviously, because of the ROK–US relationships South Koreans are in a far better position to help create American interest in such planning. The author has assessed various US options and potential institutions for such planning.²⁹ For present purposes, however, it is important to note that one of the key issues that shall have to be assessed and coped with will be US policy toward adjusting to the merger of two forms of Korean semi-nationalism via pan-nationalist sentiments into a healthy and productive form of normal nationalism. The more the USA does to adjust to these future developments, the better positioned the USA shall be to have a productive relationship with the future united Korean state and the kind of nationalism that Koreans in a reunited country shall experience and utilize.

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