

South Korea and a New Nationalism in an Era of Strength and Prosperity by Steven Denney and Karl Friedhoff

Steven Denney (steven.denney@mail.utoronto.ca) is a PhD student in the Department of Political Science at the University of Toronto. Karl Friedhoff (klf@asaninst.org) is a program officer in the Public Opinion Studies Center at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies and a Mansfield Foundation US-Korea Nexus Scholar.

For the first time in nearly a decade, people watched as soldiers, tanks, and missiles rolled through the streets of central Seoul. For many observers, the purpose of the military parade was clear: a show of force meant to deter North Korea from engaging in military provocations. This surface reading is correct, but overlooks an important underlying trend: beyond the pomp of the parade a nationwide transformation is underway. Public opinion data suggests that a “new” nationalism is on the rise in South Korea. This is not a passing phase; it is the manifestation of a new national identity and a natural outgrowth of the country’s material development and newfound confidence. As Korea seeks a more prominent role in East Asian affairs, an effort encouraged by a supportive national identity, any understanding of the region will require taking Korea’s new nationalism into account.

Many South Koreans are coming to terms with the fact that they are citizens of a rich country with a powerful army, the twin goals of government policy in Korea’s developmental era. A modernized military, strengthened by the US security guarantee, protects Korea from conventional military threats; an export-oriented, conglomerate-driven economy ensures that Korea stays economically vibrant and affluent. These accomplishments are based on a formidable development experience that has fostered a new level of confidence across the political spectrum as well as among elites and ordinary people alike. Koreans have begun to view themselves and their republic in a way that reflects political, social, and economic realities. Korea’s new nationalism is based less on ethnicity than previous strands of nationalism, views the state with an increasing level of confidence, and presumes that South Korea is on the rise in East Asia and the world.

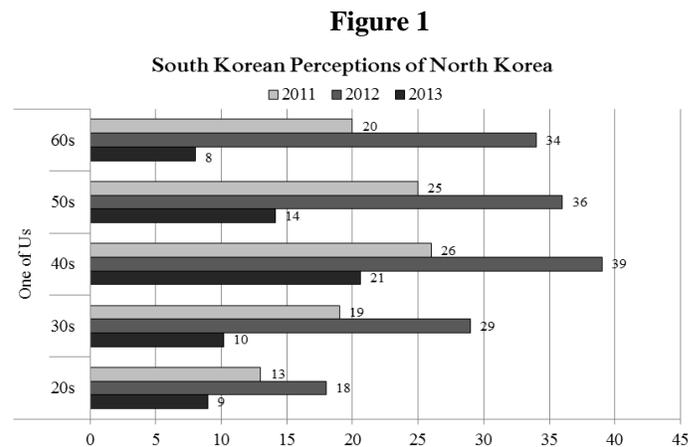
The Rise of a New National Identity

One of the first results of Korea’s new identity is the decline of ethno-nationalism. That is, South Koreans are increasingly willing to draw a clear line between the Koreans as people and the two states they inhabit. Though Koreans in their 30s and 40s consistently show more positive attitudes toward North Korea, the youngest cohort (those in the 20s) reflects the identity of Korea’s new nationalism. That Koreans have a strong sense of ethno-nationalism has long been the underlying assumption to the argument that reunification by choice will take place if reunification by collapse does not, because Koreans of both countries are of the same “nation.”

However, recent public opinion surveys provide data that necessitate a rethinking of this long-held view.

Figure 1 shows South Koreans that view North Korea as “one of us” by age cohort from 2011 to 2013. The most obvious observation is from 2012, the most positive toward North Korea for the data, when approximately one-third of South Koreans viewed the North as “one of us.” This is hardly a high enough percentage of the population to support the claim that reunification by choice is inevitable. Moreover, in 2012, South Koreans were just as likely to identify North Korea as a neighbor, and 19 percent defined it as an enemy.

The 2013 data makes it clear that the South Korean public judges North Korea on its actions, with public opinion turning sharply against the North following tensions in early 2013. Of course, if North Korea can become a responsible neighbor, attitudes would improve. The question is if the North can achieve this before the youngest South Koreans decide that they, and their country, are better off seeing the Republic of Korea as a completely separate political and national entity. In 2012, while 11 percent of those in their 60s expressed no interest in reunification, 23 percent of those in their 20s stated the same. Notably, it was those in their 20s (60 percent) who were most in favor of reunification on South Koreans terms, indicating a less accepting and less tolerant attitude toward the North. (Those in their 60s were the next highest at 49 percent.)



Source: The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

The most important point to make is how sharply South Koreans in their 20s have broken in their views of North Korea with those in their 30s and 40s. In 2011 and 2012, those in their 20s were the least likely to identify the North Korea as “one of us.” Indeed, in 2012 this cohort was more likely to define the North as an enemy (24 percent). Following heightened inter-Korean tensions in the first quarter of 2013, the response “one of us” decreased by 9 percentage points.

This data helps to highlight a larger trend – on issues of national security the young think like the old. Asan surveys

have consistently found that Koreans in their 20s identify as “security conservative” and usually find themselves in agreement with those in their 60s and older on issues related to North Korea. Even so, these age cohorts likely agree for fundamentally different reasons. While those in their 60s still show an interest in reunification, the youngest Koreans see South Korea as a strong and prosperous country and are far less interested in reunification with North Korea.

The national identity gap between generations may be explained by a difference in experience and expectation. The youngest South Koreans know no other Korea than an affluent one. Japan has been in decline so long that those in their 20s only know rumors of its former economic might. Unlike in the days of their parents and grandparents, there is no regional hegemon. China is a growing power with plenty of potential, but it is not thought to be as advanced as Korea. Thus, Korea is entering into a vacuum of sorts, and the youngest Koreans see Korea as assuming its rightful place in the hierarchy of countries. This has precipitated a fundamental shift in national identity and expectations for how Korea ought to behave.

In Korea We Believe

Korea has depended upon others for the security of its territorial borders for a better part of its pre-modern and modern history. Although still true to some extent, South Koreans no longer see themselves, or their country, as a “shrimp among whales.” The era of development has been definitively closed. Even if Koreans debate whether they have become an advanced country, there is little debate about South Korea being a powerful and influential actor in the international community.

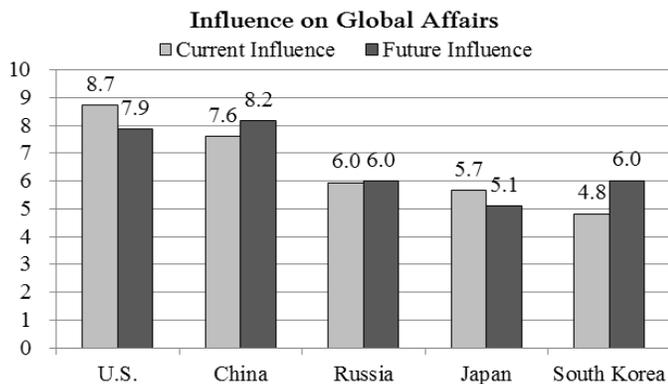
As seen from Figure 2, which measures perceptions about influence on global affairs both now and in the future, South Koreans expect the influence of the United States to wane in the next 10 years as China’s influence grows, with China becoming the most influential among countries in the survey. But the more interesting finding is just how confident South Koreans are: while Koreans rank their country as the least influential among the countries *currently*, in 10 years’ time they expect South Korea’s influence to surpass that of Japan and even to rival that of Russia.

Some observers will dismiss the idea that South Korea could grow to be as influential as Russia as wishful thinking or overconfidence. But doing so misses the point. The question of influence on global affairs is not aimed at garnering expert opinion on the true prospects for growing South Korean influence in the world. Instead, it is aimed at measuring the general population’s level of confidence in their country. The growing confidence among Koreans should be carefully watched because as the confidence of the general population grows, the South Korean government is likely to carry out policies that act on this confidence. The people will expect as much.

With increasing confidence comes increasing willingness to express that confidence. Koreans see the next 10 years bringing a fundamental reorganization of East Asia, and they expect this reorganization to give Korea a more prominent role. The Korean government will increasingly act on that expectation; the recent military parade is just one of many ways the government will fulfill the expectations of a confident citizenry. A strong and prosperous South Korea is starting to think and act as such. The rest of the region will have to deal with it.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.

Figure 2



Source: The Asan Institute for Policy Studies