

## **Identity and interests in Korea's policy towards Central Asia**

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### **Abstract**

The paper examines South Korea's policy towards post-Soviet Central Asia, with particular reference to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

The Soviet collapse opened the possibility for Korea to expand its relations (political and commercial) to a region previously closed to foreign players. The presence of a small Korean population in some of the countries of the region and the potential for expanding commercial relations in local economies seemed to bode well for the rise of Korea's influence in the region. To what extent were these initial hopes and expectations fulfilled? What are the driving forces behind Korea's Central Asian policy?

The paper focuses on the cases of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan as these are the countries that are home to the largest Korean diaspora in the region and also present the most sizeable and relatively diversified economy – hence offering a promising incentive for investment.

The scope of the paper is two-fold: first to consider the extent to which the presence of a Korean population mattered in shaping Korea's foreign policy towards the region; second to examine how Korea has exploited the potential of local markets to its advantage by maintaining a low profile in the mounting concerns over the dissonance over issues of political reform.

The paper argues that commercial interests have played a significant role in Korea's policy towards Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Trade relations have overshadowed concerns of the diaspora and especially questions of political reform. Unlike the United States and Western European countries, Korea, similarly to Russia and China, has intensified its relations with the Central Asian republics in recent years. The paper also suggests that identity plays but a marginal role in the way Korea relates to Central Asia. Trade, by contrast, seems to play a paramount role even compared to other issues that have fraught relations between the Central Asian countries and Western actors and organizations.

## **Introduction**

Though often (perhaps more often) seen as potential bones of contention, diasporic communities also act as possible bridgehead between the homeland and the country of residence (Kolstø, 1999). They can help establish and develop links between the two countries, politically, culturally and more crucially, economically.

Korea's diaspora amounts to about six million, most of whom are concentrated in China, Japan, and the United States. Just about 500,000 (9% of all overseas Koreans) currently reside across the former Soviet territory, the large majority of whom live in the Central Asian republics of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. What role, if any, have they played in shaping the relations between the Republic of Korea and the two Central Asian republics?

This explorative paper seeks to examine the driving factors guiding Seoul's policy in the region. While this study is still in its preliminary stages and the findings are tentative, the paper proposes that energy security and trade have been the main factors behind Korea's deepening of relations with the Central Asian states.

The paper is structured as follows. First the arrivals of Korean communities in Central Asia is revisited, looking back at the pre-Soviet and Soviet period. Next, attention turns to the changes brought by the Soviet collapse, as independence opened a window of opportunity for developing cultural, political, and economic ties between Central and East Asia. The paper then examines the cases of Korean-Uzbek and Korean-Kazakh relations, as it is with these two republics that Seoul has sought to develop closer ties, due to their political and economic relative weight in the region. Finally, the paper assesses the extent to which Koryo-saram (as ethnic Koreans are known in Central Asia) have contributed to develop Korea's policy toward the region or whether instead other factors have played a greater role. Conclusive remarks follow.

## **Central Asian-Korean relations before and during the Soviet period**

A Korean presence on Russian territory dates back to the middle of the nineteenth century (from 1863 onwards) when the Russian acquisition of the territories of Preamur and Primor'e established a Korean presence in the Russian Empire (Diener, 2006, p. 204). Koreans were then fleeing the exploitation by the Korean monarchy and the abuse by landowners and moneylenders (Diener 2006, p. 204). At the turn of the century Russia's fear of the Japanese raised the question of the allegiance of the Korean population and began relocating those Koreans who had settled in the Far East after 1884 outside border regions, only allowing those that were living there by that date to remain. The empire preferred to have Russians at its utmost periphery so not to have any doubt about their loyalty. In a similar ('preventative') move, in 1937 that Stalin gave orders to deport the Korean population from the areas around the Amur and Primor'e to the deserts and steppes of Central Asia. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan were the recipients of the deportation of Koreans, with only a smaller number reaching Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. By then Koreans, settled in rural areas, devoted themselves to rice farming.

During the Soviet period, and particularly in the post-Stalin era, Koreans moved from the countryside – where they were originally relocated from the Far East) to urban centres. In fact, the Koryo saram increasingly became a predominantly urban population. They also turned out

to be one of the most culturally Russified communities, overall well integrated in Soviet society. Following Stalin's death in 1953 the Soviet regime redressed some of the earlier policies and therefore Koreans were allowed to re-establish their ethnic identity, culture and language' (Kim, 2004).

### **After the Soviet collapse: Opportunities, challenges and uncertainties**

The collapse of the Soviet state appeared to open an unexpected window of opportunity for the Central Asian republics. These could develop new contacts with the outside world and the Korean state could enter new political, cultural, and economic relations with a region previously isolated. Diplomatic relations between Korea and the newly independent republics in the region were established in 1992. Korean Cultural Centres and associations were established and funded by the Korean government. New opportunities for travelling and the process of identity change which also entailed a rediscovery of common ethnic ties with South Korea raised the possibility that local Koreans might opt for out-migration, following the sharp decline in living standards and a general sense of disorientation, cultural, ideological and social. While many Koreans left for Korea, many others remained. Shuttle-trading and labour migration, more than mass out-flows from the region, seemed to characterise the way Koryo saram adapted to post-Soviet changes. At the same time the newly independent states of Central Asia were embarking upon a simultaneous process of state- and nation-building<sup>1</sup>.

Establishment of new state institutions was accompanied by a new search of the self and for the identity for the new state and often this bore the marks of the titular nation (here, Kazakhs and Uzbeks). Many referred to the Central Asian states as examples of nationalizing states, defined by Rogers Brubaker as states of and for the titular nation<sup>2</sup>, aimed at enhancing – in a remedial action – the status and position of the majority ethnic group to the expenses of the minority population. While the picture is more complex than what is commonly argued (both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan combine policies and practices promoting ethnic and civic types of identities) Koreans have appeared to adjust themselves to being 'at home abroad'.

### **Conceptualizing Korean-Central Asian relations**

Scholarship on Korean-Central Asian relations is promising and growing (Diener, 2006; Oh, 2006; Kim, 2002; Kan, 1999), but still at an embryonic stage. Scholars have thus far approached Korean-Central Asian ties from three distinct perspectives.

First, attention has been paid to the origins of a Korean presence in Russian first and Soviet territory (later). Here the arrival of Koreans to the Russian Far East and their subsequent deportation to Central Asia during the 1930s have been the dominant themes in the literature (Lee, C.M. 2003; Kim, 2002; Kan, 1999). Um (2000) has looked at the construction of the self and group identity through music consumption among the Koreans living in the Soviet Union. Second, a more contemporary outlook on the dynamics of identity change in post-Soviet Central Asia has emerged (Oh, 2006; Diener, 2006). This field of enquiry has drawn from the expanding literature on transnationalism and diasporas and has examined the re-

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<sup>1</sup> On Kazakhstan see Dave (2006) and Olcott (2002); on Uzbekistan see Bohr (1998) and Smith (2000).

<sup>2</sup> Brubaker (1996)ю

conceptualizations of homeland and territory among Kazakhstan's Koreans. Alex Diener has insightfully analyzed the way Koreans are reconstructing their idea of homeland following the Soviet collapse. Diener shows how the notion of a civic inclusive territorial Kazakhstani identity has still to penetrate among the majority of the population living in the country and that particularly applies to the minority peoples. Koreans have nonetheless been 'acculturated to the lifestyle, language, climate and customs of their local homelands' in post-Soviet Kazakhstan (2006, p.201). Third is the political and economic side of the relationship, namely the implications that a relatively large Korean presence has on the development of closer ties between the local republics and South Korea<sup>3</sup>. Lee (2003) discusses the Act on the Immigration and Legal Status of Overseas Koreans, adopted in 1999, but considered unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court in November 2001 and therefore amended.

While the emergence of the so-called global Korean diaspora has been object of growing attention (Hübinette, 2005; Lee, 2005; Bergster and Choi, 2003, Lie 2001), in particular the contribution made by Korean labour migrants on the homeland's economy (Bergster and Choi, 2003; Lee, H.K., 2005), this new wave of interest in the Korean diaspora has only marginally touched the issue of Korean-Central Asian relations. Korean out-migration from Central Asia has occurred, but has also met with difficulty, given the lack of networks in South Korea and Korea's restrictive immigration policies, as also reported from local Koreans in Uzbekistan<sup>4</sup>. So, overall, an analysis of the impact of co-ethnicity on political and economic relations between Central Asia and South Korea is still wanting. This is particularly surprising because several issues of great strategic relevance for Seoul are part of this identity-interests nexus.

### **Migration, citizenship and Korea's diaspora policy**

Traditionally studies of Korean foreign policy have been dominated by two intertwined issues: South Korea's relation with the North and the United States (Son, 2005; Kim, 2006). Besides the clear policy relevance of such issues, what is interesting of them is that they span across the inside/outside divide which has for decades plagues the study of domestic politics and international relations. The study of intra-Korean relations as well as US-Korean relations go beyond 'hard security' and instead tell us a great deal about how identities and foreign policy are intertwined and shape one another. Similarly, though as said to a far less dramatic extent, an analysis of the relations between Korea and ethnic Koreans deported by Stalin to Central Asia in Soviet times can shed light on the strategic interplay between domestic and foreign policy. As will be shown, discussions about the alleged Korean-ness of Koryo saram and more generally of the global Korean diaspora go at the core of debates about migration and citizenship in South Korea. Although the issue was first raised in 1971, it is only in 1997 that Korea conceptualizes a formal diaspora policy with the 'Act on Immigration and Legal Status of Overseas Koreans'. The following year the National Assembly approves a revised version of the law. The question of 'overseas Koreans' is multi-dimensional and contested as it concerns questions of citizenship, migration, but also relations with the new host countries and the extent to which citizenship should be granted to ethnic Koreans there. It is a delicate and thorny matter.

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<sup>3</sup> This is a particularly interesting point as Choi (2003) posits that Korea seems to deal more effectively with countries that are home to large Korean communities than with those with a smaller Korean presence.

<sup>4</sup> Conversations held in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, in August 2006.

Nevertheless the law is deemed unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court as it discriminates against those who migrated and obtained citizenship from their new host countries. Lee's study of the controversy surrounding the adoption of the law contributes to shed light on the core of the matter (2003). The debate was and is not so much about the diaspora itself and the relationship that the Korean state should or should not have with it, Lee contends (*ibid.*), but it is about the nature of the Korean state and pertains to questions of migration, identity, and citizenship. According to the law, equal treatment in terms of rights and employment in Korea is extended only to those who left Korea after 1948. This crucially excludes ethnic Koreans living in China (the thorny issue *par excellence*<sup>5</sup>) as well as Koreans settled in the former Soviet Union. Particularly problematic is the fact that with this law Korea's policy for immigrant workers has become entangled with its policy for overseas Koreans (*ibid.*) and while there is some overlapping between the two (most immigrant workers from China are actually ethnic Koreans), this has raised two main problems. First, neighbouring countries (China, *in primis*) have been greatly concerned about the change in status among one of its minority groups. Second, granting some immigrant workers preferential treatment equals an infringement of the principle of equality promoted by, among the others, the United Nations. This essentially boils down to the question of defining who is Korean and who is not, what being so entails in terms of rights and preferential treatment.

### **Korean-Central Asian relations**

As noted right at the outset of the paper, the presence of diasporas can be used by the alleged kin-state as a possible tool of foreign policy-making to influence domestic politics in the host countries, and/or as a bridgehead to develop ties with the countries of residence. In the Korean case, this can have cultural and social implications (contributing to maintain a Korean identity, culture and language within the diaspora) and economic as well, because positive relations with the host country can open new markets and space for investments for the Korean state. Let us now briefly examine the development of relations between Korea and the two larger Central Asian states, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, where the greater part of Koreans in the former Soviet Union now live.

Interest in Kazakhstan's Koreans mainly revolves in questions of the cultural conditions of the Korean community there, their identity transformation, the territorialization of identity and homeland conceptions. Identity issues aside, in recent years Korea and Kazakhstan have increased their economic cooperation. In 2004 the two countries signed a memorandum on cooperation in the energy and mineral resources sectors, as well as in the sphere of communications<sup>6</sup>. In September 2006 the two countries committed to developing joint projects in the construction, transportation, and banking sectors<sup>7</sup>.

More crucially, while debates over the costs and benefits of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, completed earlier in 2006 typically concerned the Caspian Sea littoral states (Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan especially) and the Western states which would benefit from the pipeline itself, less considered has been the extent to which East Asian countries, and

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<sup>5</sup> This is because large part of the illegal immigrants come from China and most of the immigrants from China are ethnic Koreans.

<sup>6</sup> *Pravda.ru*, 20 September 2004.

<sup>7</sup> *RFE/RL*, 22 September 2006.

Korea in this case<sup>8</sup>, could also profit from the BTC. On 20 September 2006 it was announced that Korea's LG would start exploring an oil field in western Kazakhstan (Egizkara) with reserves estimated at 200 million barrels in 2006-2007<sup>9</sup>. Developments in this sense are especially significant considering that Korea currently imports 97% of its energy<sup>10</sup>.

The growth of the Korean economy has led to rising energy needs. What is more, the current situation in the Middle East – on whose oil Korea is dependent – make it imperative for the country to diversify its energy sources. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan provide alternative sources of natural resources (oil, gas, gold, uranium) and Korea has recently pushed the accelerator to develop ties with these countries. As Nguyen notes (2006), because it is a latecomer and most crucially because it wields far less political influence than some of its neighbours (China and Japan, most notably), Korea might have to settle and deal with riskier environments. While Nguyen hints at Sakha as a possible outlet (where relatively little infrastructure exists), Kazakhstan provides a less risk-prone environment with sufficient resources to accommodate Korean deals as well.

Korea's role in Uzbekistan is even more marked, though not free of ups and downs over the years<sup>11</sup>. Of the five Central Asian countries, Uzbekistan is home to the largest Korean population<sup>12</sup>. Similarly to Kazakhstan's Koreans, even those living in Uzbekistan have emerged among the most Russified and Sovietized elements of society before independence. Again, similarly to Kazakhstan, it has not been the Korean presence per se that has driven relations between the two countries, as this would amount to grossly over-rate its political impact. What is not under dispute, however, is the extent of Korea's involvement in the Uzbek economy. Seoul is the largest investor in the Uzbek economy. The trade turnover between Korea and Uzbekistan has also grown over the years. In 2004 it amounted to US\$409m and that rose to a further US\$565m in 2005. 2006 has also been a particularly fruitful year in terms of developing bilateral economic ties. Earlier in the year (March) Korea's oil and gas companies (National Oil Corporation and Korea Gas Corporation) signed a memorandum with Uzbekistan's state company Uzbekneftegaz which gives Korea the 'exclusive rights to explore and extract' from two oil<sup>13</sup> and two gas fields in the country. In August Uzbekistan and Korea signed a gas production sharing agreement (valued US\$20m) which gives Korea National Oil Corporation a 20% stake in the gas field in the Aral Sea which should commence in 2012 after an explorative phase<sup>14</sup>. More recently, an important deal regarding the shipment of uranium has been reached during Korea's Prime Minister's

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<sup>8</sup> This is also the result of the fact that Korea wields less political influence than China or Japan as these have been quicker to sign more lucrative deals with the countries of the Caspian countries, including Russia and Iran.

<sup>9</sup> *Dow Jones Newswire*, 20 September 2006.

<sup>10</sup> (Nguyen, 2006)

<sup>11</sup> Saidazimova notes that despite being the largest investor in the Uzbek economy, Korea's three main joint ventures (Kabool Textiles, Uz-DaewooAvto, and Daewoo Unitel have no longer Korean capital, as Korean investors have increasingly become weary of Uzbekistan's government interference with private business (2005).

<sup>12</sup> Caution against an essentializing approach to the study of diasporic communities as if they were bounded entities comes from Lie (1995 and 2001) and Hübinette (2005).

<sup>13</sup> These are located in the eastern part of the country, in Chust-Pap and Namangan-Terachi. The two fields are estimated to hold up to 385 and 435 barrels of crude oil (*Ferghana.ru*, 29 March 2006).

<sup>14</sup> *Korea Times*, 30 August 2006.

visit to Tashkent in late September 2006<sup>15</sup>. This brings Korea an import of up to 300 tons of uranium in the period 2010-2014 directly from Uzbekistan, whereas it currently purchases it indirectly via US companies<sup>16</sup>.

The political and economic situation in the country appears more risk-prone compared to its northern neighbour, particularly since the May 2005 events in the Ferghana Valley town of Andijan<sup>17</sup>. Korea has appeared undeterred by the growing instability in the country. Quite the contrary it has intensified its links with Tashkent, sanctioned by the signing of a Strategic Partnership in Seoul on 29 March 2006<sup>18</sup>.

From the perspective of the Central Asian states, and Uzbekistan in particular, developing closer ties with Korea gives strength to the Asian vector in their international orientation. Ties with East Asia have accompanied the deepening of relations with South and South-east Asia too, as the improvement of ties with Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and Pakistan testify. On the political side, while the last two years have been characterised by Uzbekistan's re-alignment from a strategic partnership with the US to an alliance treaty with Russia and closer ties to China as well, it must be said that Korea has maintained a behaviour which places it in line with Russia and other Asian states when dealing with Tashkent.

### **Conclusive remarks**

Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are home to the largest Korean communities in the former Soviet Union and have also been the countries Korea has particularly sought to develop closer ties with. Is there a causal relationship between the two aspects? There is not sufficient evidence to support this view at the moment. First and foremost, the issue of the Korean diaspora is more a domestic policy issue in South Korea than a question guiding foreign policy. While no doubt references to the Korean diaspora are made in the various agreements signed between the parties, the issue of how to deal with overseas Koreans is about migration and citizenship. In addition, the comparatively small numbers of the Korean community in Central Asia, compared to, for example, those of the Korean diaspora in the United States, make it highly unlikely to become a critical political actor in either country.

In light of its rising energy needs, Korea has stepped up its diplomacy with resource-rich countries. In recognition of the uncertainty deriving from the political situation in the Middle East, Korea has wisely begun diversifying its imports, exploring and expanding ties with Central and South Asian countries as well as African ones. While arguing, as Nguyen does (2006), that Korea has entered the 'Great Game' is perhaps exaggerated, it is important to note how economic considerations have played a greater role in shaping Korea's relations with the Central Asian states, compared to other issues.

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<sup>15</sup> *Uzreport.com*, 26 September 2006; *RFE/RL* 25 September 2006.

<sup>16</sup> *RFE/RL*, 25 September 2006. Korea consumes about 4,000 tons of uranium a year, mostly for energy purposes (*Uzreport.com*, 26 September 2006).

<sup>17</sup> Akiner's has been the account most sympathetic to the government's version of the events (2005). By contrast, the report by the Human Rights Watch (2005) is representative of those view that most different from it. The report by the Crisis Group (2005) gives a balanced account of the events, the background and the immediate consequences.

<sup>18</sup> Kimmage (2005); Saidzimova, (2005).

Without downplaying the significance that opportunities to travel to, receive education in and do business with Korea have for Koryo Saram, the cultural dimension in the bilateral relations has focused more on questions of education and cultural preservation within the diaspora than on exerting pressure on the states of the region for easing the cultural development of ethnic Koreans.

What is interesting is that while relations with Western states have been thwarted by political reform coming to a halt in Uzbekistan and slowing down in Kazakhstan, this type of considerations has played a more marginal role in the relations between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan and East Asian countries. This in fact applies not only to Korea, but to the increasingly close ties with China (Jize, 2005) and Japan (Dadabaev, 2006).

To conclude, the paper has shown that relations with ethnic Koreans overseas occupy a more important role in Korea's domestic politics (as regards issues of migration and citizenship) than in shaping its foreign policy. The Korean diaspora does not appear to play a significant role in Korea's foreign policy. With respect to Seoul's policy towards Central Asia Korea's strategy has been guided by energy security and commercial concerns. This has led the country to downplay concerns about political reform and emphasise the benefits that economic cooperation might bring with energy-abundant countries of Central Asia.

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