

Identities in tension in South Korean unification discourses

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Twenty-five years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the surge in great hopes for the unification of North and South Korea, the Demilitarized Zone remains intact and unification continues to reside only in the imagination of the pan-Korean nation. The South Korean Government faces an ever-challenging task in “selling” the unification imperative to a national public apparently less interested than ever in the prospect of political, social, and economic “one-ness” with its poor, troubled northern neighbour. Over the past twenty-five years the discursive construction of a pan-Korean national “Self” has lain at the heart of South Korea’s unification policy framework, where the parameters of national identity extend over the entire Korean peninsula. This identity construction has been contingent on the continual restatement of a narrative emphasising the loss of the pre-division, pre-colonial, united past, the tragic “abnormality” of the present division and the dream of an “inevitable” and essential united future. However, particularly as inter-Korean relations have become more strained in the post-Sunshine Policy era, the South Korean national collective has also been exposed to continual, habitual “Othering” of the ontology of the North, with challenging consequences for South Korea’s unification policy framework.

This paper considers the tension between positive and negative collective identification with the ontology of North Korea in the South Korean national narrative in relation to unification, and observes some ways in which this tension can be seen to have affected policy practice. Drawing on constructivist theory from the field of international relations and adopting a post-structuralist analysis of unification discourses, this paper looks to identity at the level of the nation as a helpful explanatory lens through which to understand government action within its unification policy framework articulated alongside the securitisation of different aspects of national identity. It looks firstly at the nature of the identity tension, considering how two apparently opposing types of identification with the North have been cultivated in the nation-building efforts of the South Korean state, as well as how it is possible for both positive and negative identification parameters to co-exist in a single national narrative.

Throughout the presentation of the different types of identification with North Korea and its people, the paper also examines the explanatory utility of South Korea’s often-confused national identity narrative in understanding certain phenomena found in South Korea’s unification policy practice. It will be shown how the identity tension has had complex repercussions for the way policy is presented and “marketed” to the general public. The defining impact of the identity tension upon the design and execution of key areas of unification policy practice, such as the settlement of North Korean refugees, will also be presented.

Finally, this paper addresses briefly the sustainability of the positive-negative collective identity tension in the long term. Looking at what the discourses on unification in South Korea suggest in terms of envisioning the future, this paper concludes by considering the ways in which national security is derived from the affirmation of a secure vision of the nation and its defining cultural, geographical, economic and political boundaries.

Theoretical framework and its application

This paper considers national identity as being connected to policy concerning “national security” in the sense that shared identity gives the national collective a sense of “We-ness”, which it will seek to defend,

and which policymakers will foster, manipulate and be influenced by in policy development.¹ Much has been published in the last two decades on the rise in significance of identity in relation to domestic and international politics: Waever directly attributes the growth of this research agenda to “the increasing importance of nationalism and other forms of ‘identity politics’ after the Cold War.”² This paper argues that in looking beyond “soft” cultural or linguistic parameters, national identity can also be understood as being linked to a broad range of “material” factors which characterise the nation-state and which come to be significant to the nation’s sense of We-ness through shared experience.³ In terms of the important mechanism which links national identity and policy outcomes, Bloom has written persuasively on the power of ideational factors, and national identity in particular, in influencing the grand strategy of the state.⁴ He uses social identification theory to explain how humans feel the need to attach themselves to a broader collective through the sharing of environmental circumstances and meaningful experience.⁵ Berenskoetter similarly writes that a coherent “national narrative” helps a collective to formulate its boundaries, while also providing this “Self” with knowledge about its place in the world.⁶ This process of enabling individuals to situate themselves meaningfully in the world means that a shared national narrative comes to impel individuals to subscribe to it by acting as a vital “anxiety controlling mechanism,” which the collective will seek to defend from threat through their interactions with the policy process.⁷ In essence, human action (in this case policy) becomes “tied to who we are and who we want to be,” encompassing crucial *physical* and *ideational* aspects of the national Self.⁸

In the context of this understanding of national identity, this paper draws specifically on theory found within the Copenhagen School of IR, which describes how representations of identity and policy are linked through discourses, particularly those which seek to “securitise” aspects of the nation’s identity.⁹ While arguing that “national security is a discursive construction rather than a mirroring of objective reality”, the Copenhagen School sees the “securitisation” of interests as influential in the grand strategy of the state. Security is viewed as a “speech act”, where the “securitiser” raises a threat, and the audience accepts that issue as an existential threat. The “securitising move” then leads to action on the part of the

¹ William Bloom, *Personal Identity, National Identity and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

² Ole Waever, “European Integration and Security: Analysing French and German Discourses of State, Nation and Europe,” in *Discourse Theory in European Politics: Identity, Policy and Governance*, ed. David Howarth and Jacob Torfing (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 34.

³ Ruth Wodak, Rudolf de Cillia, et al., *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*, Second Edition (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, n.d.).

⁴ William Bloom, *Personal Identity, National Identity and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). See also Roxanna Sjöstedt, “Ideas, Identities and Internalization: Explaining Securitizing Moves,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 48 (2013): 143–64. Sarah A. Son, “Brothers, Refugees or Migrants? South Korean Government Policy for North Korean Defectors and National Building in the National Narrative” (School of Oriental and African Studies, 2013).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 23-53.

⁶ Felix Berenskoetter, “Parameters of a National Biography,” *European Journal of International Relations*, October 16, 2012, doi:10.1177/1354066112445290.

⁷ Berenskoetter, “National Biography,” 9.

⁸ Felix Berenskoetter, “Reclaiming the Vision Thing: Constructivists as Students of the Future,” *International Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (2011): 654, doi:10.1111/j.1468-2478.2011.00669.x.

⁹ Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998).

First, on the positive side of the identity spectrum, it is possible to identify a number of ways in which the South Korean national narrative is inclusive of North Korea, while differentiating the imagined, pan-Korean nation from regional and international “Others”. At the centre of the construction of the imagined pan-Korean nation is the discourse of “North Korea as Self,” which places security in the maintenance of this single nation, its history, its enduring importance in the present beyond the physical divide, and the certainty of its inevitable unification in the future. Further, it positions failure to unify as a site of loss, weakness and fear, where the two Koreas succumb to a permanent division that was not of their creation. Naturally, this discourse firstly positions North Koreans as brothers who were joint victims, along with all the Korean people, of international meddling in the affairs of the peninsula which led to Japanese colonization, the division and the unresolved Korean War. The notion of shared suffering and lingering trauma for both those who experienced personally oppression and violence, as well as those who “inherited” the same painful memories through a range of transmission channels, from official commemoration to propaganda, thus provides a psychological connection between the two peoples as one victim unit.¹⁷

Analysis of presidential speeches and government writings, as well as popular media editorials shows a second crucial element to this type of positive identification: the importance of blood and race as the central feature of pan-Korean identity, an aspect which has been explored in detail elsewhere.¹⁸ In this respect, “Koreanness” by descent is inescapable and unchangeable by any administrative or experiential process undergone by members of the imagined national collective. As Kim Dae Jung stated in his inaugural address prior to commencing the most radical policy of engagement with the North in South Korea’s history, “We are standing in the shadow of our 5,000-year history; the spirit of our forefathers is urging us on.”¹⁹ Unification White Papers have described “national community” as “a communal society where all the members can share common values and care about each other. A national community binds people together with common ethnic heritage. It is, therefore, the very source of power that enables the national unification.”²⁰ These statements and the discourse they are seated within have been seen to provide a mandate not just for South Korea’s unification policy and the Ministry of Unification’s continued existence, even under pressure for its dissolution under Lee Myung Bak,²¹ but also the paternalistic, top down way in which the Ministry has sought to promote its unification education programme with increasing urgency,²² emphasizing the need to “enhance the Korean people’s will and capacity for national unification through education,”²³ in an era where the younger generation in particular fail to properly “feel and experience unification issues.”²⁴

¹⁷ For a discussion on the complex “depth” of memory and its transmission in the East Asian context see Nicholas D. Kristof, “The Problem of Memory. (cover Story),” *Foreign Affairs* 77, no. 6 (December 11, 1998): 37–49. Jie-Hyun Lim, “Towards a Transnational History of Victimhood Nationalism: On the Trans-Pacific Space,” in *The Trans-Pacific Imagination: Rethinking Boundary, Culture and Society* (Hackensack, NJ: World Scientific Publishing Company, 2012), 45–60.

¹⁸ Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea*.

¹⁹ Kim Dae Jung, “Inaugural Presidential Address,” no. 2 September (1998), <http://eng.unikorea.go.kr/CmsWeb/viewPage.req?idx=PG0000000585>.

²⁰ *Peace and Cooperation: White Paper on Korean Unification 1996* (Seoul Computer Press, 1996), 52.

²¹ “SAIS US-Korea Yearbook 2008,” accessed September 5, 2014, <http://uskoreainstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/KimJ.pdf>.

²² *A Pleasant Walk with the Institute for Unification Education toward Unification* (Seoul: Ministry of Unification, Republic of Korea, 2010).

²³ *2010 White Paper on Korean Unification* (Ministry of Unification, Republic of Korea, 2011), 18.

²⁴ *2010 White Paper on Korean Unification*.

Integral to the notion of North Korea as Self is not just the memory of a united past lost and corrupted by “outside forces”, but also the vision of a united future, which is variously linked in South Korean domestic discourse to ideas about “national security,” “national prosperity,” “advanced industrialised nation” status, “quality of life for every member of the Korean community,” as well as the suggestion that a unified Korea would be a boon for the region and the world at large.²⁵ However, this future is contingent upon a process of change found in a second discourse which is also located on the positive side of the national identity spectrum: that of “North Korea as tainted Self.” Though the use of the term “tainted” is not ideal, it is perhaps the best way of describing the awareness noted in the domestic discussion on North Korea of the practical challenges that physical unity of the two Koreas brings, and what must be done about them. In an interview with the author, Yi Aeran, a prominent North Korean defector and winner of the 2010 International Women of Courage Award said, “The major cultural difference between North and South Koreans has to do with hierarchy, whereby it is hard for South Koreans to see North Koreans as equals.”²⁶ The discourse of North Korea as tainted Self was found to be a very common representation of the ontology of the North in the sources, and is a discourse which distances North Korea slightly from the “pure” Self, while establishing the hierarchy Ms Yi described. Though it considers the people of the North a tainted part of the nation, they are also considered a part which is redeemable and able to be corrected through socialization,²⁷ development assistance and re-education led by the South. In short, it is a discourse of the current reality of the two Koreas and what will need to be done in order to facilitate the imagined unity of the Korean nation found in the often utopic visions presented of the future.

This discourse is also very important as a tool in “selling” unification, as well as domestic policy such as North Korean refugee settlement, to a population less interested in these issues and ambivalent about the presence of North Koreans in society and what they symbolise. In essence, the idea of the “tainted Self” acknowledges difference, but promises hope of solutions. It is a narrative for coping with the division, for explaining it and providing hope to both South Koreans and the world that the condition is temporary and rectifiable. This discourse securitises the pan-Korean nation and unification as a source of potential that should not be lost. Yet this nation is also securitized in terms of its defining characteristics according to the blueprint of the South. The awareness of part of the Self being tainted, suggests that the continuity of culture, behaviour, and degree of sophistication and development of the national community is also of concern, promoting a need to correct disparity and restore continuity according to the model of the superior partner, in order to feel secure in a “united” identity. The security-giving hierarchy manifest in this discourse is evident in the continual restatement that,

“South Korea must take a leading role in shaping the future of the Korean peninsula and Korean people. In other words, there is a national mandate for the South Koreans to... manag(e) the national division in a stable way and ultimately achieve national unification to open a better future for the entire peninsula.”²⁸

²⁵ *Peace and Cooperation: White Paper on Korean Unification 1996*. “Reunified Korea Would Be a Better Partner for Russia, China,” *The Chosun Ilbo*, November 7, 2011, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2011/11/07/2011110701214.html. *2010 White Paper on Korean Unification*, 18.

²⁶ Aeran, Yi, interview with the author. Personal interview. Institute of North Korean Cuisine, Seoul, 27 July 2011.

²⁷ For more on methods and outcomes of socialisation and identity see Bernhard Peters, “A New Look at ‘National Identity’ How Should We Think about ‘Collective’ or ‘National Identities’? Are There Two Types of National Identities? Does Germany Have an Ethnic Identity and Is It Different?,” *European Journal of Sociology* 43, no. 1 (2002): 3–32.

²⁸ *Peace and Cooperation: White Paper on Korean Unification 2001* (Seoul Computer Press, 2001), 23.

Connected to this, much of the focus in unification discourses over the past fifteen years has been on the pursuit of “Mutual Benefits and Common Prosperity” – a phrase repeated over and over in more recent unification texts.²⁹ The focus on economic cooperation and development as the solution to inter-Korean conflict, described as “a peace project that transcends the Cold War through the economy,” has been a feature of both progressive and conservative government unification policy.³⁰ Government literature and the research output of a great many NGOs and academic institutes describe the proposed economic powerhouse that a united Korea might become, not least as a result of an initial heavy reduction in the need for military spending.³¹ This line of policy also highlights the vast untapped resources available in North Korea, which could be exploited once the two become one, in addition to the cheap labour resources that could be a major boon for manufacturing.³² Much of the accompanying urgency in the language used to sell the unification imperative suggests that progress must be made towards unification before the developmental gap between the two Koreas widens too much.³³ However, what this urgency also masks, alongside the appeal to the economic identity of the nation, is the increasing sense that the public will in favour of unification as goal warranting the investment it has historically demanded, is waning and threatening to undermine the current policy direction.³⁴

On the other side of the identity spectrum, the tendency within South Korea to identify negatively with North Korea is complex and inconsistent across different ideological orientations and demographic groups. However, there are certain features of the discourses on North Korea which are useful in painting just what this negative identification looks like and how processes of “Othering” are serving to chip away at impetus for unification as a desirable national vision. The first negative discourse delineated as a result of the data analysis is that of “North Korea as enemy Other,” and it is a discourse which is perhaps well summed up in the words of a 1999 Chosun Ilbo editorial, which said, “The lesson to be learned from the history of these contacts is that the only way to establish peace through dialogue is to ensure the North fears the South. North Korea has never changed... it does not need to. Why should it when South Korea changes for it?”³⁵ The discourse of “North Korea as enemy Other” is based in significant part on a belief that North Korea has always had an agenda of obstruction serving to undermine the unity of the Korean nation, and that this is a reflection of North Korea’s true nature, closely linked to its “communist” ideology. From the division onwards, South Korean governments ran a consistent campaign of differentiation of the South from the North, promoting its constitutionally-enshrined, rightful leadership of the entire peninsula. As a result, fear of “pro-North” forces in South Korean society has persisted well beyond democratization. In one significant example, in the mid-2000s President Roh Moo Hyun established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Korea to investigate, document and

²⁹ “Policy of Mutual Benefits and Common Prosperity: The Lee Myung-Bak Administration’s North Korea Policy,” n.d., <http://eng.unikorea.go.kr/CmsWeb/viewPage.req?idx=PG0000000585>.

³⁰ *White Paper on Korean Unification 2005* (Ukgo Publishing Company, 2005), 19.

³¹ Nam, Song-wook, interview with author. Dept. North Korean Studies, Korea University, Seoul. 24 June 2014.

³² In August 2013 the Institute for Unification Education posted a link to a website on its Facebook page called Information System for Resources of North Korea (bukhan jiha won net) (IRENK) which shows detailed breakdowns of the natural resources believed to exist in North Korea, just as though they were the South’s own. “Information System for Resources of North Korea”, *Ministry of Unification*, 2013, (accessed 25 July 2013), <http://www.irenk.net>; Bae, “A vision of Korean Unification and its Value: Building Great Power Korea.”

³³ *A Pleasant Walk with the Institute for Unification Education toward Unification*.

³⁴ “Joint Survey Reveals Shifting Perspectives on Unification- Daily NK,” accessed August 29, 2014, <http://www.dailynk.com/english/read.php?catald=nk00100&num=12248>. For more detail see also Soo Jeong Lee, *2012 Survey of Attitudes to Unification* (Seoul National University, Institute of Peace and Unification Research, 2012).

³⁵ “Kim Dae-Joong North Korea Policy,” *The Chosun Ilbo*, May 7, 1999.

achieve closure for tens of thousands of victims and their families who between 1910 and 1987 suffered massacres, wartime unarmed civilian killings, and other crimes, many times in cases of putting down “Communist sympathizers.” Yet during its short, three-year tenure the Commission’s work was described as having been hampered by limited media coverage and lack of cooperation from “defensive government bureaucracies” and “contestation from conservative political forces.”³⁶ Right-wing veterans groups “attacked commission members as ‘Communists’” and members of Lee Myung Bak’s presidential campaign in 2007 said the Commission’s activities “threatened social harmony in the South,” through its alleged “vilification” of the military while turning “communists into patriots.”³⁷

The perceived potentially treacherous nature of North Korea, and often by association its people, is painted as an inherent characteristic which is contrasted with the nature of the South as being virtuous, committed to reconciliation, morally superior, trustworthy and developmentally advanced. The events of 2010 involving the sinking of the Cheonan warship and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island were decisive in burying the previous era’s Sunshine Policy once and for all, when President Lee said,

We have always tolerated North Korea’s brutality, time and again. We did so because we had a genuine longing for peace on the Korean peninsula. But now things are different. We will immediately exercise our right to self-defense.³⁸

It was argued in the Unification White Paper of that year that “North Korea has not changed.”³⁹ In light of this view of North Korea which lacks any real sense of trust in the Other, unification policy has tended more than ever to include a strong emphasis on placing “national security” ahead of all other steps towards Oneness. What this has meant for the South’s approach to unification policy in more recent, conservative government-led years is a distinct tone of maintaining the status quo while working towards an unclear and highly conditional goal of co-prosperity and peaceful co-existence. Indeed, alongside her claim earlier this year that unification would be *daebak*, or the “jackpot”, President Park Geun Hye’s unification policy titled “Trust-building process on the Korean Peninsula” places “solid security” at the forefront, “encouraging the North’s right choices” as an entity independent of the South, citing adherence to “international norms” as crucial to trust-building. In this context, actual unification is presented as a vague, distant goal, with more emphasis on peace *between* the two Koreas and the region than detail on how a united Korea may be achieved or what it would look like in practice.⁴⁰ As one professor interviewed for this research said, “To be any more specific would be to invite an intense national debate no one really wants.”⁴¹

However, this paper argues that this talk of ensuring material security before all else also masks alternative, ideational security concerns found in the discourses of “North Korea as tainted Self,” and evident even more so in the final discourse, that of “North Korea as foreign Other.” The data collection undertaken among NGO workers, academics and even some government advisors very often favoured a

³⁶ Dong-Choon Kim, “Korea’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission: An Overview and Assessment,” accessed August 25, 2014, https://www.academia.edu/6417685/KOREAS_TRUTH_AND_RECONCILIATION_COMMISSION_AN_OVERVIEW_AND_ASSESSMENT.

³⁷ Choe Sang-hun, “Korea Investigates Atrocities in Race Against Time,” *The New York Times*, September 4, 2009, sec. International / Asia Pacific, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/04/world/asia/04truth.html>.

³⁸ *2010 White Paper on Korean Unification*, 42.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴⁰ *Trust-Building Process on the Korean Peninsula* (2013, n.d.).

⁴¹ Lim, Jie-hyun. Interview with author. Personal Interview. Department of History, Hanyang University. 14 July 2014.

peaceful two-state solution. Yet rather than focusing solely on physical security, central to this preference was what might best be described as growing concerns over the “societal security” of the South as an independent state, different economically, socially and politically – indeed *culturally* in the broadest sense of the word – in so many respects from the North. There is clear evidence that awareness and concern in the unification conversation over the hybridization of the two Koreas away from each other has become more present in recent years: Government white papers have acknowledged that it will “take more than territorial recovery or political integration to resolve all of the problems created by national division.” Similarly, “even if unification were achieved... it would only be superficial... it would not unite the people of the two Koreas at the internal or psychological level.”⁴² Academics involved in research on defector settlement in the South (arguably a microcosm of what at least the social integration aspect of unification would look like) acknowledge that “there are clear differences in backgrounds and cultural practices of North and South,”⁴³ and that “The younger generation sees North Korean neither as an enemy... nor as part of ‘us’.”⁴⁴ Such statements mirror the reality of the divided status quo and the ambivalence it has engendered towards North Korea, particularly among the younger generations.⁴⁵

Alongside the hand-wringing in unification discourses about the confessed difference that has opened up between North and South has been a growing debate beyond the discourses on unification about what South Korean national identity *should* look like, largely without consideration of North Korea as part of the vision, and it primarily securitises the international reputation of South Korea in various normative aspects.⁴⁶ This securitization of more novel parameters of South Korea’s identity, even though their internalization by the general public is as yet questionable, serves to draw the South away from identification with North Korea and its people as brethren or the Self. There are three arms to the public discussion on the South’s identity aspirations: First is the “globalization” of South Korean identity and the need to redefine the South Korean nation as a global player and, by default, leave the unification imperative behind as an incompatible aspiration. Second is the discussion on the physical makeup of South Korean society, including the economic and social value to be gained from diversification and multicultural acceptance of foreigners, largely inspired by economic imperatives and international norms of behaviour in immigration policy (and significant because of the heavy ethno-nationalistic element of positive identification with North Koreans). Third is the humanitarian and human rights obligation owed to North Korea and other areas in crisis, again framed in terms of international norms *rather than filial obligation*. It is in these areas that taboo-breaking statements unheard of two decades ago are providing evidence of crucial shifts in the way the South Korean national collective sees itself and its neighbours. The idea that it is a mistake to hold unification higher than “the reality of the 60-year long national

⁴² *Peace and Cooperation: White Paper on Korean Unification 1996*, 40. In September a gallery opened at Panmunjom to promote “cultural unification” alongside the physical aspect. “Cultural Unification at Panmunjom Gallery- Daily NK,” accessed September 3, 2014, <http://www.dailynk.com/english/read.php?catald=nk00100&num=12266>.

⁴³ Gyoung Bin Ko, “A New Perspective of Resettlement Support Policies for North Korean Migrants” (presented at the Symposium on an era of twenty thousand North Korean migrants, National Human Rights Commission of Korea, 2009), 298.

⁴⁴ “Younger Generation Sees North Korea as Neither an Enemy Nor Ally,” *Korea Focus* 12, no. 5 (2005): 13–14.

⁴⁵ For a detailed analysis of the changes in the attitudes of the younger generation, see Emma Campbell, “Uri Nara, Our Nation: Unification, Identity and the Emergence of a New Nationalism amongst South Korean Young People” (Australian National University, 2011).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* Timothy Lim, “Rethinking Belongingness in Korea: Transnational Migration, ‘Migrant Marriages’ and the Politics of Multiculturalism,” *Pacific Affairs* 83, no. 1 (2010): 51–71.

division”⁴⁷ has appeared alongside statements like that made by a former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade: “We need to have diplomatic expertise and progressive ideas that are commensurate with the country’s standing as the world’s 10th largest economy. But our society is still overshadowed by the influence of passive and retrogressive concepts such as... resistant nationalism,” citing the need to adhere to international norms, “lest (the) two Koreas become strayed sheep in world society.”⁴⁸

Playing to fears of being left behind by clinging to the legacies and hopes of the past and the pursuit of a seemingly impossible goal, public discourse on unification has shifted to align with wider conversation about South Korean identity in a bid to retain relevance.⁴⁹ It has begun to shed more historically-oriented calls to fulfil a destiny based on pan-Korean nationalism, and instead turned more towards economic development as well as the defense of human rights and attendant aims such as “greening” Korea⁵⁰ and working towards greater regional cooperation. Situated this way, unification is presented as an eventual, organic outworking of series of other processes that will be a boon for both Koreas and the region. Framing unification like this removes a need to be specific about any kind of detail on what form unification might take as well as the procedural or institutional nature of steps or agreements to bring it forward. In evidence of this, President Park’s 2013 policy paper on unification stated, “The ROK government will pursue cooperative endeavours on agendas regarding terrorism, environment, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief and other non-conventional areas of security, in order to secure sustainable peace in the region.”⁵¹ The paper discussed plans for Northeast Asian peace and cooperation, but referred to North and South as the “two Koreas” in the future tense, while a range of new approaches to inter-Korean and regional cooperation were presented, including “Green Détente” aimed at “mitigating tension and realizing peaceful coexistence by means of environmental cooperation,” as well as humanitarian cooperation and improving human rights, bearing in mind that “the very goal of unification is to ensure happiness on *both sides* of the Korean peninsula.”⁵² Within such discourses, a paradoxical, co-existence-oriented re-definition of unification emerges, as Minister for Unification Yoo Woo-ik stated in 2013: “Unification...can be a fundamental solution to many issues to ensure *co-existence* and prosperity amidst the flurry of changes.”⁵³ The “North Korea as foreign Other” discourse is thus constituted by two strands of discussion: the acknowledgement of deep differences between the communities of North and South, as well as a turn on the Southern half of the peninsula towards identifying with norms, values and visions of the future which set it apart from the North while reframing the ideal relationship between the two as one of peaceful coexistence, even while continuing to make rhetorical statements that unification “would be nice.”⁵⁴

Making sense of multiple identity narratives

The co-existence of these positive and negative identity frames is difficult to interpret and explain; however, a brief look at some of the features on the political landscape in South Korea provides some

⁴⁷ Joo-Sung Kim, “Korea’s Problems after Economic Development and Democratization,” *Korea Focus* Spring (2010): 95.

⁴⁸ Young Kwan Yoon, “Lest Two Koreas Become Stray Sheep of Global Society,” *Korea Focus* Autumn (2006): 18–20.

⁴⁹ For some sound reflections on the trouble with South Korean identity, see Gilbert Rozman, “South Korea’s National Identity Sensitivity: Evolution, Manifestations, Prospects,” *On Korea* 3 (2009): 67–80.

⁵⁰ “National Green Growth Strategy and Five-Year Plan Milestones,” accessed September 5, 2014, http://www.greengrowth.go.kr/?page_id=42450.

⁵¹ *Trust-Building Process on the Korean Peninsula*, 23.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 32–33.

⁵³ *2013 White Paper on Korean Unification* (Ministry of Unification, 2013), 2, <http://eng.unikorea.go.kr/content.do?cmsid=1819>.

⁵⁴ Lim, Jie-hyun. Interview.

clues as to how it has been possible for these two types of identification to persist to the extent that they have. Rozman has described how with the end of the Cole War, “long frozen prospects for unification with the North reappeared suddenly on the political agenda,” while at the same time, “a nation accustomed to high levels of economic and cultural autarky, protected by numerous barriers, precipitously faced a massive infusion of global and regional influences.”⁵⁵ Although South Korea has experienced significant change over the last twenty years leading to impressive speed of change in national identity, it has also led to confusion as old aspects of identity resurface and conflict with newer ones in the national and political and public debate. The situation has also allowed “political leaders to arouse emotions while reducing the possibility of centrist thinking gaining ground at the expense of ideological extremes.”⁵⁶ Over time, the possibilities for unification, which demand positive collective identification with North Korea, have been standing in parallel with the possibilities for taking on international and globalising influences which necessarily pull South Korea away from the pan-Korean national Self which is stagnant in its pre-division state, rendering unification less meaningful or desirable. Added to the impetus for fostering distance between the two has been the deterioration in positive relations between them over the last two governments. Drawing on Rozman’s reading of the political landscape, and given the hegemonic place of elite voices in the identity frames described, the role of political elites can be seen as crucial in managing the sustainability of this identity tension by virtue of their polarisation: while there is polarisation, opposing views on North Korea and policies such as the settlement of defectors are permitted to persist. Furthermore, successive governments have displayed remarkable deftness at dealing with the challenges presented by negative collective identification to positive collective identity-inspired policy. They have done this by taking care to deal with complicated North Korea policy in the unification education policy framework through caveats on unification taking place only in a “secure” state of inter-Korean relations. Within this, settlement of North Korean defectors, for example, has thus come to be framed in two ways which complement each other, despite originating from opposing identity frames: as a humanitarian and human rights-oriented obligation in the present context of difficult relations with the North, and as a precursor to unification at an undefined (and therefore “safe”) point in the future.

In light of the coexistence of seemingly contested identity frames and an inability to overcome the problems of history and create a consistent national narrative for the past, present and future, there is perhaps a need for alternative approaches to achieving inter-Korean reconciliation to be aired, where conflicting collective narratives are brought into some form of cohesion moving forward. A revised approach should acknowledge that the continual restatement of distant, “ideal type” scenarios and rhetorical statements of positive identification with North Korea have so far failed to achieve a great deal in the way of *consistent* concrete outcomes.⁵⁷ Though there is not the space here to go into detail on what revised processes or institutions for identity-building could look like,⁵⁸ in any concerted programme of engagement between South and North Korea it will be necessary to take stock and reflect on the multifaceted conflicts of the past in building a future that is accepting of difference.

⁵⁵ Rozman, “South Korea’s National Identity Sensitivity,” 72.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ This is not to underrate the significant achievements of Kim Dae Jung’s Sunshine Policy, the 2000 inter-Korean summit, the establishment of the Gaeseong Industrial complex and Mt Guemgang tours, as well as the regular (if interrupted) arrangement of family reunions. It has to be acknowledged that the problem of consistent, speedy progress and growth in cooperation is much more complicated and connected to significant systemic and institutional issues.

⁵⁸ Paik explores some important mechanisms by which the “division system” might be overcome in Paik Nak-chung, “TOWARD OVERCOMING KOREA’S DIVISION SYSTEM THROUGH CIVIC PARTICIPATION,” *Critical Asian Studies* 45, no. 2 (June 2013): 279–90, doi:10.1080/14672715.2013.792577.

A more comprehensive approach may involve revised policies and discourses which deliberately de-securitise by de-prioritising the issues which have gradually come to inspire greater uncertainty and anxiety in the national narrative: namely, the physical merger of the two Koreas into one social and political unit in the absence of sufficient attention to the manifold social, political and economic issues that would arise. At the same time, disassociating current physical and ideational realities on the peninsula from “failure” and “loss of potential” and instead placing positive meaning in functional cooperation and shared achievements outside of the shadow of unrealized unification, could be helpful. A large part of this, however, involves harnessing the political will and courage to assign alternative meanings and feelings in the process of resolving conflict, no small feat in ideologically divisive South Korea.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to shed light on the prominent features of South Korea’s national identity narrative in relation to North Korea and its people. The co-existence of positive and negative identity frames was shown to pose challenges to the coherent and precise articulation of unification policy in South Korea today, where the realities of an evolving national identity narrative that is distinct from the North and the imagined pan-Korean nation are demanding a re-thinking of just what unification means and how it is presented to an increasingly ambivalent public. Viewing “national security” as also being grounded in the ideational provides an understanding of national identity as wielding significant power over policy planning, particularly in regard to this long-standing and sensitive area of government activity and public debate. The uncertainties of when or how regime change may occur in North Korea make unification planning equally uncertain, all of which calls into question the continuing relevance of placing security and hope in the idea of a single nation that may never come to pass. This is not to say, however, that inter-Korean cooperation is impossible, or may never lead to a form of unity between the two. On the contrary, seeking creative methods of engagement and activities which bring the two closer and allow shared identity to develop organically, with less emphasis on historically and ethnically-grounded, unification-oriented rhetoric, could serve a vital purpose in the wider pursuit of regional peace and security and ought to be a priority for the South Korean government moving forward.

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