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Regional Community Formation:
National Identity, Migration,
and the Rise of China

**Diverging Trajectories of Trust
in Northeast Asia:
South Korea's Security Relations
with Japan and China**

LEIF-ERIC EASLEY

Most studies of contemporary Northeast Asian security focus on the U.S. interaction with China, Japan or South Korea and are concerned with aspects of national power.¹ The present chapter takes a more intra-regional and sociological approach, examining trends in mutual trust within Beijing and Tokyo's security relations with Seoul.² Focusing on ROK-China and ROK-Japan relations has advantages in addition to covering new ground.³ These relationships present interesting points of comparison as they address similar security environments in different ways.

In the universe of bilateral relations, Seoul-Beijing and Seoul-Tokyo ties could be understood as middling cases for mutual trust (in contrast to the high trust relations of the U.S.-ROK and U.S.-Japan alliances, the low level of mutual trust between Japan and China, and the near zero trust that South Korea and the United States have with North Korea).⁴ However, while mutual trust in ROK-China and ROK-Japan relations might be categorized as "moderate," the willingness of these governments to rely on each other on matters of national security exhibits different trajectories in recent years. Trust between Seoul and Beijing has decreased, whereas some increase in mutual trust is apparent between Seoul and Tokyo. That variation is somewhat puzzling given the widely observed post-Cold War trends of closer ROK-China relations and often strained ROK-Japan relations.⁵

The space of a chapter is not sufficient for tracing year-on-year variation in mutual trust in two bilateral relationships since the end of the Cold War. The present goal is to account for different levels of trust in ROK-China and ROK-Japan relations in 2006 and 2010. Without time to watch the entire movie of bilateral relations, these two snapshots are examined as crisis points during which levels of trust were tested and, hence, readily observable. The 2010 Cheonan and Yeonpyeong incidents shone a spotlight on the extent to which policymakers believe other governments can be counted on for security cooperation. A diplomatic crisis in 2005-2006 also tested governments' willingness to work together on security matters. However, unlike the 2010 military action, the mid-decade crisis involved historical controversies such as that surrounding Yasukuni Shrine.⁶

Conflicting nationalisms, wrapped up with contested history and territory, are often discussed in relation to distrust in Northeast Asia.⁷ Analyses of military cooperation and conflict tend to identify trust as important (and a lack of trust as problematic), but do not operationalize or measure trust and explain its variation. Meanwhile, there is growing interest in ideational approaches for understanding the international relations of East Asia, calling for more cross-national studies and systematic analysis of competing causal factors. Two new volumes cover identity issues in unprecedented depth from various regional perspectives.⁸ Korean scholars, long focused on historical and territorial disputes,⁹ are investigating other factors of distrust, including racial prejudice.¹⁰ Public opinion research in Northeast Asia is becoming increasingly sophisticated with the availability of more reliable cross-national and cross-temporal polls.¹¹

The present chapter, concerned as it is with the mutual trust between governments, focuses on the perceptions of foreign policy elites (rather than media images or public opinion). Explaining the level of trust within ROK-China and ROK-Japan

security relations in 2010 should be a difficult test for an identity explanation since the historical controversies so prevalent in 2005 were largely overtaken by hard security issues such as China's rapid military rise, North Korea's 2006 and 2009 nuclear tests, in addition to missile tests, and finally the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong incidents of 2010. What is more, the 2000s witnessed impressive military modernization by China and expansion in East Asian trade, allowing for variation in three different competing explanations based on power balance, economic interdependence, and public opinion related to historical antagonisms.

This chapter proceeds as follows. First, changing levels of mutual trust in ROK-China and ROK-Japan relations are assessed, in particular by interrogating the military doctrines of the three countries in 2006 and 2010. Then, competing explanations drawn from international relations theory are tested and shown inadequate for explaining variations in ROK-China and ROK-Japan mutual trust. Next, a new explanation for changes in mutual trust is presented, considering the sociology of inter-state comparisons: in particular, how elite perceptions of the other country's national identity change over time. Identity perceptions are made up of beliefs about national values (how good are the other country's internal governance, economic development, and social norms?) and international roles (how positive are the other country's contributions to external peace, prosperity, and stability?). By understanding how perceptions of identity difference change over time, it is possible to explain variation in how governments are willing to depend on each other for national security. The chapter concludes with implications for foreign policy and regional security, and suggestions for future research.

CHANGING LEVELS OF MUTUAL TRUST

Explaining variation in the level of trust between national governments is of interest because trust is a determining factor for meaningful and sustained security cooperation.¹² On the one hand, trust lowers transaction costs and helps actors manage risk by obviating the need for costly enforcement mechanisms. Trust may also serve as a shock absorber, providing stability for a relationship and making it more robust for weathering crises.¹³ With trust, two governments may be able to encapsulate and deal with a problem without it derailing other aspects of the relationship.

On the other hand, a lack of trust involves seeing the behavior of the other according to worst-case assumptions, leading to unrealized cooperation, and worse, to security dilemma dynamics, hedging behavior and arms races. With low trust, problems of miscommunication and miscalculation are more frequent and serious, making precipitation and escalation of a crisis more likely. Trust may thus tip the balance between war and peace, isolation vs. engagement, or regional division vs. integration. Distrust among powers in Asia is arguably the main obstacle to building a regional security architecture, and this lack of mutual confidence appears to be wrapped up with issues of national identity.¹⁴

Trust can be approached in many ways depending on the research question at hand.¹⁵ For the purposes of this research on bilateral security relations, mutual trust is operationalized as the shared willingness of two states to assume the risks of reliance on matters of national security, based on expectations that both sides will fulfill their obligations. Data on willingness for security reliance draws primarily on official doctrine regarding the provision of military capabilities and defense mechanisms and its application in various contingencies.

Data on expectations about the bilateral security relationship can be drawn from policymaker assessments concerning whether security commitments will be met and the probability of military conflict. To accurately trace variation in mutual trust over time, one would code the entire range of willingness and expectations indicators and perform content analysis on all available treaties and amendments, bilateral agreements, joint statements, minutes from security consultation meetings, government reports, national security strategies, budgetary allocations, internal government memos, policy reviews, intelligence assessments, and policymaker pronouncements. It would also be helpful to review developments for cooperation and conflict in bilateral security relations.¹⁶

In the interest of space, this chapter assesses change in mutual trust by comparing the defense white papers of each country in 2006 and 2010. Defense white papers should be a reliable source of policymakers' willingness and expectations to rely on other governments on matters of national security for several reasons. First, they are fairly comprehensive about a nation's security environment, what military capabilities a nation maintains and plans to develop and for what contingencies, and how a nation assesses the capability and intentions of other states. Second, they are not the product solely of a nation's defense establishment. Whereas some documents may only represent a particular view within part of the government (the administration, the legislature, the diplomatic bureaucracy, the military or intelligence services), defense white papers tend to be circulated for approval by the various departments that deal with national security and foreign policy. Finally, defense white papers tend to be regularly updated, and hence should be responsive to developments in bilateral relations.

MUTUAL TRUST BETWEEN SOUTH KOREA AND CHINA

The leaderships in Seoul and Beijing continuously stress the importance of their bilateral cooperation in diplomatic meetings.¹⁷ However, some decrease is observable in the level of willing reliance and shared expectations for the security relationship by comparing the defense white papers of 2006 and 2010. There is a certain asymmetry when viewing the white papers of the ROK and PRC side-by-side, as the South Korean documents devote more space to China than the Chinese documents devote to Korea. This is not a measurement problem for trust, however, because the present exercise is not about contrasting the Korean and Chinese documents. At issue is change in mutual trust, so the task at hand involves comparing the documents of both sides in 2006 and 2010.

The 2006 Chinese defense white paper reports that, "China has set up bilateral consultation mechanisms on the law of the sea with the Republic of Korea."¹⁸ It, thus,

expresses willingness to work with Seoul on maritime security and safety. Toward this end, the document cites mutual naval visits, and shares the expectation that Beijing and Seoul will expand cooperation on non-traditional security issues, including via police exchanges focused on combating transnational crime.

Meanwhile, the ROK defense white paper notes China's impressive economic growth and more active diplomacy. It devotes an entire section to profiling China's military and reviewing ROK-China relations, while also expressing concern about possible U.S.-China strategic competition. However, the document stresses that South Korea's military relations with China are "steadily developing" and are very important for resolving the North Korean nuclear issue and for stability and peace in Northeast Asia.¹⁹ Beyond expecting continued defense-related communication between Seoul and Beijing, the South Korean white paper outlines willingness for regular and institutionalized exchanges, working and high-level defense meetings, and mutual visits of navy vessels and aircraft with China.

In sum, the mutual willingness and shared expectations of the South Korean and Chinese governments to rely on each other on matters of national security were at a moderate level in 2006. Moderate levels of mutual trust are characterized by defense exchanges and information sharing as well as reassurances that the relationship will be peaceful, with expectations for expanded cooperation in the future.

The mutual trust picture looked quite different for Seoul and Beijing in 2010. The 2010 Chinese defense white paper mentioned signing a new "Frontier Defense Cooperation Agreement" with North Korea, but did not feature defense exchanges with the ROK. In Chapter 10 on "Arms Control and Disarmament," it does not stress cooperation with Seoul but instead expresses willingness to serve as an honest broker between North and South Korea, such that China responsibly stands on the side of peace and stability:

China advocates resolving the nuclear issue in the Korean Peninsula peacefully through dialogues and consultations, endeavoring to balance common concerns through holding six-party talks in order to realize the denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula and maintain peace stability of the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia. China, always considering the whole situation in the long run, painstakingly urges related countries to have more contacts and dialogues in order to create conditions for resuming six-party talks as early as possible.²⁰

This language does not show any willingness for a security partnership with South Korea. And while the South Korean defense white paper of 2010 touts defense exchanges as part of a ROK-China "strategic cooperative partnership," it devotes much more attention to modernization of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and Beijing's support of North Korea.²¹ The level of mutual trust may not have declined to a low level (which would entail little to no willingness for any security cooperation, even defense exchanges). However, comparing the two sets of defense white papers, the evidence suggests that the trajectory of mutual trust between Seoul and Beijing was negative between 2006 and 2010.

MUTUAL TRUST BETWEEN SOUTH KOREA AND JAPAN

In contrast, the level of mutual trust between Seoul and Tokyo, assessed via the defense white papers of 2006 and 2010, showed improvement. Interestingly, the level of mutual trust in ROK-Japan relations appears to have crossed that of ROK-China relations as Seoul's mutual trust with Tokyo was less than that with Beijing in 2006, with the situation reversed by 2010. It must be said, however, that ROK-Japan relations were improving from a low baseline, given bilateral strains at mid-decade.²²

The Japanese defense white paper of 2006 focuses on North Korea's nuclear and missile threats to Japan, and on U.S.-ROK cooperation, with virtually no mention of Japan-ROK cooperation, except for several allusions to "frank talks" and a sentence stating that it is important for Japan and the ROK "to establish a basis for cooperation and to coordinate more effectively."²³ As is pro forma for Japanese defense white papers, the report mentions a territorial dispute with South Korea (asserting that "Takehima is an integral part of Japanese territory") and notes official protests by each side over the other's oceanographic surveys in waters claimed as an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

For its part, the ROK defense white paper of 2006 speculated that developments in Japan's defense posture and active strengthening of the U.S.-Japan alliance may elicit a competitive response from China and Russia. The document stated that Japan's positions on historical issues, territory, and EEZs are "detrimental to the improvement of peace in Northeast Asia." That is fairly strong language indicative of trust problems, but the level of mutual trust could still be described as on the low end of moderate, as the Korean document stresses that Japan and South Korea are important neighbors between whom bilateral defense exchanges should be increased.²⁴

By 2010, the trust indicators of willingness and expectations for the ROK-Japan bilateral security relationship appear noticeably improved. The 2010 Japanese defense white paper shows detailed concern for South Korea's national security and states that South Korea is one of the countries that has maintained "the closest relations with Japan in economic, cultural and other areas" and that South Korea is "extremely vital to Japan from a geopolitical perspective."²⁵ It goes on to say that Japan and the ROK share "fundamental values such as democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights, and capitalist economies" and "share many strategic interests as allies of the United States."²⁶ The report claims that the two countries "collaborate closely" on security issues, have successes in promoting "mutual understanding and trust," and are expanding defense exchanges and areas of functional cooperation including maritime security. There is then an entire section devoted to Japan's efforts to support the ROK after the sinking of the Cheonan.²⁷

Impressively, the 2010 South Korean defense white paper indirectly refers to Japan as a military ally: "Solidifying security ties with major Asia-Pacific alliances, the ROK, Japan, Australia, and the United States have been trying to establish a more effective multilateral security system within the region based on alliances."²⁸ The report goes on to devote an entire section to "Exchange and Cooperation with Japan" focused on working together to "resolve the North Korean nuclear issue

and to ensure regional security and peace.”²⁹ The document explicitly mentions ROK-Japan-U.S. trilateral cooperation, Korea-Japan maritime search and rescue exercises, and even expanding combined training of military forces.

The level of mutual trust between Seoul and Tokyo would still be coded as “moderate” (certainly not yet at the level of full-fledged military allies), but a positive trajectory for trust is apparent in comparisons of the 2006 and 2010 defense documents. Mutual trust can only be as high as the least common denominator of a dyad’s willingness and expectation for security cooperation, and it is worth noting that South Koreans demonstrated slightly less willingness than Japanese. Japanese strategists, who used to be resistant to a role for the U.S.-Japan alliance and Japanese security policy beyond Japan, are now speaking of providing “public goods” relevant to regional security in cooperation with South Korea.³⁰ The next generation of strategic thinkers in Japan even write about Japan-ROK contingency planning for securing North Korean nuclear weapons.³¹ While there is increasing realization among policymakers in both Tokyo and Seoul that Japan and South Korea’s futures are intertwined,³² Japanese recognition of South Korea’s security role and willingness to engage in defense reliance with Seoul appears slightly greater than that in Seoul. Hence, the level of mutual trust, while improved relative to 2006, is still not as high as it could be.

COMPETING EXPLANATIONS FOR MUTUAL TRUST AND SECURITY RELATIONS

How can we explain these different trajectories for mutual trust between 2006 and 2010—decreasing in ROK-China relations and increasing in ROK-Japan relations? This section considers three competing explanations drawn from international relations theory. As existing explanations are unable to account for the above variation, a new explanation based on perceptions of identity is elaborated in the subsequent section. That explanation suggests that when power balance, economic interdependence, and public opinion over historical antagonisms affect mutual trust, they do so via perceptions of identity.

A balance of power explanation would expect that – given three states A, B and C – if the power of C is significantly increasing, states A and B will feel threatened and trust C less and less. The rise of State C will drive states A and B together, helping trust to increase between A and B. Over the past two decades, China’s material power has been growing substantially relative to that of Japan and South Korea.³³ A power balance explanation would thus predict that Seoul and Beijing should have decreasing mutual confidence and Seoul and Tokyo should have more, as South Korea and Japan cooperate to balance China.³⁴

Defense white papers in 2006 and 2010 indicate such trajectories for trust. No doubt changes in material capabilities matter, but the problem for a balance of power explanation is timing. China has been rising for some time, so why did ROK-China trust not go down and ROK-Japan trust not increase earlier, and why do we not observe active balancing behavior as realists would expect?³⁵ One realist

defense is that South Korea and Japan do not collectively balance China because each has the United States as an ally. But this is not a convincing explanation because Washington actively encourages trust and cooperation between South Korea and Japan, and leaders in both states remain concerned about the capacity and commitment of the United States in Asia.³⁶ Another realist defense is the infamous “time lag” explanation, but if a balance of power explanation cannot predict (e.g. it has to wait forever to be proven correct) the timing of change, then it is not the most useful explanation.

Another explanation predicts that if the relative economic interdependence of states B and C is going up while that between A and B is going down, then mutual trust between B and C should increase as that of A and B decreases. Related to China’s economic rise, ROK-China economic interdependence has been increasing, but ROK-Japan interdependence, while still high, is becoming relatively less so.³⁷ An interdependence explanation would, thus, predict that ROK-China trust should be going up and ROK-Japan trust going down. However, the trajectories in mutual trust observed above are in fact the opposite.

Interdependence theorists might offer their own “time lag” defense by arguing there is a disconnect between economic and political actors, i.e., politicians may get caught up with issues of ideology or diplomacy, but eventually their thinking will conform to those of domestic political interest groups good at making money. The problem with this argument is that it is possible to make money (hot economics) despite low trust between governments (cold politics).³⁸ Meanwhile, there is no guarantee that political leaders will take their cues from the business lobby. Trade relations are in many ways substitutable, whereas hard security issues often cannot be pushed aside by profit potential. Interdependence theorists might counter that with greater interaction, there are bound to be some trade and social frictions, and geopolitical crises may occasionally present overpowering shocks. Observations of trends in mutual trust support such contentions, but then we are left wanting a theory that incorporates such frictions and shocks that an interdependence explanation considers exogenous.

A third explanation attributes the lack of trust between states to negative public opinion associated with incomplete historical reconciliation. Historical memories are very powerful in the popular consciousness as they are derived from past wars and different development paths that people use to understand the varying fortunes of states in the international system. If two countries, B and C, have similar historical grievances against country A, historical flare-ups can be expected to lower the level of trust with A, and possibly result in solidarity between B and C. South Korea and China both hold historical grievances against Japan, and public opinion polls regularly show negative opinions of Japan in both countries.³⁹

A public opinion explanation would, thus, predict increasing ROK-China trust and decreasing trust between South Korea and Japan. Yet, despite historical flare-ups over the wartime sexually exploited “comfort women,” Yasukuni Shrine, and history textbooks with conflicting territorial claims, the level of trust between

Seoul and Tokyo was observed to improve between 2006 and 2010. This is not to say that historical antagonisms do not matter – they almost certainly do – but the trust exhibited by governments in bilateral security relations may not closely track public opinion. Public opinion can, of course, affect elite perceptions, but policymakers are just as likely to use historical issues for instrumental purposes or otherwise attempt to shape public opinion.

The transmission belt for effects on and from public opinion tends to be the media. Media coverage can be important in influencing the identity perceptions discussed below, but identity perceptions are “sticky” or less volatile than the headlines. As far as using the intensity of historical antagonisms to explain variation in mutual trust, the level of trust between governments appears not to be driven by public opinion. I argue below that policymakers’ assessments about another country’s reliability on matters of security depend on deeply-held beliefs about the other’s national identity, specifically concerning national values and international roles.

PERCEPTIONS OF IDENTITY EXPLAIN TRAJECTORIES OF TRUST

Trends in power, economic interdependence, and public opinion are all relevant to mutual trust, but none of these variables offers sufficient explanation for the different trajectories of trust in ROK-China and ROK-Japan relations. To the extent that these factors affect the level of mutual trust, their causal force is mediated through changes in elite perceptions of national identity, according to the explanation below. In other words, change in identity perceptions is a necessary and sufficient condition for change in mutual trust. The greater difference elites perceive between two countries’ national identities, the less trust; while the less difference elites perceive between the two national identities, the more trust relevant for security cooperation we expect to observe.

This section asks in what ways the decision-making elite in one state differentiates the national identity of another state in areas germane to foreign policy. Policymakers in States A and B compare national identities in terms of international roles and national values and perceive identity difference as a result. This perceived identity difference is the distance between how policymakers see the international role and national values of their country versus those of another. It exists because of a sociological process in which policy elites engage, where in-group/out-group comparisons are made for purposes of in-group pride, positive distinctiveness, legitimacy, and sense of self-purpose in an uncertain international environment.⁴⁰

How elites in each country see the national identity of relevant other states is wrapped up with views of the other country’s international role.⁴¹ The other major dimension considered in perceived identity difference involves what elites in one nation think about the domestic political values of the other country (concerning human rights, type of governance/institutions, cultural sophistication, etc.). Perceived identity difference is measured by identifying the main differences raised by national leaders and policymakers in their domestic debates about the

other country.⁴² Observations of policymakers drawing contrasts between the international roles and national values of their country and those of the other are drawn from: public statements to domestic audiences, including opinions expressed in op-eds, press briefings and media interviews (in English, Japanese, Chinese and Korean), and private statements by policymakers in interviews with the author or revealed indirectly and corroborated by multiple interviews.

PERCEIVED IDENTITY DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SOUTH KOREA AND CHINA⁴³

Perceptions of identity difference by policy elites in Seoul and Beijing were not negligible in 2006. On the one hand, the perceived gap between the international roles and national values of the two were greater than the low perceptions of difference between the United States and Britain or even between the United States and Japan. On the other hand, ROK-China mutual perceptions were clearly better (closer) than the high perceptions of difference between the United States and North Korea or the United States and Pakistan. On a relative scale, perceived identity difference between Seoul and Beijing was within a moderate range and had benefited from a rapidly expanding relationship since their normalization in 1992.

Interviews with Chinese policymakers in 2006 about how their perceptions of South Korea had evolved since normalization revealed two prominent themes. Regarding South Korea's international role, Seoul was no longer seen as a pawn of the United States, but was increasingly respected as a pragmatic international actor in its own right. Regarding national values, South Korea was seen as a success story for its "Asian values." Confucian hierarchy, emphasis on education, and strong meritocratic leadership were seen by Chinese to have achieved rapid economic development in South Korea.

Views of South Korean elites about China were also moderately positive in 2006, especially compared to Cold War perceptions, when South Korean elites perceived China's international role as negative (an enemy during the Korean War, prolonging division of the peninsula). South Korean perceptions of Chinese national values were also negative, as anti-communism was itself an ideology in Seoul. In the early 2000s, however, those views gave way to at least moderately positive identity perceptions. Perceptions of China's international role became dominated by South Korean hopes that Beijing would be constructive in Seoul's efforts to engage, transform, and, ultimately, reunify with North Korea. Also, Chinese national values were no longer broadly derided as communist, backward, or underdeveloped. Instead, China's rich historical traditions were increasingly recognized by South Korean policymakers. While ROK-China reconciliation remained incomplete, Seoul's historical tensions with Beijing were considered to be of lower intensity than those with Tokyo.⁴⁴ There was even broad recognition among Korean elites that living with Chinese nationalism is somewhat inevitable as Beijing faces challenges unifying such a large and diverse polity.⁴⁵

Perceived identity difference was thus on the low end of moderate, in terms of how policymakers in Seoul and Beijing saw each other's national values and international

roles. The positive gains for identity perceptions drove increasing mutual trust after the end of the Cold War. But ROK-China perceptions of identity difference widened, comparing views on international roles and national values in 2010 to those of 2006.⁴⁶

In 2010, author interviews with Chinese policymakers revealed what might be described as annoyance with South Korea's international role. It was seen as demanding disproportionate recognition from and showing inadequate deference to its much larger neighbor. Analysts considered the peninsula potentially volatile – and not just because of Pyongyang – such that the situation must be controlled and stability maintained.⁴⁷ In the view of some, South Korea's problem is that it “blindly follows Washington's policy” and expects too much of China given its limited influence on North Korea.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, South Korean national values were also viewed more negatively. Some Chinese interviewees lamented that South Korea had lost its moral focus on economic growth and had instead become polarized over issues of inequality and redistribution.⁴⁹ Some Chinese observers criticized South Korean politics as nationalistic and emotional, while others claimed that Koreans tend to excessively talk up Chinese nationalism.⁵⁰ Yet, some Chinese nationalists, long proponents of resisting Americanization, also started to argue that China needs cultural security from *hallyu*, the pop-culture wave from South Korea.⁵¹

South Korean perceptions of Chinese identity also markedly worsened by 2010. China's Northeastern History Project was very controversial in Korea and raised negative perceptions of Beijing.⁵² What is more, the offense that officials (not just the public) expressed toward China aggravated negative perceptions that Chinese held about South Korea.⁵³

South Korean hopes for China's positive international role were dashed during this period. As recently as 2006, many saw the road to Pyongyang as going through Beijing, but China's betrayal of expectations for evenhanded diplomacy between North and South Korea, and its perceived insensitive handling of the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong incidents changed those perceptions. In 2010, South Koreans saw less benevolence and more brazen self-interest in China's international role. Perceptions of identity difference also widened with more negative views about Chinese national values. Beijing's heavy-handed response to internal political-economic challenges after the 2008-09 global financial crisis drew the attention of South Koreans to the lack of democracy and human rights in China.⁵⁴ Beijing's policy on North Korean refugees, with occasional repatriation of people to suffer harsh punishment by Pyongyang, also widened the perceived gap on human rights with China.⁵⁵

These changes in perceived identity difference predict a negative trajectory for mutual trust between Seoul and Beijing. By comparing the two countries' defense white papers in 2006 and 2010, precisely such a reduction in trust was observed. A more lengthy analysis would process-trace (with a detailed narrative, year-by-year) how policymakers' increasing perception of difference between South Korean and Chinese international roles and values drove down mutual willingness and shared expectations for security cooperation in the bilateral relationship. The causal chain linking identity perceptions to trust beliefs is summarized below.

	International Role	National Values
Beijing's view of South Korea	Over-reaching for a country of its size, failing to show appropriate deference	From shared focus on economic development to divergent democracy
Seoul's view of China	From hopes for a benevolent international role to brazen self-interest	From single-minded economic development to calculated repression

Lower willingness in Beijing to rely on Seoul for cooperative management of regional security was based on Chinese perceptions of South Korea as impetuous and not showing due deference to Chinese interests for stability on the Korean peninsula. The Lee Myung-bak administration projected a different international role for the ROK (a “Global Korea” that demands reciprocity in dealings with the North), an identity that Chinese policymakers saw as putting principle over pragmatism (i.e., stability) in a way that could not be trusted. Meanwhile, lower Chinese expectations for the bilateral security relationship followed from a Chinese perception of value divergence with South Korea. From a Chinese point of view, Seoul transgressed away from an East Asian development model prioritizing economics over politics. As a result, South Korean identity politics were seen as injecting uncertainty into diplomacy, lowering Chinese expectations of future security ties.

Similarly, more negative perceptions of Chinese identity among South Korean policymakers pushed down ROK-China mutual trust. Lower willingness in Seoul to rely on Beijing for dealing with North Korea was based on South Korean perceptions of China's international role becoming dominated by parochial interests. Such negative perceptions built up over time, after China's failure to bring North Korea back to the Six-Party Talks, its weak response to North Korea's second nuclear test in 2009, its unhelpful stance after the Cheonan sinking, and its diplomatic shielding of Pyongyang after the Yeonpyeong shelling. On the dimension of national values, South Koreans questioned whether an undemocratic China could be a trustworthy partner, as suspicions rose over its economic involvement in North Korea and resentment grew over its support of the regime in Pyongyang.

The decline in mutual trust between Seoul and Beijing from 2006 to 2010 is, thus, explained by prior and proportional change in perceived identity difference. The next section investigates whether changing identity perceptions between Seoul and Tokyo can explain the modest increase in mutual trust between South Korea and Japan.

PERCEIVED IDENTITY DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SOUTH KOREA AND JAPAN⁵⁶

Perceptions of identity difference between policy elites in Seoul and Tokyo were within a moderate range in 2006. Japan and the ROK experienced comparable paths of rapid economic development, were on the same side of the Cold War, and continue to share the United States as their main ally. However, relations between Seoul and Tokyo did not exhibit the sustained improvement that ROK-China relations demonstrated after the Cold War. Some South Korean policy elites had a complex regarding Japan because of its colonial past, and many policy elites in Tokyo were slow to recognize Seoul on equal footing. For these reasons, an outsider might have seen more similarities between South Korean and Japanese national identities in 2006 than Koreans and Japanese chose to see in themselves.

Interviews with Japanese policymakers about their perceptions of South Korea in 2006 revealed they were somewhat apathetic toward Korean democracy. While Japanese were not fond of the dictatorial leaders of Korea's past, they were dismayed by the waves of anti-Japanese sentiment in South Korea's liberated civil society. Some policymakers viewed South Korea as well behind Japan in terms of development, and preoccupied with history as a way to deflect attention from Korean failings. Japanese strategists did not speak much of a constructive international role for South Korea; in their view, Seoul was almost completely focused on the peninsula and actions that might affect its relations with North Korea.

Likewise, South Korean policymakers' perceptions about Japan were somewhat ambivalent in 2006. Modern Korean nationalism developed in opposition to Japanese imperialism and retains a focus on a perceived lack of Japanese atonement for past misdeeds.⁵⁷ The issue of distorted Japanese textbooks (even if such texts are not widely used in Japan) influences perceptions of Japanese identity.⁵⁸ Views of Japanese national values were also darkened by stories about the poor treatment of Zainichi Koreans in Japan, attributed to the Japanese obsession with ethnic purity. Despite Japan's strongly positive economic development in the post-war era, many elites saw its international role through the lens of historical imperialism, viewing Japanese international trade and financial coordination, investment and aid as softer tools of Japanese expansionism. By 2006, such concerns began to wane as Japan's economic growth had leveled off for years, but policymakers in Seoul still did not welcome an international role for Japan's Self-Defense Forces.

Compared to the ROK-China case, perceptions of identity difference between Seoul and Tokyo were on the more negative end of the moderate range. Improvement in ROK-Japan identity perceptions between 2006 and 2010 followed positive developments in how policymakers on both sides perceived each other's international roles and national values.

Author interviews with Japanese policymakers in 2009-2010 revealed notable improvement in views of South Korea's place on the global stage. Seoul was seen as an important international economic player, not just because of the leading market

share of several South Korean companies, but also because of Seoul's productive involvement in various policy fora including the G-20. Japanese strategists now recognized South Korea's "robust involvement in the international arena" involving security issues beyond the peninsula.⁵⁹ Rather than consider South Korea "catching-up," Japanese policymakers began to talk about how Japan should not be left behind, in view of positive developments for Korean trade such as the KORUS FTA, and deeper security cooperation in the U.S.-ROK alliance. South Korean national values were also viewed more positively in Tokyo. The flow of people and cultural products between Japan and South Korea had grown substantially in the 2000s, and Japanese admired the popularity of *hallyu* and the technological competitiveness of South Korean companies. Frustrated with deadlock in their own political system, some Japanese policymakers spoke of South Korea's dynamic democracy in a more positive light.

South Korean perceptions of Japanese identity also showed improvement by 2010. Resentment over Japan's past actions were mitigated by Japanese efforts to show respect for historical sensitivities.⁶⁰ Growing Korean confidence was also a large part of this change. Japan's economic stagnation and political deadlock made clear that Japan is not invincible,⁶¹ just as confidence was increasing in Seoul about South Korea's place in the world.⁶² From a position of greater national confidence, South Korean policymakers were more likely to see Japanese politics (and identity) as coping with internal challenges rather than being hijacked by right-wing revisionists.⁶³ Officials increasingly saw Japan's regional security role as positive and important, so much so that some policymakers expressed concern when relations between Tokyo and Washington appeared strained over basing issues in 2009-2010, because they believe the U.S.-Japan alliance helps stabilize East Asia.

Changes in leadership in Tokyo and Seoul had much to do with these improving perceptions.⁶⁴ Members of the Lee Myung-bak administration came to office in 2008 with more positive views of Japanese identity, and post-Koizumi Japanese cabinets and policymakers actively sought to close perception gaps between Tokyo and Seoul. The ROK-Japan case thus provides evidence for how the configuration and decisions of leaders can affect long-held perceptions about identity with implications for the level of mutual trust.⁶⁵

These changes in perceived identity difference between Seoul and Tokyo predict an increase in mutual trust, which was indeed observed by comparing the two countries' defense white papers in 2006 and 2010. The perception among Japanese policymakers that South Korea is increasingly a capable and contributing global player increased Japanese willingness to rely on and cooperate with Seoul on matters of regional security, particularly dealing with North Korea and engaging China. The growing recognition among policymakers in Seoul that Japan is a constructive contributor to international peace and stability (rather than a revisionist power) increased South Korean willingness to incorporate Japan as a partner into the ROK national security strategy.

Meanwhile, expectations both in Seoul and Tokyo about the future of bilateral relations were buttressed by converging perceptions about national values. Each side showed increasing appreciation for the other's democratic governance

Table 2. Improvement in ROK-Japan Perceived Identity Difference, 2006-2010

	International Role	National Values
Tokyo's view of South Korea	Increasingly outward-looking, capable and willing to contribute	Shared universal values (less particular/Confucian) and more dynamic than Japan
Seoul's view of Japan	From stealth expansionist to supportive of international peace and stability	From driven by right-wing revisionists to coping with internal challenges

and cultural strengths. Converging perceptions of South Korean and Japanese international roles and values, thus, made possible greater mutual willingness and shared expectations for security cooperation in the bilateral relationship. South Korean concerns about historical issues (and hence Japanese identity) lingered, however, explaining why it may be somewhat less enthusiastic than Tokyo for further expanding security cooperation based on mutual trust. Nonetheless, ROK-Japan mutual trust improved from 2006 to 2010, a modest yet still significant increase accounted for by lower perceptions of identity difference.

CONCLUSION

Trust is not an all or nothing phenomena – it is not miraculously realized or lost. Instead, trust between national governments concerning their bilateral security relationship varies with developments in domestic and international politics. The timing, direction, and magnitude of change in mutual trust confound existing explanations based on power balance, economic interdependence, and public sentiment over historical grievances. A more sociological explanation, focused on identity perceptions, is needed. The present research used changing perceptions of identity difference to account for decreasing ROK-China trust and increasing ROK-Japan trust between 2006 and 2010. The above findings about mutual trust in Northeast Asia offer a number of foreign policy implications, as well as several cautions about changing circumstances.

The observed and explained trajectories of ROK-China and ROK-Japan mutual trust as of 2010 suggest that trilateral security cooperation among China, Japan and South Korea will be difficult to advance. Despite various drivers of community building in Northeast Asia,⁶⁶ it is hard to expect much political and security integration in the region while trust remains at such modest levels. However, it will be important to chart progress made by ROK-Japan-China trilateral summits and working meetings.

Considering the potential upsides of ROK-Japan identity perceptions (shared political values, similar goals contributing to the international community), the outlook for trust between Seoul and Tokyo is relatively favorable. Compared to Beijing, Tokyo is more likeminded with Seoul in dealing with North Korea after the death of Kim Jong-il. Japan can also be expected to engage in less “ROK passing.” Considering the potential downsides of ROK-China identity perceptions (human

rights, democracy, different role expectations dealing with North Korea), the outlook for trust is not favorable. The greater extent to which positive international roles and national values are contrasted with those of China, that is, the greater extent to which China is a negative relevant other, the less trust we can expect the South Korean or Japanese governments to have with Beijing.

Two cautionary notes about changing circumstances are in order. Although South Korea and Japan have accomplished modest improvement in mutual trust, that trust remains fragile. There are several regular irritating events (Japanese Education Ministry textbook approvals, Defense Ministry white papers mentioning the Dokdo/Takeshima island dispute, Shimane Prefecture celebrating “Takeshima Day,” and so on) as well as occasional revisionist comments by Japanese politicians about history. Developments that aggravate perceptions of identity difference send the trajectory of mutual trust downward, especially if nationalist politicians seize on an issue for electoral advantage and then rile up nationalists in the other country, setting up an identity-trust spiral. The Lee Myung-bak administration and the DPJ leadership have been mindful to avoid such spirals, but future leaders might have different priorities.⁶⁷

The present study also points to several avenues for future research. While this chapter focuses on trust between foreign policy decision makers of different countries, society-to-society relations are not insignificant for state-to-state relations. Even if political elites manage to close perceived identity differences and build trust, public opinion may not follow as positive a trajectory. This could be in part because the biases of the public may lag those of the elite, but it could also be due to public distrust of the elite in their own country.⁶⁸ An important question for future research is, thus, how public and elite perceptions of another country co-vary, depending on state-society relations within the nation doing the perceiving.

Another task for a future study would be to compare ROK-Japan and ROK-China mutual trust over a longer period of variation to see if and how the two are correlated. Mutual trust within these two bilateral security relationships are clearly not directly correlated, but they exhibited some inverse correlation, at least from 2006 to 2010. While there is no reason to believe that ROK-Japan trust and ROK-China trust are zero-sum, their respective identity perceptions are likely sensitive to changing orientations vis-a-vis North Korea and the United States. This is a complicated geometry that deserves further analysis from an identity perspective.

Based on the present research, while diplomatic rhetoric about building trust is prevalent in East Asia, much of it is cheap talk. Defense white papers are better gauges of trust than political speeches, and real trust is built with meaningful changes to perceptions of national identity. This is difficult to achieve and requires concerted and sustained efforts by political, military, and diplomatic leaders – not just for better understanding international roles and national values, but also toward improving the very content of these contested dimensions of identity.

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