North Korea in South Korea–Japan relations as a source of mutual security anxiety among democratic societies

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Abstract

When Kim Dae-jung and Koizumi Junichiro visited Pyongyang in 2000 and 2002, their visits facilitated a perception shift toward North Korea in South Korea and Japan. This was a consequence of the two democratic societies expanding and redefining the acceptable boundaries of their national security identities and principles in a changing regional environment. Although the expansion of societal security discourse did not lead extreme ‘revisionists’ to implement drastic strategic policy transformations in either country, it did provoke a ‘mutual security anxiety’ between the South Korean and Japanese publics, as they felt increasingly uncertain about each other’s future security trajectory. This mutual anxiety, in which both countries tend to view each other as potential security risk, while overlooking the existence of moderate democratic citizens on the other side, continues to provide a powerful ideational undertone to the bilateral relationship, which contributes to persistent misunderstanding at various levels.
1 Introduction

This article first traces Kim Dae-jung’s visit to the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea) on 13 June 2000 as the first head of state of the Republic of Korea (South Korea) to do so, and likewise, Koizumi Junichiro’s visit to Pyongyang on 17 September 2002 as the first acting Japanese Prime Minister. These visits led to a significant shift in North Korea’s image within the two states throughout the early to mid-2000s, resulting in the two countries holding opposite views. This article posits that the two visits also provided critical opportunities for ordinary citizens of the two states to openly engage in public debates on reevaluating their traditional post-World War II and the Cold War era security identities and principles. The rise of the public debates was a result of a ‘widening of newly acceptable interpretations’ concerning the nature and the immediacy of ‘North Korean threat factor’ in the post-Cold War regional environment.

The changing domestic narratives about the nature of North Korean threats and the resulting expansion of ‘acceptable future security options’ among both the South Korean and Japanese publics were not the only

1 In Japan’s context, the post-World War II security principles referred to in this article are self-restraint on using direct coercion (both military and nonmilitary) as a legitimate means of pursuing state interest, especially toward its neighbors, and this ‘pacifist’ norm institutionalized in its Peace Constitution. The constitution and the overall public support for the ‘Peace Clause’ (Article 9) in it – which renounces the sovereign right to wage war and the threat or the use of force as means of settling international disputes – have offered Japan a fundamental policy guideline to be a liberal trading state of the Western bloc allied to the United States. The principles have also made Japan prefer to avoid direct confrontation with its former colonial victims in the region. In South Korea’s context, firm domestic anti-communist ideology and the alliance with the United States as the foremost security guarantee for the ‘sole legitimate sovereign state’ in the Korean Peninsula against another North Korean invasion had been the core aspects of the South Korean strategy during the Cold War.

In terms of theoretical framework, it is not this article’s aim to provide a parsimonious and linear explanation by applying a particular theory. Nonetheless, it does embrace the central tenet of the constructivist paradigm of International Relations (IR) that social identity, which constitutes the pillar of national security principles, is a significant variable for understanding the nature of a state’s policy orientation. Constructivist argument states that state policy, especially concerning that of national security, follows the normative principles derived from the collective social identity shared by the majority of citizens that, in turn, has been formed by the specific historical trajectory that the state in question has experienced. Of course, there are always those critics opposed to the ‘mainstream’ security identity. However, it nevertheless becomes an ‘institutionalized norm’ if the mainstream society, and not only the government, concedes to it as the general guiding principle for the state’s foreign and security policies. For examples of the most classic constructivist works relevant for this article, refer to Jepperson et al., (1996) and Katzenstein (1996).
changes to occur following the two leaders’ meetings. The second part of this article will explore the byproduct in the South Korea–Japan relations that was created as a result of the changing public discourse throughout the 2000s: the widening of security debates in the two states also caused problems for bilateral relations, as mutual distrust grew over the possibility that the ‘other side’ might fundamentally shift its future security strategy in a manner detrimental to one’s own by using the North Korean factor as a timely excuse.

During Kim Dae-jung’s visit to Pyongyang in 2000, as part of his new doctrine of engagement with the North widely known as the Sunshine Policy, he announced in a joint declaration with Kim Jong-il that they intended to cooperate in the reunification process of the Korean Peninsula and facilitate economic and social cooperation. Koizumi’s visit in 2002, likewise, resulted in the signing of the joint Pyongyang Declaration with the North Korean dictator, demonstrating to the world that Japan and North Korea would work together to renormalize their long-strained relations. Furthermore, this declaration signaled that Japan would take an active role in resolving security-related issues in the region – such as the North’s ballistic missile and nuclear programs – by working with the North to find a peaceful solution (Asahi Shimbun, 2002a; Asahi Shimbun Editorial, 2002; Lee, 2003, p. 67). However, this meeting also caused unprecedented public shock within Japan after Kim Jong-il officially admitted and apologized for the abduction of Japanese citizens by his agents in the past (Samuels, 2007, pp. 149, 175).³

² This policy, which became official during the Kim administration, asserted that all Koreans must overcome the confrontational South–North relational structure of the Cold War to bring peace and stability to the Korean Peninsula through their own initiative. A product of South Korea’s democratization in the 1990s, this liberal posture toward North Korea promoted the concept of ‘peaceful coexistence’ and ‘mutual security’ by acknowledging the existence of non-zero-sum solutions to the two Koreas’ security problems. The policy also involved delinking humanitarian aid from hard security politics, and loosening government control on the private sector’s activities with the North (Moon, 2002, pp. 26, 30–40; Cha, 2003, pp. 214–215).

³ North Korean agents had secretly abducted Japanese citizens – mostly from within Japan – during the 1970s to be trainers for North Korean spies infiltrating South Korea disguised as Japanese. Moreover, providing Japanese who were semi-permanently residing in North Korea (for example, the Japanese Red-Army faction members who hijacked the Japanese airliner JAL 351 ‘Yodo-go’ in March, 1970 and flew to North Korea to seek asylum) with Japanese spouses was another reason (Yomiuri Shimbun Political Section, 2006, p. 35; Wada et al., 2008, p. 126). The number of total abductees claimed by the Japanese and the North Korean governments varies greatly, and the two governments also disagree on the fate of the victims.
The two leaders’ visits to Pyongyang soon caused a series of domestic consequences. The most visible and direct consequence was the drastic shift in North Korea’s image in South Korea and Japan, which proceeded in fully opposite directions. The summit in 2000 convinced many South Koreans that North Korea was not simply an eccentric rogue state to be contained, as they had been told to believe during the Cold War, but an equal that deserved political space for dialog and negotiations (Moon, 2002, p. 44). The country was even swept away by the ‘friendly’ image of Kim Jong-il’s smiling face and mannerisms on live television, causing a heightening of ‘one-nation’ sentiment (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2000). In contrast, North Korea’s official disclosure of the abduction issue by the apology of Kim Jong-il marked the first instance in which Japan had become a victim of a neighboring state’s deliberate activity within the post-World War II period. Kim Jong-il’s confession thus hardened the negative image of North Korea in the minds of the Japanese public.

It is not surprising that the transformation of North Korea’s image was soon followed by a concomitant reevaluation by the South Korean and Japanese publics of their traditional post-World War II and Cold War security principles in light of newly rising public perceptions vis-à-vis the North. These societal-level debates and discussions on national security principles took place in a wide public arena as a publicized issue, encompassing traditional and new types of mass media, academia, legislative branches of the two governments, societal elites and ideational entrepreneurs, and the informed public. After the two meetings in Pyongyang, the

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North Korea argues that all the survivors, their children, and their spouses have already been repatriated to Japan since 2002 and that the rest had already died in the North either by natural causes or suicide. The Japanese public, as well as the media and the government, do not give credit to this claim, and many still believe either that some must be still alive or that the circumstances of their deaths have been distorted by the North.

4 The terms ‘societal’ and ‘public’ used in this article are not limited to non-governmental organizations, think-tanks, or agenda-specific interest groups in South Korea and Japan that are linked to North Korean issues. The terms more broadly embrace ordinary citizens at the mass-level of all occupational and educational backgrounds. Of course, as in any democratic state, Japanese and South Korean citizens are composed of individuals with diverse opinions and degrees of interest toward East Asian regional politics. However, there are certain foreign policy issues that draw a high degree of public interest, and these well publicized policy areas produce mainstream opinion as a result of constant media coverage and domestic debates. Refer to Hudson and Skidmore (1993) as an example of works on state-society dynamics and domestic political contexts of foreign policy making processes. Incorporating the societal factor in the analyses of post-Cold War South Korea–Japan bilateral relations beyond policy makers is important, as public opinion in the two countries has become increasingly powerful.
public debates increasingly took on the tone of questioning the core assumptions about the nature and the reality of the North Korean threat that had previously guided governmental policy-making as well as citizens’ ‘common sense knowledge’ during the Cold War era.

Needless to say, North Korea had always been considered the main enemy for South Korea after the Korean War in 1950–1953. In the case of Japan, the North had been a former colonial victim-turned-communist dictatorship that needed to be approached with caution and a dose of historical remorse whenever Japan became engaged in unofficial interactions. The re-interpretations within the public perceptions of North Korea enabled the widening of what acceptable and legitimate security discourse meant concerning alternative security strategy options. Some of the newly legitimized options included those that had been previously considered taboo or too extreme by the majority of citizens during the Cold War (Lee, 2002b, pp. 174, 175; Samuels, 2007, pp. 171–176).

It is from this domestic context in South Korea and Japan that the changing image of North Korea, and the societal debates about the validity of traditional security principles, also caused the exasperation of bilateral relations in the last decade. In short, both South Korea and Japan felt uneasy about the possibility of each other’s transition away from the long-held images that each was accustomed to before the summit. Both countries were not sure where, at the end of the road, the other would settle in terms of security strategies. There was a prevalent mutual suspicion within both countries’ societal discourse that the other side was using the new North Korean factor as an excuse to deliberately weaken the post-World War II security principles and institutions. Those principles previously had provided a basis for South Korea and Japan to maintain bilateral relations during the Cold War era, and following the summits, a mutual concern

in framing the governments’ options on publicized policy issues; this is particularly the case in post-democratization South Korea, from the 1990s on. Public sentiment’s policy impact is magnified in South Korea more than that in other Asian nations. According to the World Values Survey, South Korea had the most rapid increase in protest activism in the world from the early 1980s until the early 1990s – an increase more than twice as rapid as that which occurred in Japan during the same period (Calder, 2005, p. 28).

The term ‘discourse’ used in this article means a contextual and narrated form of public opinion, formed by societal debates and discussions, often through the mass media. It is a source from which we can contextually understand the ideational origin of how and why a majority of citizens react in a certain fashion on a particular issue.
developed that the other side was heading in the direction of becoming a potential threat.

In this article, this two-way suspicion held by the public in South Korea and Japan is termed ‘mutual security anxiety’ over the other side’s uncertain future trajectory. Many informed Koreans in the early 2000s felt that Japan was on the verge of revising their post-World War II pacifist security institutions. Japan’s main justification propelling the change would be the now-uncovered North Korean kidnapping of Japanese citizens. It would serve to mobilize the public’s new sense of ‘victim mentality,’ enabling the country to take a firmer stance not just toward the North but toward other neighbors in the long run as a spillover. On the other hand, the Japanese intently watching the Korean Peninsula voiced concern that South Korea’s sentimental pan-Korean nationalism following the visit in 2000 could result in the country shifting its stance vis-à-vis its Cold War patron-ally, the United States. Japanese observers and media worried that South Korea might weaken its traditional link with the United States, as North Korea was no longer seen as an immediate threat but a potential partner for reunification. There was concern that the new Korea, full of ethnic nationalism and distancing itself from its ally, could also bring negative security implications for Japan, since both countries—through the influence of the United States and the global pressure of the Cold War structure—had maintained a de facto United States–Japan–South Korea tripartite ‘virtual alliance’ despite the unfortunate historical legacy of colonialism (Sakata, 2011b, p. 109).

In the third and the last section, this article explains the primary structural cause for the prevalence of the mutual security anxiety that has put pressure on South Korea–Japan relations since the 2000s. The article asserts that since the last decade, the two countries have focused only on the criticism and reevaluation of the traditional security principles within the other side’s society, while ignoring another equally important fact: despite their increasingly flexible views toward their countries’ new security environment, citizens of neither side still do not blindly support strategic shifts that are too extreme or drastic.

In other words, the reevaluation of traditional security principles in both South Korea and Japan has unfolded as a complex process in which this ‘duality’ in the public security discourse has become structurally consolidated since the 2000s; on the one hand, the scope of acceptable security principles has expanded, but on the other, mainstream citizens continue to
impose limitations on overly extreme arguments. The article concludes
that the tendency to magnify the former while myopically overlooking the
existence of the latter on the other side is the cause of the mutual security
anxiety that has complicated bilateral relations.

Government-level South Korea–Japan interactions have always been
volatile in their degree of amicability and friction, as various issues of the
day emerged since the bilateral diplomatic normalization process in 1965.
Numerous literatures have illustrated this complexity in track-1-level inter-
actions by analyzing the shifts in leaders’ statements and in policies (For

On the other hand, the domestic consequences of the two visits in 2000
and 2002 and their societal-level effects on South Korea–Japan bilateral rela-
tions have been comparatively overlooked. The reason is straightforward:
until the end of the Cold War, public discourse in the two countries did not
have much influence on their bilateral relations and their individual relations
with North Korea, since societal perceptions were relatively constant. South
Koreans’ collective mindset was overwhelmingly governed by the Cold War
mentality and the primacy of the United States, such that despite their histor-
ical animosity toward Japan, the tripartite ‘virtual alliance’ was accepted as a
necessity. Meanwhile, the Japanese public’s demeanor toward both Koreas
was a balance between caution and indifference—even up to the mid-1990s.

But since the influence of the societal factor drastically increased along with
the changes in security discourse in the 2000s, it is imperative that we shift our
level of analysis accordingly. The main purpose of this article, therefore, is to
present an alternative interpretation of a well-documented period by utilizing
already-available evidence and locating the non-governmental sphere as the
main moving force in bilateral relations. Although the case in question oc-
curred more than a decade ago, the legacies of this period still lurk in the
background as an undertone in current bilateral interactions, despite lead-
ership and policy shifts in both countries as well as in North Korea.

2 Domestic implications of the two visits
in South Korea and Japan

2.1 South Korea

Kim Dae-jung’s visit to Pyongyang in 2000 had two immediate repercus-
sions in South Korea: (i) the surge of pan-Korean nationalist sentiment
among the wider spectrum of citizens, and (ii) a hopeful expectation that the Cold War in the Korean Peninsula was finally coming to an end (Kimura, 2005, pp. 14, 15). While this societal perspective may be viewed as naïve today, media scenes from North Korea and the joint declaration provided visible evidence to encourage the public to start reevaluating South Korea’s traditional Cold War era view of their northern neighbor and its leader, Kim Jong-il.

Although the Sunshine Policy was controversial in the earlier period of Kim’s administration, the summit seemed to have finally proved its ‘effectiveness’, and it established itself as South Korea’s policy foundation toward the North with fast-rising public approval (Izumi, 2006, p. 33). The anti-communist ideology of the Cold War era dissipated as ethnic nationalism and a sense of South–North solidarity grew, transforming South Korean’s public view toward the North with increasing force (Cha, 2003, p. 216; Williams and Mobrand, 2010, pp. 531, 532). For example, a national poll conducted by Munwha Daily in February 2002 showed that 69% of respondents strongly supported the Sunshine Policy (Kim et al., 2004, p. 45). ‘Conservative’ factions – traditionally associated with the Cold War anti-communist and pro-United States mentality – were forced to publicly announce their approval of South–North joint ventures in trade, tourism, and the re-linking railways through the demilitarized zone dividing the two Koreas (Jang, 2006, p. 158).

Prioritizing reconciliation further meant that South Koreans were adopting a ‘selective silence’ on issues conflicting with their own democratic values, particularly the North’s human rights violations. This was ironic, as Kim Dae-jung himself had suffered from such abuses under former South Korean regimes (Steinberg, 2005, p. xvi). In August 2000, a large group of South Korean publishers went to Pyongyang and promised not to publish articles that were critical of the North or that might harm the Sunshine Policy (Steinberg, 2005, p. xvi). The public’s leniency on North Korea’s human rights records was justified by the pro-Sunshine Policy media, academia, and the government, by saying that the South must acknowledge that ‘North Korea’s political system does not square with the South’s newly gained democratic sensibilities’ (Williams and Mobrand, 2010, p. 532).

Kim Dae-jung’s visit ameliorated the South Korean public’s perception of the North as the Cold War enemy (Izumi, 2006, p. 33) and raised the hope that a peaceful unification led by the Koreans could be achieved.
through mutual cooperation. The apparent success of the Sunshine Policy, along with South Korea’s democratic consolidation in the post-Cold War period, all worked in conjunction to encourage ordinary citizens to think about national security in a new light. The visit in 2000 provided a perfect opportunity for the public to reevaluate their traditional Cold War era security principles, and the newly democratized media environment further aided the open expansion of such societal discourse. In this regard, the Sunshine Policy’s most lasting effect was a ‘democratization’ of the unification issue, as the widening of perceptions concerning security and unification meant that a ‘narrow band of opinion on North Korea could no longer label anything outside of it as treasonous,’ as had often been the case before (Cha, 2003, p. 216). As the way in which Korean citizens thought about security diversified, actors espousing concepts such as ‘mutual security’ and ‘multilateralism,’ which incorporate North Korea into the equation, became legitimate voices in the society for the first time (Cha, 2003, p. 202).

In time, the expansion of security discourse inevitably led to societal reevaluation of the core guarantee for thwarting North Korean threats – the United States–South Korea military alliance. The alliance had always been the principal pillar of South Korean security. South Korea’s justification for maintaining the alliance was the obvious and real threat from the communist North, which served as both a practical and a symbolic institution for South Korea’s attachment to the Western bloc as a junior partner of the United States during the Cold War (Lee, 2002b, pp. 161, 162). In essence, the alliance defined bilateral relations between the two states in general (Cha, 2005, p. 117).

The spread of a less-threatening image of North Korea thus produced a growing number of voices among the public that questioned the validity of strictly adhering to the alliance in its contemporary form. As Victor D. Cha posits, ‘the Sunshine policy had the unintended consequence of creating nationwide perceptions of the United States as an impediment (italics added) to inter-Korean relations’ (Cha, 2005, p. 126). South Koreans increasingly started to regard inter-Korean relations as between ‘brothers,’ and the relationship with the United States as one that was between ‘friends’. The societal trend came to question the role of the ‘friend’ in reducing tension on the peninsula, and whether the existence of the alliance would be compatible with the changing security environment (Kim, 2005, p. 180).
It is not clear whether North Korea had predicted these outcomes in South Korea beforehand, but Kim Jong-il certainly achieved success in driving a wedge between South Korea and the United States through the summit. Throughout the Cold War period, North Korea had tried to win popular support among South Koreans for driving out all ‘foreign influence’ (i.e., the United States) in favor of a Korean-centered unification. In this regard, it is highly indicative that the first article of the 2000 Joint Declaration emphasized reconciliation through ‘independent’ resolution of the unification issue (Kim, 2005, pp. 181, 182).

In the post-summit societal context, the desire for ‘independent’ unification had a catchy resonance among the public, as it appealed to the ethno-national identity common to both Koreas. Korean identity and national integrity had been robbed multiple times throughout history by external powers, and this violence against the Korean identity had helped both North and South Korea to develop a sense of historical victimhood vis-à-vis any foreign state that was influential in deciding the fate of the peninsula (Woo-Cumings, 2005, p. 65). Following the summit, it began to appear as if the United States would be added to the public discourse as the latest external power hindering Koreans from recovering their violated national identity.

Fueling the trend further, the younger generations of South Koreans were already highly sensitive to what they regarded as the ‘asymmetrical and unfair’ alliance structure. For example, American military personnel with criminal charges against civilians during their service in Korea were beyond effective Korean jurisdiction; a number of American servicemen-related incidents that coincided with the summit thus compounded already-prevalent negative societal emotions toward the United States (Flake, 2006; Jang, 2006, p. 158). A national poll conducted by Gallup Korea in December 2002 showed that only 37.2% of South Koreans had positive opinions of the United States, whereas 53.7% had a negative view; 80% of the respondents holding unfavorable views were young college students (Woo-Cumings, 2005, p. 56). Additionally, another poll conducted in January 2003 revealed that 51.5% of respondents over 20 years of age believed that South Korea must aid the North regardless of the ongoing North Korean nuclear issue (Woo-Cumings, 2005, p. 65).

In the early 2000s, South Koreans were less willing to tolerate what they viewed as ‘American arrogance and unilateralism,’ since they wanted to reduce the country’s dependence on the United States in the era of Korean
'détente' (Kim, 2003). The public mood reinforced the success of the South Korean government during the Kim Dae-jung and the following Roh Moo-hyun administrations in securing enough domestic support to push for more ‘independent’ foreign policy-making without overly relying on the United States (Lee, 2002a, pp. 83–85; Dalton and Snyder, 2004, p. 119; Cha, 2005, pp. 126, 127). Observers of the region understandably worried that diverging perspectives on North Korea and rising tensions within the two allies’ bilateral relations could erode the political basis for the entire alliance structure that had been built up in the wake of World War II (Berger, 2003, p. 160).

Throughout the 2000s, in the relations between the two Koreas, there certainly had been instances in which North Korea’s nuclear programs and military provocations led to a souring of government-level interactions and South Korean public opinion in the short term. As the former Minister of Unification during the Roh Moo-hyun administration Lee Jong-seok explains in his recent memoir, the unfolding of bilateral relations was far from smooth (Lee, 2014, pp. 249–361). However, it must be emphasized that the expansion of the domestic security discourse, nevertheless, enabled those citizens that were empathetic toward North Korea to consolidate their status as a newly legitimate political force. Such societal inertia had an unmistakable impact on government officials, as they engaged in debates regarding the ‘self-reliant national defense (jaju-gukbang)’ posture in dealing with North Korea and the alliance with the United States (Lee, 2014, pp. 69–180). This new domestic structure enabled South Korea to envision security policies that would not have been imagined possible during the Cold War period.

2.2 Japan

While Kim Dae-jung’s visit to Pyongyang softened the perception of the North in South Korea, and while the nature of the United States–South Korea alliance was increasingly questioned on the public stage, an entirely opposite phenomenon occurred in Japan after Prime Minister Koizumi’s visit to Pyongyang in 2002. The summit was initially perceived as a diplomatic success for Koizumi, as he opened a path for Japan to take initiative in the bilateral diplomatic normalization process, and to further mediate the resolution of the ongoing North Korean nuclear and missile issues. However, Kim Jong-il’s admission of abducting Japanese citizens fuelled
Japanese society’s anger more than any other North Korea-linked issues from the past, including both the nuclear and missile programs as well as North Korea’s so-called mystery/spy boats (fushinsen) that had been infiltrating Japanese waters to conduct illegal activities such as drug trafficking and espionage. Subsequently, the abduction issue overshadowed any other bilateral agenda in the minds of Japanese citizens from 2002 onward (Funabashi, 2007, pp. 1–49).

In Japan’s case, the visit thus resulted in a drastically negative shift in the Japanese public’s perception toward the North. Japanese citizens, for the first time in the post-World War II period, were suddenly faced with undeniable evidence of Japan becoming a victim due to a deliberate action by a neighboring country (Komori, 2005, p. 13). As in the case of South Korea, Japanese citizens started to question the structural cause, in this case of not having been able to prevent such human rights tragedies in the past. Japan’s traditional Cold War era security principles became the target, with the domestic media bandwagoning with public anger. The incident in part also functioned as an ‘eye-opener’ for the Japanese public of the ‘necessity to have a firmer “sense of nation”’ in the hostile regional environment (Yomiuri Shimbun Editorial, 2004a).

In the years following the summit, public discourse on security gradually expanded to incorporate the argument that Japan should recognize the fact that post-World War II security norms and institutions had been proven inadequate for dealing with the security realities of the volatile region, and particularly with unpredictable neighbors such as North Korea. Media and political elites who had been critical of Japan’s traditional security principles in the past could now claim that it was Japan’s overly pacifist security practices and discretion toward its neighbors that were at fault for not preventing the abduction tragedy (for example, Yomiuri Shimbun, 2002a; Abe and Yoneda, 2003, pp. 72–83). Interestingly, the abduction issue and the resulting societal victim mentality was perceived as ‘cathartic’ for those critics, since Japan had always been the country accused of being a victimizer in regional history (Funabashi, 2007, p. 73). In this regard, the abductions provided an important opportunity during the last decade for both Japanese citizens and political elites, offering them valuable legitimacy to initiate a serious reevaluation of the traditional security principles.

Public anger over the abductions resulted in a number of policies toward North Korea at the government level. From 2002 onward, the
Japanese governmental stance vis-à-vis North Korea was heavily influenced by public emotions, the societal atmosphere (*min-i*), and bandwagoning conservative politicians in the Diet wanting Japan to exercise firmer measures against the North (Asahi Shimbun, 2002b; Williams and Mobrand, 2010, pp. 531, 532). As a result, the Japanese public’s growing sensitivity to North Korea’s violation of Japanese human rights sovereignty pressured the government to demand that the North reinvestigate the abductions with full Japanese participation. They also demanded the repatriation of survivors and their children and the cremated remains of those reported by the North Korean officials to be already deceased.

The first coercive measure by Japan against North Korea was implemented on 5 July 2006, in the form of economic sanctions after the North test-launched the multi-stage ballistic missile *Taepodong 2*. Although this was Japan’s first unilateral sanction against a neighboring state in the post-World War II period, its contents had already been debated and planned domestically, for a different reason, by the Diet committees, media, and non-governmental groups with participation from supportive academics between 2003 and 2004. The original ‘sanction option’ had been raised to answer Japanese society’s growing frustration with the bogging-down of the negotiations concerning the reinvestigation of the abduction issue. Therefore, although the missile launch in 2006 provided Japan with a timely justification, the actual contents of the sanction had been coordinated, and legal limitations had already been overcome much earlier by the ‘abduction shock’. This premeditation was prompted by the growing discursive shift that convinced the general public of the necessity of putting pressure on North Korea (Samuels, 2007, pp. 150, 151, 171–176).

A swift turn in the public’s view of North Korea from 2002 to mid-2000s is clearly visible from various national polls. The Cabinet Office (*Naikakufu*) poll of October 2002, after the Koizumi-Kim summit, still showed 66% of respondents in favor of pushing for diplomatic normalization (Cabinet Office, 2002). Less than a year later, an opinion poll conducted in July 2003 showed that respondents who disapproved of normalization (46%) now outnumbered those who approved (44%) (Asahi Shimbun, 2003). By 2004, with the abduction issue still in deadlock and the sanction discussion gaining momentum, a Yomiuri Shimbun poll of 14 December 2004 showed that some 74% of respondents already supported Japan’s immediate imposition of unilateral sanctions (Yomiuri Shimbun Editorial, 2004e).
The tone of the supportive media during this period argued that the shifting of the Japanese stance toward a more assertive ground was natural and legitimate (for example, *Yomiuri Shimbun* Editorial, 2004a). Even if Japan is a pacifist state with prevailing norms that impose self-limitations on the use of coercion in settling international disputes, the hard realities of the region as demonstrated by the North Korean violation of Japanese citizens’ human rights would compel Japan to consider using coercive means at its disposal to protect its sovereignty and the security of its citizens. In short, Japan must overcome its long-held ‘timid’ diplomatic stance in dealing with its neighbors when Japan clearly has an upper hand on moral grounds.

We can observe linkages between this discursive shift and other security issues. As the media and public continuously tracked the Japanese government’s resolve on the abduction case, it had to doggedly cling on to this agenda at the Six Party Talks for resolving the North Korean nuclear and missile programs, and at other multilateral frameworks involving both Japan and North Korea. Despite the fact that Japan and South Korea coordinated and cooperated at the official level for the common interest of denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula, this Japanese ‘over-fixation’ on the abduction issue sometimes resulted in Japan’s ‘isolation’ from other member states, including South Korea, as they preferred to focus on the common multilateral issues at hand (*Asahi Shimbun* Editorial, 2003; Hughes, 2003, pp. 455, 456; Hughes, 2006, p. 166).

When compared to the case of South Korea, what is particularly interesting is North Korea’s effect on the Japanese view toward United States–Japan relations. Unlike South Korea, the worsening image of North Korea resulted in a spillover effect of strengthening the arguments favoring even closer attachment to the United States. Both the government and public recognized the need to closely align Japan to the United States as the threat perception of the North became widespread (and later, more seriously, of China). An example of the spillover effect was the government and media’s justification in the dispatch of the Japanese Self Defense Forces to support the United States’ operations in Iraq. Widespread societal and political discourse during the period, which was persuasive to the mainstream public, held that Japan would need to prove itself as a reliable ally and a respectable power in its own right, in order to secure American support in dealing with North Korea and win American sympathy on the

3 South Korea–Japan ‘mutual security anxiety’

Opportunities presented to the public in both South Korea and Japan to reevaluate their traditional security principles after the two summits also caused lasting repercussions in their bilateral relations. The more the trend of guessing what is happening ‘on the other side’ in Japan and South Korea increased, the more each country grew sensitive to the prospect of the other side’s future security trajectory becoming detrimental to their own.

For most of the post-World War II period, it had been taken for granted in South Korea that Japan would avoid direct coercive measures in dealing with both Koreas. Any hint of the Japanese government taking an assertive diplomatic stance or making a provocative public statement toward the two Koreas was typically regarded by Koreans as a sign that Japan was taking an ‘ultra-rightist’ turn, or not being sufficiently apologetic for its historical responsibility.

Prior to North Korea’s admission of the Japanese abductions in 2002, official Japanese interactions with North Korea had also been cautious and even ‘timid’ in order to avoid a diplomatic collision on various issues, such as the not-yet-confirmed abductions, the ‘mystery/spy boats,’ or some dubious activities of the pro-North Korean residents’ league in Japan (Jochongryun/Chosen-soren) (Pyle, 2007, pp. 294, 295). Both Koreas had regarded this stance as a familiar ‘reference point’ for judging the standard practice on Japan’s part. Ordinary Koreans would have considered it right and proper for Japan to yield in diplomatically complicated situations, and this expectation was often justified in terms of Japan’s historical responsibility.

South Koreans thus saw increasing assertiveness by the Japanese government toward North Korea after Koizumi’s visit to Pyongyang as an anomaly from the accustomed reference point. After all, the Japan–North Korea summit was originally conducted in order to normalize their long-strained bilateral relations, and prior to Kim Jong-il’s confession, the Japanese government was even willing to publicly apologize and offer condolences to the North Korean people for past colonialism. Japan’s
‘over-fixation’ on the abduction issue and comparative neglect of its own imperial past thus aroused suspicion in South Korea (Lee, 2003, p. 71).

The Korean mass media accused Japan of inflating the abduction issue and other North Korean-related cases out of proportion in order to legitimize its real hidden ambition of ‘re-militarization’ (Sheen, 2006, p. 126). The new Japanese assertiveness against North Korea was seen as a part of a cleverly designed scheme by the Japanese government and the ‘ultranationalists’ to deliberately bandwagon with the societal momentum to achieve a fait accompli in discarding Japan’s pacifist principles (Asahi Shimbun, 2006; MBC News, 2009). Prior to 2002, South Korea had used the Japanese governmental stance on other issues. The territorial disputes, the ‘revisionist’ textbooks, as well as the constitutional revision arguments within Japan were viewed by South Korea as demonstrating Japan’s true ambition to ‘flex its muscles’ again. Now the Japanese public and government’s assertiveness toward North Korea on the abduction issue was added to the ‘list of Japanese excuses’ to realize the hidden agenda.

The Roh Moo-hyun administration following Kim Dae-jung’s administration shared this view. During the rocky Japan–South Korea summit in January 2004, Roh urged Japan to deal with the North ‘rationally’ and ‘objectively’ (Asahi Shimbun, 2004). More blunt statements followed when Japan unilaterally imposed the fore-mentioned economic sanctions against North Korea in July 2006, after the Taepodong 2 launch. South Korea’s Office of the President (the Blue House) posted on its website, ‘no defense authority in the region announced a state of emergency, because the missiles were aimed at no particular country … there is no reason to fuss over this from the break of dawn like Japan is doing’ (Funabashi, 2007, p. 466). And when several Japanese officials urged their government to consider a preemptive strike against launching sites as a future option, the Blue House issued another statement, ‘they reveal the militant nature of Japan, which warrants our intense vigilance … these grave and threatening statements endanger peace in Northeast Asia’ (Funabashi, 2007, p. 466).

In Japan, on the other hand, public discourse as represented by the media and sympathetic politicians started to portray South Korea as leaning too much toward the North, swept by excessively emotional ethnic nationalism. While the South Korean mistrust of Japan was about potential remilitarization, Japanese security concern vis-à-vis the South was based on the potential weakening of the post-Cold War security bloc led by the United States with South Korea and Japan belonging to the same
‘democratic camp’. There was a widespread belief that South Korea’s increasingly friendly gestures toward the North would first result in the weakening of the United States–South Korea alliance, and then a new South Korea could emerge, taking an even stronger anti-Japan position as it moved away from their common ally (Maehara, 2000; Yomiuri Shimbun Editorial, 2006; Pyle, 2007, pp. 342, 343).

While the Japanese concern reached its peak during the Kim Dae-jung administration, it still remained dominant after Roh Moo-hyun, who had promised to continue the spirit of the Sunshine Policy, was elected president in December 2002. This concern was already becoming a reality for many Korea observers in Japan, particularly when Roh openly disagreed with American requests to relocate American bases in South Korea, a part of the military transformation scheme during the Bush administration (Park, 2007, p. 194; Lee, 2014). The Japanese media and politicians, especially those on the right of the political spectrum, went as far as worrying that such a trend would lead to a spillover effect of increased ‘traditional influence’ of China over the unified Korean Peninsula in the future (Green, 2001, pp. 142, 277; Pyle, 2007, pp. 342, 343).

The concerns about South Korea suddenly ‘switching sides’ to its continental neighbors, discarding the traditional alliance structure with the United States, and thus becoming a liability to Japanese security, became an increasingly popular image in Japan in the early to mid-2000s. The concerns, however, continue to resonate in the security narratives of the conservatively minded politicians, media (for example, Sankei Shimbun), academics, and informed public elites occupying the same place on the political spectrum, who regularly provide officials and journalists the theoretical and historical framework to feed on the anxiety.

When we trace the discursive tone of major Japanese newspaper editorials during this period concerning President Roh’s continued nationalistic stance toward the North, and its potential impact on United States–Japan–South Korea relations, the anxiety is clearly observable (for example, Yomiuri Shimbun Editorials, 2002; 2003a,b; 2004b). There are two examples that particularly concerned Japanese and American policymakers: first, Kim and Roh sharply disagreeing with Japan on the best means of dealing with the North Korean nuclear and missile crises; second, Roh declaring his wish to make South Korea a more neutral ‘balancer’ in the region, positioning South Korea equidistant from the United States and Japan on the one hand, and China on the other, in order to
strategically seek national interest in the changing geopolitical landscape of East Asia (Sakata, 2011a, p. 78; Sakata, 2011b, pp. 104, 109).

South Korea and Japan held diverging views not only about their bilateral relations and North Korea but additionally about East Asian regional security in general. It was an inevitable consequence of their differing interpretations on the nature of the North Korean threat (refer to Yomiuri Shimbun, 2002b; Berger, 2003, p. 160; Yomiuri Shimbun Editorial, 2003b, 2004c,d; Park, 2007, p. 194). For example, South Korea during this period decided not to participate in the Proliferation Security Initiative nor the theater missile defense system in conjunction with the United States but instead focused on regional cooperation resembling the European model of multilateral decision-making and conflict resolution by urging North Korean participation (Swenson-Wright, 2011, p. 179). Next, the Japanese government decided to exclude South Korea as a partner in its own initiative for regional security order called an ‘Arc of Freedom and Prosperity’ (Soeya, 2008, p. 37).

Most importantly, for the media and the Japanese public swayed by the abduction fever, the South Korean government’s open stance in supporting the North’s position in international arena and almost ‘being equivalent to North Korea’s ‘spokesman’ concerning the abduction issue’ (Yomiuri Shimbun Editorial, 2005a) provided a powerful ‘proof’ that South Korea could potentially become a turncoat.

4 The ‘democratic’ origin of the mutual security anxiety

Of course, domestic criticism against the traditional Cold War era security principles had always existed in South Korea and Japan before the two summits. Whether the voice was from politics, academia, mass media, or from the informed public, it had always been a part of the post-World War II domestic political landscape in the two countries, although the critics had occupied a non-mainstream status in security debates. Open criticism against the fundamental values of mainstream society’s accepted security principles in the post-World War II regional order was discouraged and was often a taboo, especially for those in the government and the mainstream media (Perry et al., 2004, pp. 25, 108).

The most distinguishing factor between the new trend in security discourse during the last decade, and the critical voice against traditional
security principles in the past before the two summits in 2000 and 2002, was that the new critics in both Japan and South Korea were now able to utilize their societies’ changing perceptions vis-à-vis North Korea. These perceptions were used as leverage to openly push their agenda of ‘updating’ the traditional security identities and institutions to fit the changing post-Cold War regional security reality into public security discourse. The critics succeeded with the public’s rising recognition about the ‘anachronistic’ sides of their traditional security principles. The North Korean factor as a medium thus provided a powerful focal point around which these previously -marginalized voices could now persuade and mobilize the larger society.

However, this growing acceptance among the public for the reevaluation of the traditional security principles was still a complex democratic societal process, and it certainly did not mean that South Korea and Japan would experience a wholesale strategy-shift in the opposite direction overnight. The new public awareness, although more widespread in the context of the post-summits fervor, did not lead to extreme ‘revisionists’ suddenly taking complete control of domestic debates or policy decision-making, nor did it mean that the mainstream public would blindly support them. That is why extreme alternative future strategic outcomes did not materialize, despite the expansion and diversification of societal security discourse: for example, discarding the Peace Constitution or taking military actions against North Korea in Japan’s case (Soeya, 2004, pp. 93, 94), or signing out of the United States–South Korea alliance and rejecting the American military presence in South Korea’s case (Lee, 2002b, pp. 176–180).

Those extreme options promoted by some critics were, and still are, regarded as too risky to be supported by the majority of citizens in their original forms. In short, there are still ‘elements of continuities’ firmly being maintained in the two countries’ fundamental foreign policy principles (Moon, 2002, pp. 29, 30; Soeya, 2005; Yomiuri Shimbun Editorial, 2005b) that prevent the citizens from supporting options that ‘go too far’.

What happened in the societies of South Korea and Japan in the last decade, then, is that the critics of the traditional security principles had at last openly achieved their seat in the domestic security discourse by polishing and repackaging their claims as a reasonable need for the expansion and the diversification of security strategies in the new post-Cold War era. Their strategy worked, as their ideas became more readily accepted by the
public, and because the two summits and the issue of the North Korean threat had served as a medium for the publicization of security debates.

This *duality* of the South Korean and Japanese public discourse is illustrated through the acceptance of the expansion and diversification of their security principles on the one hand. However, the ‘elements of continuities’ nevertheless continue to keep a valve on overly extreme arguments on the other. This duality is the structural characteristic that had been consolidated in South Korea and Japan in the last decade.

The common dual structure in which the security debates have been carried out in South Korea and Japan following the North Korean summits is significant. Both countries, in the process, over-emphasized and over-simplified the former trend (the reevaluation and the expansion of security discourse) taking place on the other side, whereas they overlooked and downplayed the existence of the latter (the ‘elements of continuities’) in the midst of the mutual security anxiety. In other words, the popular interpretation of Japan’s domestic shift on security discourse in the minds of many South Koreans, and vice versa, conveyed an overly simplified picture of what was actually happening on the other side, and where it was headed, despite the fact that the domestic context was more complex and multi-faceted.

It is unfortunate that, rather than preventing such trends and promoting a deeper mutual understanding, the media of the two countries and academics providing advice on coverage materials often took the leading role in reinforcing stereotypes. They often presented their interpretation of the other side’s intention with cliché-ridden ‘sound bite’ ‘historical’ analyses, as such stereotypical narratives are catchy and long-lasting among the public. These interpretations took bits of the other side’s domestic discourse and reduced them to black-and-white explanations to facilitate understanding by ordinary viewers and readers. These ‘sound bite’ analyses seemed plausible in the minds of their respective publics, because what seemed to be happening on the other side was susceptible to flexible interpretations, and the analyses were also largely based on popular ‘historical common sense’. For example, South Korea’s fear of Japan’s remilitarization and Japan’s viewing of the Korean Peninsula as a security hazard are based on the already-prevailing historical understanding of ordinary people, and the latest changes on the other side were thus readily applied to fit this historical pattern.
In South Korea, the legacy of Japanese colonialism and its past imperial ambition embedded in the Korean public psyche is always at the center of any narrative concerning Japan. Japan has a long-held understanding, which is rooted in the Meiji-era geopolitical strategy, of viewing Korea as a ‘dagger pointing at Japan’ that serves as a historical passageway for China and Russia to project their power on her. This understanding remains widely used in security-linked narratives (Iokibe, 1999, p. 11; Green, 2001, p. 113; Samuels, 2007, p. 16). Interestingly, the Koreans agree that their peninsula has indeed been an ‘avenue’ that great powers have crossed (Lind, 2008, p. 83). Both South Korea and North Korea, however, emphasize this ‘historical lesson’ upside down, meaning that it has always been Japan that had used the geopolitical excuse to attack Korea as a launching pad to fulfill its continental ambitions.

Because South Korea and Japan are now both pluralistic democracies, citizens embracing the mutual security anxiety have been influential in guiding the trajectory of the countries’ bilateral relations, as public opinion has the power to frame already-publicized foreign policies. Compared to the past when only Japan was a democracy, a variety of actors in both states can now freely influence the public, and vice versa, in forming the image of the other side. This phenomenon has made it more difficult to achieve a balanced analysis of contemporary South Korea–Japan bilateral relations, as democratic leaders sensitive to public opinion could sometimes serve domestic political interests, and popularity, at the expense of improving foreign relations, and an emotional public could always invite unexpected troubles in diplomacy (Park, 2009, pp. 253, 254). This framework can be extended to other publicized bilateral issues that have heightened the public’s emotional involvement at present, such as the ongoing territorial disputes.

5 Conclusion

In South Korea and Japan, the two summits and the change in societal perception toward North Korea in the 2000s facilitated open public debates on the post-World War II security principles. Furthermore, they provided a powerful focus for the critics of the traditional security principles to push their agenda into mainstream society. If we consider the critics’ officially marginalized position in the public sphere during the Cold War era, it is significant to note that from this period on, they were
no longer automatically regarded as extreme revisionists with taboo ideas secluded from a moderate public. It is questionable if Kim Dae-jung or Koizumi Junichiro could have fully anticipated the domestic implications beforehand.

There have been multiple leadership changes in both countries as well as in North Korea, and the status of the ‘North Korea factor,’ admittedly, has not remained constant in the minds of South Korean and Japanese public since the summits. The bombardment of Yeonpyeong Island and the sinking of the corvette Cheonan in 2010 have also made the South Korean public not as enthusiastic about patiently sympathizing with their Northern brothers as they once were in the early 2000s. For example, a March 2014 poll conducted by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies shows that North Korea scored 2.8/10 (10 being ‘completely favorable’) in ‘Country Favorability’ among South Korean respondents (2014). For comparison, the same survey reports the United States scoring 5.8/10 and China 4.8/10, but Japan still scoring lower than North Korea with 2.3/10.

In Japan, the most serious and immediate threat in the minds of both the public and policy-makers has clearly shifted toward China, largely due to the recent escalation of the territorial dispute concerning the Senkaku/Diaoyu Island and the general Japanese anxiety over the growing power of the rising authoritarian giant next door.

The biggest role that North Korea played in Japanese and South Korean public security discourse is structural. It made thinking about new security options from diversified perspectives a new legitimate topic for open citizen involvement, even if the support rate for a particular argument or the overall degree of societal interest could surely vary each year. The incorporation of many of the critics’ agenda into the mainstream security discourse is now constant. It is also a structure of domestic competition between the followers and the critics of the traditional security principles to gain more citizen support on the public stage.

Despite the two conservative presidencies following Roh Moo-hyun and the apparent waning of ‘pro-North’ sentiment among South Koreans, the legacy of the Sunshine Policy has thus survived as a part of the country’s domestic discourse. Debates about how to interact with North Korea between the supporters of the policy or its offshoots, and the conservatives supporting the maintenance of a strong United States–South Korea alliance based on the traditional security principles, are still among the most heated topics in any national-level election in the country – and especially
during the presidential elections. But the dividing line in these public security debates is not about a simple dichotomy of ‘pro-’ versus ‘anti-’ North Korea (or the United States). It is more valid to view this debate as a domestic competition between citizens who prioritize protecting the traditional security principles that have served the country well, versus the citizens who prefer diversifying and balancing options in the midst of the volatile regional security dynamics.

As a result, the future of the United States–South Korea alliance, despite firm commitment from both sides at the governmental level, continues to be a contested issue in the South Korean societal discourse. As Kent E. Calder posits, there is a powerful argument presented by the Korean critics of the alliance that always resonates among a portion of the country’s civil society, which is that the American bases in Korea are the product of the ‘Japan-centric character’ of the San Francisco System of 1952. In other words, the alliance is less for the protection of Korea than to enrich and stabilize Japan by using the peninsula as a buffer. This seemingly persuasive line of thought often stirs resentment, as Koreans ‘appear to feel that the United States systematically neglects their national concerns’ (over those of Japan) (Calder, 2005, p. 27).

The South Korean uproar, even among the normally-pro-United States conservative media, against the recent statement made by Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Wendy Sherman that South Korea, Japan, and China are equally responsible for the deterioration of regional relations over historical disputes exemplifies this collective Korean mentality (Chosun Ilbo Online, 2015). The fore-mentioned Asan Institute survey also shows that 60.6% of respondents have negative views about the United States supporting Japan’s expanded security roles. But at the same time, demonstrating the complex and nuanced nature of South Korean security discourse, 57.1% of the respondents still prefer strengthening the United States–Korea–Japan trilateral alliance over Korea–China security cooperation (favored by 29.8%); and 46.9% still support strengthening Korea’s ties with the United States rather than China (favored by 29.4%) if one has to make a choice (Asan Institute for Policy Studies, 2014).

In Japan, the consecutive Prime Ministers from the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), before the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) led by Abe Shinzo won the December 2012 general election, had once led to predictions that Japan and North Korea might negotiate for a breakthrough in the strained relations.
However, Japanese governmental policy toward North Korea will continue to lack flexibility, regardless of whether it is DPJ or LDP-led. Despite Japan’s growing anxiety over China (and even South Korea) in recent years, North Korea is still one of the most politicized and publicized foreign policy issues for Japanese citizens. It will not be easy for any Prime Minister to endorse the renormalization of relations with the North, unless the abduction issue somehow first reaches a closure that is acceptable to the Japanese public. This is particularly the case for Abe, as he first rose to political prominence from obscurity only by his assertive stance toward North Korea while he was a member of Koizumi’s Cabinet in 2002. It is thus crucial to monitor how the recent Japan–North Korea bilateral agreement, which was reached in May 2014 to resume the investigation of the abduction issue, will unfold (Asahi Shimbun Digital, 2014; Japan Times, 2014).

On the question of South Korea and Japan’s mutual security anxiety, suspicion on the part of South Korean society that Japan is using North Korea as an excuse for re-militarization is not likely to disappear, despite the rise of cultural and social interaction between the two countries’ citizens. Many Japanese citizens will also continue to observe South Korea with suspicion that it might ‘tag-team’ with its continental neighbors to turn against Japan, whether on the historical or the territorial disputes. This argument will continue to be fed by the popular Japanese ‘historical understanding,’ in which South Korea is seen as a country with a question mark and geopolitically doomed to choose either Japan and the United States, or its non-democratic continental neighbors, with no other option in between.

In the end, there will surely be more unexpected and unintended cycles of disagreements and concerns as in the last decade. This is why it is crucial for the citizens of South Korea and Japan to first recognize that the other side is currently experiencing a delicate and painful transition to re-define its roles and stance as a democracy with a mature and flexible security orientation in the shifting regional dynamics, just like they are doing in their own country.

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