



NATIONAL IDENTITIES AND THE
FUTURE OF NORTH KOREA

INTRODUCTION

North Korea is a country easy to approach emotionally. For anyone with even a little twinge of conscience toward human rights, it evokes disgust. For many in South Korea, who recognize that there but for an accident of history they would be, it evokes pity. Finally, for others who viscerally despise U.S. self-righteousness amid efforts to judge good and bad in other societies, it evokes defensive forgiveness. To manage North Korea's growing danger to the region and the world as well as the complex diplomatic jockeying of states toward North Korea demands sober analysis. It also requires clear awareness of how thinking has been evolving in South Korea—where national identity greatly influences how people want to treat defectors from the North; in North Korea—where family ties and national identity influence the way mobile phones and money transfers link defectors to those they left behind; and in Japan, where national identity complicates realist thinking toward North Korea and toward Russia as a force in Northeast Asia. Whereas defectors stand at the center of our coverage in two papers concerning contacts across the peninsula and attitudes in South Korea, Japan is approached differently as a country wrestling with the challenge of a realist foreign policy under the shadow of revisionist hopes.

Issues concerning North Korea can usefully be analyzed through three successive circles. The inner circle is inter-Korean relations. In 2014-15 they received a boost through President Park Geun-hye's decision to showcase reunification as an urgent objective, presenting it as a "bonanza." Below the surface lurked quieter forces, as communications with North Korean residents were intensifying and defectors were becoming more active as go-betweens through cell phone calls and remittances. In turn, South Korean citizens were looking anew at the defectors as a proxy for vast numbers of North Koreans who, with reunification, would share citizenship in the enlarged Korean state. This inner Korean circle is revealing new dynamics, which two chapters examine on the basis of survey research. New attention from the top in South Korea and new connections from below into North Korea make it timely to reassess how individual attitudes and family dynamics are being transformed. In doing so, we keep our eyes on ethnic identity, struggling against rising civic identity in South Korea and family, community, and personalized identity in North Korea.

The intermediate circle is where the attention of most international observers is centered. That encompasses China and the United States as they both cooperate and compete to shape the future of the Korean Peninsula. Since their priorities have not of late been national identity, analysis is best left to discussions of strategic thinking. They do not figure into this group of chapters except as factors in Japan's reasoning about how it should revise its policies in Northeast Asia. After all, the two countries that matter most for Japanese national identity at this time are the United States, the key to its self-identification as part of the West and international society, and China, the key—positive or negative—to its calculus about "reentering Asia" and recovering a "normal" identity with a more autonomous foreign policy and self-clarification of how it views its historical behavior and demands that its neighbors deal with it.

The outer circle reaches to Japan and Russia, whose views on the Korean Peninsula have acquired new urgency as they have grown more obsessive about their national identities. The shadow of China is one factor driving Japan to reconceptualize what it seeks from Asia

in identity terms and driving Russia to do the same, albeit in quite a different manner. Both states felt marginalized as the Six-Party Talks proceeded after first taking pleasure that they were included in the talks in contrast to the late 1990s frustration at being excluded from four-party talks. In 2009-12 they struggled to find a way forward only to conclude that their position was eroding. Even before Abe took office, relations with South Korea had sharply deteriorated, while there was little hope of progress with North Korea as well as with Russia. Given trouble with China from 2012, Japan was losing its foothold in Northeast Asia. This served as the background for Abe's proactive diplomacy toward North Korea and Russia.

Section II consists of three chapters: two on defectors viewed from different angles, and one on Japan's thinking toward Northeast Asia, including North Korea, South Korea, and Russia. All highlight the impact of national identity on attitudes. Together they shed light on prospects for the transformation of North Korea not centered on how its nuclear weapons development proceeds but on how individuals and nations see ways of influencing it at either the micro level of families or the macro level of states.

NORTH KOREAN DEFECTORS AND THEIR IMPACT IN NORTH KOREA

Sandra Fahy focuses on "small unification," where defectors pay brokers to bring their family left behind in North Korea out using mobile phone communication via China, which breaks down barriers that have long isolated the residents of North Korea. Usually, discussions of North-South relations center on ethnic homogeneity manifest through a sense of national identity in South Korea. Rather than this ideal serving as the driving force in current efforts to bring people in South and North Korea together, it is genetic family bonds that she sees operating as a force for acts of unification. Fahy finds that ethnic nationalism is limited, countered by ideological nationalism, leading to the unexpected result that family units across the peninsula show practices of unification that are emotionally and practically more powerful than ethnicity and nationalism in conceptualizing reunification. Mobile phones and the money they help to transmit to North Korea can help the defection of North Koreans, but by keeping contact and helping family to receive remittances, they encourage some to stay put, opting against defection. Fahy cites data showing that remittance-senders thought their money had an impact on North Korea: 49.5 percent said that remittances would make those inside North Korea hanker after a South Korean lifestyle, 15.8 percent reported that they would lead to an increase in defections, and 8.4 percent surmised they would lead to increased resistance to the North Korean system. Her conclusion is that families, mobile phones, and money are fashioning a new conception of reunification in step with contemporary life where most North Korean defectors are separated from loved-ones and yet exist in their lives through technology.

Kim Jiyeon examines the North Korean defectors through the attitudes of South Koreans rather than their impact on relatives in North Korea. She too assesses the limitations of ethnic identity, connected to the belief that Korea is a single nation destined to be unified. Her polling data indicate its declining impact among South Koreans, and she searches for what this means for attitudes toward North Korean defectors in South Korea and for the reunification process. South Koreans are beginning to see North Korean defectors in a

similar way to how they see migrant groups. Those who do not regard ethnic identity, such as bloodline or nativity, as an important component to being Korean are more likely to have accommodating attitudes toward North Korean defectors, as toward other immigrant groups. Additionally, those with negative opinions on immigrants are more likely to have increased emotional distance from North Korean defectors. Finally, the perceived security threat level from North Korea also influences one's attitude toward North Korean defectors. As it increases, so do negative feelings toward defectors, which hints at their shaky status in South Korean society. North Korean defectors were once welcomed with open arms in South Korea. They are Korean, share the same blood, and belong to the same ethnic line as South Koreans. Perceptions of North Korean defectors, however, have changed. It is reported that these defectors feel most regretful about being treated as just one of many migrant groups. President Park was correct to be aware of the public's dubiousness toward reunification due to economic costs. Numerous studies indicate that it is the potential economic burden that is most persuasive in turning South Koreans against reunification. It is on this point that Park attempted to persuade the public. Nonetheless, a more fundamental disparity between the North and the South comes from the loss of an ethnic bond, which was previously thought to be the strongest factor in pursuing reunification. How to cope with increasing emotional distance should be a priority for the current and future presidents, Kim concludes.

Of course, national identity figures into South Korean perceptions of North Korean defectors, as well as North Korea's relationship to South Korea and other nearby states. Views in South Korea and North Korea are not the only ones that matter as diplomacy addresses how to manage not only North Korea's nuclear threat, but also its impact on the transformation of Northeast Asia. Japan's approach to the United States and Southeast and South Asia is largely viewed in realist terms, but its thinking on South Korea is well understood to be closely linked to national identity concerns. The case can be made that thinking toward North Korea and Russia also should be seen partly in that light. That is what I have tried to do in my chapter. I concentrate on the revisionist roots of policy toward North Korea and Russia, linking them to the oft-discussed revisionism displayed to South Korea and assess the balance between realism and revisionism in conservative Japanese thinking, led by Abe, as the 70th anniversary of the end of WWII and 50th anniversary of Japan-ROK normalization of relations put the spotlight in 2015 squarely on various views of history in Northeast Asia. Policy toward South Korea is hijacked by the "comfort women" issue. Initiatives toward North Korea are centered on the "abductions" issue, and Abe's insistence on pursuing Russia has been directed at the "Northern Territories" issue. In each case, a principal theme of Japan's national identity over many years has become the centerpiece in diplomacy. The result is quixotic quests for breakthroughs, arguably, at the expense of sober calculations by the foreign policy experts, coordination with the United States, and indications that favorable outcomes are in sight. Another reason for pursuing North Korea and exaggerating its prospects is to foster the impression, especially at home, that Japan is a diplomatic great power, not just a marginal factor, as seemed to be the case during the Six-Party Talks era. Showcasing the autonomous nature of its foreign policy on a matter of strategic importance bolsters Japan's self-confidence, which is useful for Abe's revisionist agenda at home and for separating Japanese national identity from U.S. identity and U.S.-led internationalism, even when Abe's realist agenda in defense policy and in heavy hedging against China's assertive policies depends heavily on U.S. ties.

The following three chapters fill gaps in the ongoing debate about the future of North Korea and the prospects for reunification. They address a conceptual gap, which has left matters of national identity on the sidelines. They also respond to narrowness in focusing on the actors that make a difference, shifting both to the micro level of personal contacts that reach across the North Korean border and personal responses to defectors who could be the tip of the iceberg as far more North Koreans arrive in South Korea, and to a more wide-ranging diplomatic level as states jockey for influence in Northeast Asia. With these additional viewpoints, progress can be made in overcoming limited awareness of the dynamics at work in what is called the “North Korean nuclear crisis,” but actually is a Northeast Asian regional dilemma with far wider ramifications.