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North Korean Identity as a Challenge to East Asia's Regional Order

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Introduction

North Korea presents serious complications for East Asia's regional order, and yet its identity is subject to frequent oversimplification. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) is often in the headlines for its nuclear weapons and missile programs and for its violations of human rights.[1] Media reports typically depict North Korea as an otherworldly hermit kingdom ruled by a highly caricatured Kim regime. This article seeks to deepen the conversation about North Korea's political characteristics and East Asia's regional architecture by addressing three related questions. First, how has North Korea challenged the regional order, at times driving some actors apart and others together? How are these trends explained by and reflected in North Korean national identity, as articulated by the Kim regime and as perceived in the region? Finally, what academic and policy-relevant implications are offered by the interaction of North Korean identity and regional order?

To start, measuring national identity is a difficult proposition (Abdelal, et al., 2009). Applying the concepts of national identity and nationalism to North Korea are complicated by analytical problems in separating the nation, and especially the state, from the Kim regime. This study chooses to focus on "identity" rather than "nationalism" because "North Korean nationalism" implies a certain ideology that contrasts to the nationalisms of the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea), Japan or China. North Korean nationalism is particular indeed,

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[1] For example, a basic search on NYTimes.com suggests that of the 1007 articles published in 2016 that mention "North Korea," 100% reference either "nuclear" or "missile" or "human rights."

but the focus here is a larger phenomenon, encompassing North Korean national political characteristics both as put forward by the Kim regime and as perceived in the broader East Asian region. Thus, for the purposes of this study, "identity" is the preferred concept of analysis rather than "nationalism."[2]

Conducting research on North Korea presents challenges in terms of methodology, access, and data validity. Political scientists pursuing quantitative research on North Korea face a dearth of reliable statistics as well as political and logistical obstacles to fieldwork. For qualitative studies, North Korean government transparency is extremely low, officials are difficult to engage in dialogue, and government propaganda is pervasive. Historians lack access to North Korean archives and to many insights from the intelligence community. Foreigners working in North Korea are subject to surveillance by the state. North Korean researchers are generally not free to travel or correspond with international colleagues, and working on a project not condoned by the regime would risk grave reprisal. Sociologists and anthropologists have difficulty measuring aspects of North Korean identity due to heavy reliance on refugees and defectors who represent biased samples, especially on political topics. Surveys of North Koreans (both in and outside of the country) face validity issues involving socio-economic class, geographic region, exposure to external political values, and self-censorship (Go 2016).

In academia, there is a lack of interdisciplinary dialogue on enhancing the validity of empirical observations on the DPRK. In the popular media, North Korea is often the subject of extreme characterizations ("worst country," "most secretive state," "crazy leader," "evil regime").[3] While the North Korean regime may earn many negative labels, such generalizations are not a useful starting point for analysis or policy. Moreover, challenges to accessing information are no excuse not to pursue research on a national case of significant consequence to regional peace and security (Isozaki and Sawada, 2017). Increasingly, there are more data sources and informed studies on the DPRK than many international observers appreciate (Kim 2010, p. 319 as discussed in Kang 2011, p. 145). This study attempts to leverage the growing scholarly literature on the DPRK, as well as primary sources available in Korean, to elucidate the connections between North Korean identity and East Asian regional order.

The next section considers Pyongyang's place in the regional order in terms of troubled economic projects, isolating sanctions, limited institutional engagement, and provocations threatening international security. The subsequent section reviews the existing scholarship on North Korean identity, because before one can investigate the causes and effects of a particular identity, it is important to show (rather than just assume) that such an identity exists and is not merely instrumental. North Korea's identity largely motivates its actions in the region, while Pyongyang's challenges to the regional order affect neighbors' views of the DPRK. North Korean identity is not monolithic, either in its projection from Pyongyang or in the perception of international observers, so the sections that follow critically examine the identity espoused

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[2] National identity is a shared sense of community attached to a specified territory and based on a common culture, ethnicity or set of civic principles (Motyl 2000, pp. 360-61). According to Smith, nationalism is an ideology in service of national identity, specifically, nationalism is "an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining the autonomy, unity and identity of a nation," (Smith 1991, p. 74).

[3] See for example, Mehreen Khan, "Six charts that show how North Korea became the most miserable place on earth," *Telegraph*, December 1, 2014; Fareed Zakaria GPS Television Transcript, *CNN*, January 15, 2017; "Evil genius," *Economist*, October 8, 2016.

by the Kim regime, and survey how North Korean national identity tends to be viewed in Seoul, Tokyo, Washington, and Beijing. The article concludes with findings on the interactions between North Korea's changing identity and East Asia's evolving regional order.

North Korean challenges to regional order

North Korea is a special case in the context of East Asian regionalism.[4] Relevant countries have struggled with how to deal with North Korea bilaterally, multilaterally and via international organizations (Rozman 2004; Rozman 2011). Scholarship on regional architecture labels North Korea and Myanmar as outliers,[5] but Myanmar was more regionally integrated than the DPRK even before its post-2010 reform and opening, especially since Myanmar joined ASEAN in 1997 (Chow and Easley 2016). North Korea has been resistant of regional integration and its provocations have been detrimental to regional economic cooperation. Those provocations have at times united its neighbors, (after its first and third nuclear tests, for example), but such unity was short-lived as governments struggled to coordinate policy and North Korea pursued wedge tactics. To drive wedges, North Korea has offered denuclearization talks and other forms of bilateral negotiations with the U.S., causing policymakers in Seoul and Tokyo to worry that their national interests would not be represented. The regime at times entertained inter-Korean summits on reconciliation and people-to-people exchanges with South Korea, raising concerns in Washington and Tokyo about maintaining focus on denuclearization. Pyongyang periodically offered talks with Tokyo, ostensibly for resolving the historical North Korean abduction of Japanese citizens, precipitating some uncertainty about U.S.-ROK-Japan unity on sanctions policy. Finally, North Korea often looks to restart high-level diplomacy with China, promising stability and economic cooperation; Beijing in turn tends to call for restraint from all sides and even suspension of U.S.-ROK military exercises. However, this typically drives a wedge between China on the one hand and the U.S., ROK and Japan on the other.

North Korea is also conspicuously outside East Asia's intricate regional trade and production networks. The DPRK has been an unreliable economic partner, lacking reciprocity and rule of law. Pyongyang has broken international agreements and impeded the development of a regional logistics hub on the Korean Peninsula, including overland rail, energy pipelines, and ports for shipping routes. North Korean entities have backtracked on contracts involving Chinese and Russian investment into DPRK infrastructure, raw materials extraction, and industrial projects (Foster-Carter 2012, pp. 7-8). The Kim regime may be willing to join more economic cooperation schemes in attempts to extract benefits, but North Korea is largely unable to access the regional economic order because of its pariah status. For example, the DPRK allegedly expressed interest in joining the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2015 but was denied entry by Beijing due to lack of economic transparency.

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[4] This study focuses on regional security architecture, but at points addresses economic development and institutions because of the importance of the identity-economics-security nexus for regional order; see Pempel (2013).

[5] See chapter 3 in the forthcoming volume, Yul Sohn and T.J. Pempel (Eds.), *Japan and Asia's Contested Order*.

Despite different perceptions of North Korean identity, DPRK provocations have been met with mounting international sanctions (Sato 2009, pp. 63-65). Trade with North Korea has been adversely affected and inter-Korean projects including the Kaesong Industrial Complex and Mt. Kumgang tourism project were suspended. North Korea's nuclear and missile programs have precluded various efforts at energy cooperation, despite reasonable potential for mutual benefit (von Hippel, Bruce, and Hayes 2011, p. 2). Yet sanctions appear to have limited effect on North Korea's foreign policy. For example, Japanese bilateral efforts with Pyongyang have met with frustration, cooperation with China regarding North Korea has been inconsistent, and economic restrictions (as well as the rewards of lifting them) have provided limited leverage. The Japanese government has thus focused on maintaining strong alliance relations with the U.S. and strengthening cooperation with South Korea. In addition, strategic thinking in Tokyo includes improving relations with Russia to pressure North Korea and using Mongolia as a channel of communication (Smith 2013).

One of the DPRK's greatest threats to regional stability is its potential for sudden economic collapse or descent into civil war, prompting refugees and possibly violence to spill out over its borders. The regime has periodically cracked down on marketization, and Kim Jong-un has engaged in waves of elite purges since coming to power (Gause 2014, pp. 1-2). Such actions, intended to consolidate and maintain power, could actually undermine stability. Although loyalty to the Kim regime appears mostly consolidated, marketization and forces of globalization can exacerbate identity gaps within North Korea (Cha 2016, pp. 266-268). Economic inequality appears to be increasing between those engaged in trade over the China-DPRK border (who serve a privileged class in Pyongyang) and poorer rural citizens of the country. North Korea faces serious challenges to maintaining its socialist identity to the point that capitalist influences may undermine the authority of the Kim regime (Yoon 2016, pp. 156, 166-167). North Korea thus faces policy dilemmas between maintaining social control and responding to the economic pressures and opportunities of the regional order (Cha 2016, p. 269).

Regional actors have attempted different institutional approaches to deal with North Korea, but the Kim regime has limited its engagement with such institutions. North Korean participation in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) is mostly limited to the sidelines of annual meetings. North Korean 1.5-track interactions with Americans and others in Southeast Asian and European locations have involved more probing than substance. Track II networks such as the Committee for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) and the Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue (NEACD) have institutionalized unofficial dialogues that serve as communication channels for governments. For example, the NEACD has periodically involved high-level official participation as a form of "shadow Six-party Talks" among North and South Korea, the United States, Japan, China and Russia, with policy discussions that informed and facilitated Track I progress (Shirk 2012).

Nonetheless, various bilateral and multilateral arrangements have failed to transform North Korea's role in the region. The 1994 Agreed Framework and the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) were unable to prevent North Korea's nuclear development (Funabashi 2008, p. 269). The DPRK participated in the Six-party Talks, which held potential for realizing a peace treaty to end the Korean War and building a regional security mechanism for Northeast Asia. Yet the talks did not consolidate appreciable progress on North Korean denuclearization (its *raison d'etre*) and have been dormant since 2008. Meanwhile, North

Korean issues have at times exacerbated strained diplomacy among neighboring countries on unrelated functional issues. This compounds the problem of how dialogues among South Korea, China and Japan have been frequently interrupted by historical and territorial disputes, as well as domestic political cycles.

Pyongyang remains mostly isolated from regional institutions and mechanisms, not the least of which are Asia's growing web of trade agreements. The regime does appear willing to benefit from trade. Since 2013, Kim Jong-un has opened special economic zones (SEZs) in areas such as Unjong, Wonsan, and Sinuiju to expand economic projects and promote foreign investment. Yet Pyongyang maintains emphasis on national security as guaranteed by nuclear weapons. North Korea's legal economic interactions are inhibited by UN Resolutions and because regional neighbors generally demand progress on denuclearization before Pyongyang can benefit from international trade. The DPRK thus remains largely outside the regional economic order.

The major role North Korea plays vis-à-vis Asia's security and economic architecture is that of regional provocateur.[6] North Korea has impeded regional cooperative fora because it refuses to play by the same rules as its neighbors. It lags behind in economic development and maintains a form of governance largely incompatible with regional institutions. Its nuclear development, missile tests, and bellicose rhetoric demand international responses (Murooka and Akutsu 2016) that freeze, if not reverse, various forms of cooperation with Pyongyang. Furthermore, the Kim regime appears to employ wedge tactics (up to and including physical attacks) to drive its neighbors apart and prevent a united policy against it. However, North Korea's overt threats encourage U.S.-Japan and U.S.-ROK security alliance cooperation and U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral diplomatic coordination (Sakata 2016). This frustrates Chinese policymakers who would rather see regional order move away from the post-World War II security architecture based on U.S. alliances. While Beijing may not seek to overturn or replace the current regional order, it appears intent on reshaping it. And yet, Chinese leaders have been unable to guide North Korean identity in a direction favorable to Pyongyang adopting a cooperative regional policy.

North Korean identity in existing scholarship

Notable efforts have been made by scholars at observing different facets of North Korean identity, transcending paradigmatic debates about constructivist alternatives to realist or liberal institutionalist understandings of security on the Korean Peninsula.[7] This body of scholarship demonstrates that North Korean identity exists and can be studied, despite formidable methodological and logistical challenges. At least six different approaches in the North Korean studies literature offer consideration of national identity with foreign policy implications.

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[6] Many South Korean officials in the Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye administrations were convinced of this to the point of concluding that Seoul needs to show greater willingness to retaliate against Pyongyang (Kim T.H. 2013).

[7] For a review of international relations theories applied to Korean security and foreign policy issues, see Snyder and Easley (2014).

First, primordial national identity underlines a shared traditional culture of the Korean people associated with admirable traits such as “a strong sense of justice, bravery, obligation, morality, assiduity, and courtesy” (Song 2004, pp. 11-19 as discussed in Cho 2011, p. 320). Historical narratives emphasize the value and uniqueness of “Koreanness” and positively distinguish their nation from others. While South Koreans tend to lionize Admiral Yi Sun-sin and King Sejong, North Korea glorifies Dangoon, the mythological figure said to be the ancient father of the Korean race (Jeon 2002). North Koreans claim to maintain the true Korean identity that has endured from the time of Dangoon, through the various Korean dynasties, to the Kim leadership of today (Jeon 2002, pp. 160-161). North Korea’s primordial identity serves to delegitimize South Korea and suggest that reunification should occur under North Korean leadership (Cho 2011, p. 324).

Second, scholars have examined North Korean identity as constructed and instrumental. Building on the primordial narrative, the Kim regime justifies its rule by historical lineage. North Korean authorities fashioned a cult identity around the Kims as the essential representatives and defenders of Koreanness, worthy of hero worship (Sakai and Hiraiwa 2017, pp. 270-276). The leadership constructed a *juche* (self-reliance) nationalist discourse aimed at securing the regime from changing internal and external circumstances (Kang 2007; Myers 2011). As North Korean identity remains strongly attached to the leadership, international criticism of the Kim dynasty is an affront not only to the DPRK’s international reputation, but to North Korean identity itself (Moon and Hwang 2014, p. 9).

North Korean officials are especially sensitive to international diplomatic protocol and human rights criticisms. For example, the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) report in 2014 has elicited responses from Pyongyang. North Korea participated in the Universal Periodic Review of Human Rights (UPR), accepting a number of recommendations from the process, even though these were largely development-related and respectful of DPRK sovereignty (Chow 2017). NGOs focused on North Korean human rights are gaining traction as the U.S., ROK, Japan and the European Union increasingly bring DPRK abuses onto the agenda of UN human rights bodies, the UN General Assembly and even the UN Security Council. Even though China blocks Security Council referral of the DPRK to the International Criminal Court, the Kim regime has found it necessary to defend North Korean national identity and international reputation. North Korean officials demand respect of *Urisik Ingwollon* (“our style” of human rights) (Lee, M.C., 2011, p. 147), which rejects dictation by external authorities and considers the North Korean people’s loyalty to the state a prerequisite for their rights (Song 2010, pp. 87-90).

A third perspective on North Korean identity focuses on state-society relations. North Korea’s top-down control, combined with grassroots fervor, is not a traditional civic identity, but does involve social participation and mass mobilization. North Korean textbooks connect national honor with personal pride and self-esteem while educational practices and social institutions ingrain national identity into the everyday lives of the people (Lankov 2005, p. 177; Lee 2010, p. 350). The Workers’ Party requires, and the state enforces, civic duties. These include participation in local meetings and mass rallies, and personal demonstrations of respect to provincial propaganda signs and national monuments. Grassroots politics are thus closely connected to the national discourse (Kang 2012, p. 3). The unity of the *inmin* (people) and “people’s democracy,” thus support the legitimacy of the Kim regime (Chung 2011, pp.

105-106).

Fourth, and very important for understanding North Korean identity, are studies of ethnic nationalism. The myths of a homogeneous nation and pure bloodline are central to North Korean pride (Shin 2006). The Kim regime claims to protect the "pure" and virtuous Korean race from the "evil world" through the maintenance of domestic political order and assertive international diplomacy (Myers 2011, pp. 115-117). State legitimacy is therefore based on the regime's success in shielding North Korea from "internal or external enemies" rather than on economic achievements and international standing (Myers 2011, p. 117). On the other hand, scholars apply ethnographic research to the challenges North Korean migrants face, particularly in adjusting to life in more developed and relatively free China or in capitalist and democratic South Korea, after leaving authoritarian North Korea (Chung 2009; Fahy 2015). By elaborating on North Koreans' personal accounts, these studies not only provide insight into life inside North Korea (Haggard and Noland, 2010), they shatter the homogeneity myth and address the widening cultural and economic gaps between the two Koreas (Chung 2009).

A fifth approach to studying North Korean identity, and perhaps of greatest interest to foreign policy analysts, focuses on significant or relevant others. North Korean historical and media sources frequently demonize Japanese colonialism, American imperialism, Chinese arrogance, and South Korean inauthenticity (Park 2000). The dissolution of the Soviet Union deepened North Korea's isolation, while the collapse of foreign assistance from Moscow and Beijing was a factor in the breakdown of the domestic welfare system. With economic hardships intensifying to famine conditions, the regime increased the role of external threat in justifying its legitimacy. From this perspective, North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons is not simply the result of a post-Cold War cost-benefit analysis. Rather, North Korean interests and values are defined in opposition to those of other nations (Hymans 2008, pp. 260-264). A siege mentality and heightened threat perception have been deliberately constructed by DPRK ruling elites to impose self-isolation and secure public unity for maintenance of the regime (Kim 2016, pp. 225-232). North Korea's relations with other countries, including its military provocations, are thus integral to its identity formation and expression.

Sixth and most optimistically, scholars have considered North Korean identity through the prism of reconciliation. This literature is concerned with closing the gap between North and South Korean identities in order to facilitate peaceful reunification. Since historical and ethnic commonalities of the two Koreas have been overshadowed by political and economic differences, the reconstruction of a unified Korean identity would require not only economic but also social integration (Kwon 2010, pp. 157-163). Ultimately, this would entail the internalization of shared identity norms through a process of norm diffusion (Son 2007). Internationally, this socialization process, including expanding economic interdependence and institutional interactions, would integrate North Korea into the regional and international order (Kim and Kim 2015, pp. 191-193). However, the formation of collective identity via mutual understanding and social integration is especially difficult to achieve due to North Korea's strong enemy perception of South Korea (Lee 2016). Nonetheless, this approach provides an identity basis for strategies of engaging North Korea.

North Korean identity according to the regime

This section focuses on the identity espoused by the Kim regime. Such identity will be examined critically, recognizing that much of the regime's identity claims are tied up with propaganda aimed at external and especially internal audiences. According to the regime, North Korean identity represents the essence of Koreanness, engages in righteous struggle, is propagated through teaching "correct" history and language, supports total loyalty to the Kim leadership, and ensures self-reliance and the defeat of external threats. To better understand North Korean identity, it is essential to trace how emphasis of these various elements of identity has varied over time.

At the core of North Korea's identity discourse is its primordial nationalism. Common ethnicity binds individuals along with shared culture, traditions and values (Connor 1994, as discussed in Nasr 2012, p. 3). The regime stresses how the great Korean nation and its courageous people have successfully protected their national identity despite a history of foreign invasions (Cho 2011, p. 320). Shared ancient history and kinship on the Korean Peninsula distinguish inter-Korean relations as separate from interactions with all other countries (Cho 2011, p. 318). However, the Kim regime also shapes identity to differentiate North Korea from South Korea, and to promote a sense of confidence in the DPRK that supports social mobilization and control of its people (Connolly 2002, p. 64 as discussed in Cho 2011, p. 313).

The regime has utilized history to argue that the admirable characteristics of the Korean race are exemplified in the teachings of North Korean leaders Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il (Cho 2011, p. 322). To identify North Korea as the true Korea, the regime grounds its historical narrative in the origin story of Dangoon, the mythical forefather of the Korean race. In analogous fashion, the Kim family leadership is portrayed with godlike origins and powers. Official North Korean history praises Kim Il-sung for rescuing the Korean race from Japanese imperialism with his miraculous methods for defeating foreign forces (Hyun 2015, p. 79). This narrative ignores how Japan ultimately surrendered to the United States and how North Korea persecuted organized religions, demanding fealty to the Kims. The regime implemented leader worship with religious elements and practices. Kim Il-sung — referred to variously as the Sun, Heavenly Leader, and Great Marshal — is idolized in pictures, songs, poems, books, movies, museums, dates on the calendar, and children's stories (Hyun 2015, pp. 80-82).

This personality cult provides legitimacy for Kim dynastic rule (Myers 2011, pp. 118-119). Kim Il-sung is considered the founder of the state and *suryong* (supreme leader), the one who should be admired and followed by the people (Lim 2015, p. 12). His son and North Korea's second leader, Kim Jong-il (who was actually born in the Soviet Union), was said to have been born on Korea's revered Mount Paektu amidst various celestial and supernatural occurrences. The cult of Kim Jong-il was built around his superhuman talents and achievements including genius on-the-spot guidance that allowed North Korea to rapidly advance its technology (Hyun 2015, pp. 89-90). When Kim Jong-un inherited power in 2011 after the death of his father, Kim Jong-il, he consolidated his role as the new *suryong*. His conduct and public presentation were crafted in the style of his grandfather (Gause 2014, p. 127), who is loved and regarded as the "Eternal President" by the people (Myers 2011, p. 118). This identity construction is significant because the *suryong* sets policy for the nation and is the center of the system for continued revolutionary struggle (Pyongyang Times 2001, as discussed in Cho 2011, p. 322). As a

father-like figure caring for the people, the *suryong* directs the military, party and bureaucracy, and his power is above the DPRK constitution (Moon and Hwang 2014, p. 10).

North Korean identity as constructed by the regime also emphasizes Korean purity from external influences. The governance of language is an illustrative case. Since the 1940s, North Korean authorities have promoted a *hangul*-only (Korean only) movement to protect the integrity of the national language. The *hangul* movement substituted colloquial words for difficult foreign ones as a linguistic means of promoting equality and unity among the masses (Lee, J.B., 2011, p. 186). Unlike South Korea, which has adopted many Western and Japanese words and for some time continued the selective use of Chinese characters, North Korea considers itself to have "rightfully maintain[ed] the cultural essence of the Korean language," as announced by Kim Il-sung in 1964 (Lee, J.B., 2011, p. 167). Such cultural management enhances North Korean identity by allowing it to claim South Korea is the inferior Korea, tainted by foreign influence. Following this logic, North Korea, the true Korea, needs to educate the South and integrate it within the righteous Korean hierarchy headed by (the memory of) Kim Il-sung (Cho 2011, pp. 329-332). The concept of authentic Koreanness is important for keeping North Korea in a superior position relative to South Korea, despite the latter's much higher economic development and international standing.

North Korean identity also stresses a hierarchy within the country in accordance with loyalty to the state. The *songbun* caste system assigns North Koreans to a specific socio-political class. Citizens belong to the "core" class, the "wavering" class, or the "hostile" class depending on their family background at birth (Collins 2012, pp. 1-2). By assigning each citizen to a particular stratum, the regime is able to exercise control over individuals and incorporate into the party-state those who are most loyal and devoted to the leadership (Collins 2012, p. 2). In addition, social opportunities and favors are granted on an ideological and performance basis, providing the regime with the power to identify loyal subjects and to manipulate social networks at both national and grassroots levels (Collins 2012, pp. 5-6).

The construction of North Korean national identity and changes in its emphasis have been observable since the initial founding of the DPRK. The Korean experience under Japanese occupation (1910-1945) made anti-Japanese sentiment and anti-colonialism the roots of North Korea's modern nationalism (Kang 2007, p. 88). The migration of Koreans into China and racial discrimination at the hands of Japanese and Chinese forces encouraged Korean communists to coalesce under the leadership of Kim Il-sung in the fight for Korea's liberation (Kang 2007, p. 90). In order to strengthen collective identity and comradeship amongst his followers after liberation in 1945, Kim Il-sung borrowed from Soviet ideologies of socialism, anti-capitalist modernization, and state-led industrialization (Kang 2007, p. 94; Nasr 2012, p. 4).

Intense nationalism for unifying the Korean Peninsula prompted Kim Il-sung to focus on enemies of the nation. In the lead up to initiating the Korean War (1950-1953), the North Korean leadership identified the South Korean government and its American ally as the forces of "evil imperialism" that threatened North Korea's national security and independence (Korean Workers' Party 1964, as discussed in Kang 2007, p. 94; Nasr 2012, p. 4). After the war, North Korea styled itself as "the legitimate egalitarian Korea" throughout the 1960s, when its economy was relatively more industrialized and developed than that of South Korea (Nasr 2012, pp. 5-6). However, the detrimental effects of the Korean War on North Korean civilians and industry produced a bitter legacy, so the regime used pervasive propaganda to build a

collective memory of the war that blamed subsequent domestic problems on the Americans (Kang 2012, pp. 10-11). Soon thereafter, negative prospects for reunification with South Korea and increasing Sino-Soviet tensions motivated North Korea to look inward.

It must be noted, however, that North Korean elites at times espoused elements of an internationalist identity.[8] During the early stages of the Cold War, North Korea's commitment to the global communist movement led by the Soviet Union was evident not only in foreign policy, but also in domestic propaganda and education (Lankov 2005, pp. 8, 175). However, this element of identity weakened as North Korea "refused to follow the [Soviet] de-Stalinization trend" (ibid., p. 175) and pursued its own economic and defense policies according to the *byungjin* line in the 1960s.[9] North Korea claimed an identity as a member of the communist bloc, and into the 1980s looked to improve relations with Eastern European and Central Asian countries and even the Soviet Union (Agov 2013, pp. 248-250). But these ties weakened over North Korean suspicions for Moscow's *perestroika* reforms and *glasnost* opening policies (Kim 2011, p. 65).

Another aspect of internationalist identity distinct from DPRK-Soviet relations involved North Korea's commitment to the Non-Aligned Movement. After the 1955 Bandung Conference, Pyongyang devoted greater diplomatic attention to the Cold War neutral countries in Asia. Kim Il-sung attended the 1965 ceremony in Indonesia marking the 10th anniversary of the Bandung Conference. Into the 1970s, North Korea presented itself — in identity statements and foreign policy — as a successful case of "Third Worldism" (Armstrong 2009, pp. 45-46). However, this narrative of anti-colonial proletarian solidarity gave way to North Korea's deeply internalized and enduring siege mentality. Ultimately, an identity associated with nationalist armed struggle overwhelmed a regional or globally oriented identity based on international socialism. Moreover, North Korea's official, unofficial and covert relations in South and Southeast Asian countries focused heavily on zero-sum competition with South Korea. By the 2000s, North Korea's activities in South and Southeast Asia exhibited little evidence of building a regional identity or international movement, and more evidence of efforts at diversifying away from China in terms of revenue sources for the Kim regime (Park 2003, pp. 245-246).

The major identity discourse in North Korea during the Cold War was domestically focused and revolved around *Urisik Sohoejui* or "Our-Style Socialism" (Nasr 2012, p. 8). Even though the northern half of the Korean Peninsula had been occupied by the Soviets and the DPRK imported various technologies and political institutions from Moscow, the North Koreans stressed a distinctive identity. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union and loss of Russian aid, the regime further emphasized sovereignty and traditionally Confucian civic duties and deemphasized Soviet-style Marxism.[10] Kim Il-sung's *juche* ideology of self-reliance, first

[8] The author wishes to thank an anonymous reviewer for advising on elaboration of this point.

[9] "*Byungjin*" means "progress in tandem" or "to move two things forward simultaneously." Kim Il-sung declared the *byungjin* line in 1962 as a national economic and defense strategy. It is different from Kim Jong-un's *byungjin* line announced in 2013 that advocates for "a higher stage of the original line" with more emphasis on economic development (Kim S.Y. 2013, as discussed in Gause 2014, p. 131).

[10] The North Korean leadership demoted Marxism's place in the national identity to the point of deleting "communism" from the state constitution in 2009 (Song 2010, p. 87). By replacing communist discourses with principles of military-first politics and *juche* in the amended constitution, Kim Jong-il was able to justify his regime's rule in the name of North Korean identity (Ministry of Unification 2012, p. 37).

outlined in a 1955 speech, served as the blueprint for economic and political policies until the 1970s (Cumings 1997, p. 404, as discussed in Kang 2007, p. 95). *Juche* emphasized both mobilization of the masses as well as isolation from the influence of other states (Kang 2007, pp. 97-98; Gause 2014, p. 32). As the ruling ideology for North Korea's economic and political institutions, *juche* underlines the organic unity between the leader, the party and the people in service of social progress (Cho 2011, p. 321).

In the post-Cold War period, *juche* remained central to North Korean identity, but was reconstructed by the Kim regime according to internal and external circumstances (Suh 2013, p. 8). Following the death of Kim Il-sung in 1994, Kim Jong-il was faced with a national famine that threatened the economic legacy of his father (Myers 2011, pp. 119-120; Park 2000, p. 511). Economic crisis motivated Kim Jong-il to implement the *songun* (military-first) policy in 1995 to divert the public's attention away from domestic problems and secure his legitimacy as a new leader (Myers 2011, p. 119; Suh 2007, p. 10). The 1998 Constitution's Articles 3 and 59 emphasized military supremacy, and the Chairman of the Military Commission was granted the position of supreme commander (Myers 2011, p. 119; Park 2000, p. 511). With the focus of national identity turning toward the military, the *songun* era witnessed heightened tensions with the United States and its "puppet" state in South Korea, because the Kim regime's legitimacy depended on demonstrating its military prowess (Myers 2011, p. 126).

The Kim Jong-il era involved domestic institutional rebalancing in line with the national identity narrative. The Korean People's Army was given priority as it could solicit the leader without having to consult with the party (McEachern 2010, p. 87). *Songun* politics also enabled Kim Jong-il to implement policies through the military bureaucracy which was less likely to "distort" orders than the party (McEachern 2010, p. 88). North Korea's institutional balance shifted again when Kim Jong-un came to power and purged and promoted individuals to reorganize the regime around his own supporters. A noteworthy case is the execution of Kim's uncle Jang Song-taek in December 2013, who had served as a top policy advisor for Kim Jong-il (Gause 2014, p. 5). The pressure Kim Jong-un is under to live up to the North Korean identity may be a source of his aggressive policies. Because Kim Jong-un is "not from the true blood of the Kim dynasty," (born to Kim Jong-il's Korean-Japanese consort, Ko Yong-hui) he is a "paranoid leader" determined to show excessive strength to the world, who has purged 200+ officials and likely ordered the assassination of his older half-brother, Kim Jong-nam.[11] Kim Jong-un's primary policy for demonstrating strength is his *byungjin* line, declared at the Central Committee Plenum in March 2013. In contrast to *songun*, *byungjin* focuses on simultaneously developing the economy and advancing North Korea's nuclear weapons program (Gause 2014, pp. 7-8).

In accordance with *byungjin*, North Korea has proclaimed itself a nuclear state. The leadership included the phrase *haekpoyuguk* ("nuclear state") in the DPRK Constitution (Ballbach 2016, p. 392). The construction of a nuclear state identity relates to North Korea's external threat perception. Justifications for developing a nuclear weapons program range from "the hostile U.S. policy" (Ballbach 2016, p. 397), over-reliance on China (Liu 2013, p. 230), and competition with the more economically developed South Korea (Park 2000, p. 508) that is equipped with more modern conventional military capabilities. Kim Jong-un's 2017 New

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[11] Author conversation with South Korean ambassador-level security expert in Seoul, February 2017.

Year's speech was more explicit than that of 2016 in terms of direct references to nuclear tests and the launch of ballistic missiles (Boydston 2017). Leadership statements, highlighting the need "to cope with the imperialists' nuclear war threats," show how nuclear weapons are now an integral part of North Korea's defense policy and national identity (Kim 2017).

In a speech to the 7th Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea, Kim Jong-un stressed the resilience of the DPRK in maintaining its independence with "powerful arms" and boasted of North Korea's strengths in "politics, military affairs, the economy, science and technology, and culture" (Kim 2016). The congress, the first to be held in 36 years and attended by foreign media, appeared to be a statement about the normalization of DPRK institutions as Kim Jong-un put his stamp on the national narrative. The third Kim can be considered a Machiavellian nationalist prince: obsessed with political theater, strategic in the use of domestic force, glorifying of war, highly distrusting, and fixated on power and control (Easley, 2012, p. 119). However, North Korean identity is frequently subject to ridicule beyond its borders, despite Kim Jong-un's attempts to impress international as well as domestic observers.

North Korean identity as perceived in the region

In stark contrast to the identity espoused by the DPRK government and the pride that many North Koreans at least appear to take in their national identity, citizens of other countries tend to view North Korea in highly negative terms.[12] This section considers those public opinions but focuses on perceptions of North Korean identity among policy relevant elites in South Korea, China, Japan and the United States. Interestingly for regional order, perceptions of North Korea are negative for different reasons in relevant countries. South Korea, Japan and the U.S. share objections to North Korean military threats and human rights abuses, but North Korea is a national identity issue for South Korea. For Japan, North Korea is a proximate challenge, while for America, North Korea elicits strong opinions but is far away. Chinese perceptions of North Korea are different still, owing to the complexity of that historical relationship.

While shared ethnic identity might be expected to unite citizens of the two Koreas, North and South have developed very different national identities since the end of the Korean War. As the ideological gap widened between Pyongyang and Seoul following national liberation, a competitive dynamic emerged in an effort to unite Korea under one regime (Kim 2014, p. 97). While conventional wisdom holds that most Koreans desire reunification under a single ethnic nation (*danil minjok*), South Koreans increasingly view North Korea as an ideological rival, political antithesis, security threat and economic liability rather than as a misunderstood and estranged family member (Shin 2006, as discussed in Campbell 2016, p. 2). Over the past

[12] In public opinion polls, Americans have ranked North Korea least favorably among all countries, slightly below Iran (Gallup 2014). On a zero to ten favorability scale for foreign leaders, South Koreans rated Kim Jong-un at 0.8, the lowest score recorded (Asan Institute 2016). Over 90% of Japanese say they dislike or distrust North Korea (Japan News Network 2017). Criticism of North Korea is so pervasive on Chinese websites and social media that Pyongyang reportedly asked Beijing to censor posts with references to "Fatty Kim the Third." Also censored was an admittedly unscientific Weibo poll in which two-thirds of Chinese respondents favored a hypothetical U.S. military strike against North Korea's nuclear weapons (Perlez and Choe 2016).

decade, South Koreans have grown accustomed to identifying with the civic and legal aspects of the nation (Kim 2014, p. 99), despite their own domestic political divisions. Therefore, ethnic affinity with the North is in decline and South Koreans are less likely to identify North Koreans as "one of us" (Kim 2014, p. 100; Campbell 2016, p. 2). As the economic gap between North and South Korea has widened (Park 2000, p. 508), so has the identity gap. South Korea's competitive and globalized society continues to pull away from the loyalty-based insulated society of the North.

The events of 2010 offered a turning point for South Korean perceptions of North Korean identity. Unlike the 2006 and 2009 nuclear tests, DPRK attacks on the naval vessel Cheonan and the island of Yeonpyeong resulted in the loss of South Korean lives. The government in Seoul pursued harsher sanctions and more robust military countermeasures against what it now considered "a belligerent and dangerous" regime (Ministry of Unification 2014, p. 101). South Korean government policy came to reflect the belief that North Korea identity, delegitimized by underperforming against the South Korean model in nearly every socioeconomic indicator, had become the very source of hostility (ibid).

From the perspective of the Japanese government, North Korea's military modernization and provocations are also linked to the nature of the Kim regime (Ministry of Defense 2016, p. 2). The Japanese public is particularly sensitive to the unresolved cases of North Korean kidnappings of Japanese citizens in the 1970s-80s (Hagstrom and Hanssen 2015). Civil society groups supporting the families of the abductees are influential in how the Japanese public views North Korea and also in encouraging the Japanese government to strengthen economic sanctions against the DPRK (Samuels 2010, p. 367). Tokyo previously considered economic assistance and normalizing diplomatic relations with Pyongyang as means of improving the regional security environment. In the mid- to late-1990s, when "global civilian power" was the banner for Tokyo's international affairs, Japanese policymakers believed that they could exercise economic leverage to improve North Korea's security behavior (Hughes 2013). However, North Korea's continued provocations led Tokyo to adopt tougher policies, including economic sanctions, in a policy that came to be known as "dialogue and pressure" (Murooka and Akutsu 2016, p. 86). Japan's policy toward North Korea also seeks to increase trilateral cooperation with the U.S. and South Korea to reinforce deterrence (Michishita 2009, p. 136; Okonogi, Nishino and Moon, 2012).

North Korea has been a major driver of Japan's evolving defense posture. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the deepening of the U.S.-Japan security alliance in the post-Cold War, North Korea became a "new existential threat" to Japanese policymakers (Hughes 2009, p. 297). To be sure, North Korea is not the only factor behind Tokyo's transforming security policy. In terms of domestic politics, pacifist and socialist political parties witnessed decline in the post-Cold War period, Japan sought other forms of international contributions in light of its economic stagnation, and Tokyo faces uncertainties regarding the rise of China. However, long before the Japanese government explicitly mentioned China in its 2015 defense white paper, Tokyo openly identified North Korea as a threat in the revised National Defense Program Outline (NDPO) of 1995 and the U.S.-Japan Joint Declaration on Security of 1996 (Hughes 2009, p. 304). The nuclear crisis of 1993-94, the 1998 Taepodong ballistic missile test that overflew Japan, a Japan-DPRK naval clash in 1999, and Pyongyang's many nuclear and missile tests in recent years all raised threat perceptions in Japan. As a result, Tokyo not only

increased alliance cooperation with Washington, it also updated military rules of engagement (previously limited by Japan's postwar pacifist constitution) and invested in reconnaissance satellites and missile defenses (Easley 2017, pp. 71-72, 81). Since Kim Jong-un's ascension to power, many Japanese observers consider the youthful leader's inexperience and lack of legitimacy as central motivations for North Korea's regionally destabilizing military pursuits (Hajime 2013).

U.S. practitioners tend to consider North Korea a chronic, stubborn problem, defying policy solutions and demanding more attention than it deserves. In the perception of many American analysts and foreign policymakers, North Korea exploits a reputation for irrationality. In the United States, North Korea is often referred to as "maniacally offensive," "logic defying," "erratic," "inscrutable," prone to miscalculation and apt to behave like a "wild animal" when cornered (Roy 1994, p. 308). At the same time as seeing the DPRK government as blinded by ideology and its own propaganda, American policymakers often describe North Korean leaders as selectively provocative, hyper-calculating, realist materialists, constantly looking for bargaining opportunities to benefit from exploiting a situation (Snyder 1999).

Recently, prominent American analysts have argued that the North Korean leadership does not see nuclear weapons as a bargaining chip, but instead as central to North Korean identity. The Kim regime is thought to believe that nuclear capabilities provide political, military and psychological advantages over South Korea and protection from American and Chinese pressure (Pollack 2011, p. 190, 207; Revere 2013). A majority of American experts see North Korean identity as that of a norm violator, in contrast the U.S. ally and partner in South Korea. This translates to American support for the U.S.-ROK alliance and Korean unification under Seoul's terms (Cossa 2013). North Korean identity is anathema to principles and values held by the U.S., ROK and Japan. This is a major impediment to engagement because Washington, Seoul and Tokyo do not want to recognize the DPRK as a nuclear power, normalize its missile provocations, or legitimize its human rights behavior

Chinese leaders claim a relationship with North Korea based on shared historical experiences ranging from ancient tributary relations, to resisting Japanese imperialism, to fighting the Americans in the Korean War. Chinese President Hu Jintao wrote of the China-DPRK relationship as a "precious legacy and common treasure handed down by the leaders of the elder generations" (Hu 2011). It is common to hear Chinese analysts describe the relationship in Confucian, even paternalistic terms, casting North Korea as a misbehaving little brother or as a junior partner struggling along the development path that China itself traversed (Shi 2011). Chinese officials and scholars voice frustration at North Korea's recalcitrance to accept Chinese suggestions for economic reform and military restraint, and emphasize that Pyongyang cannot expect unqualified economic and diplomatic support from Beijing (Wu 2005).

Chinese perceptions of the DPRK have worsened under Kim Jong-un as many observers have come to see North Korea as distrustful, nationalistic and obsessed with its own independence (Liu 2013). Chinese officials speak less of an alliance or special friendship with North Korea and more about maintaining normal state-to-state relations (Ren 2015). The view that North Korean leaders are "simplistic and arrogant" (Zhu 2009, p. 48), may explain why President Xi Jinping has yet to meet with Kim Jong-un. The Chinese government appears willing to punish North Korea when Pyongyang violates Chinese expectations in terms of maintaining stability, avoiding strategic encirclement, receiving due deference, and engaging in Confucian reciprocity

(Easley and Park 2016). But Beijing is less enthusiastic about implementing sanctions when North Korea violates international norms (ibid). For example, China responded to the Cheonan incident and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in 2010 with calls for dialogue and criticism of U.S.-ROK military exercises. But when Pyongyang betrayed Chinese expectations with its third nuclear test in February 2013, Beijing was willing to implement sanctions strengthened by UNSCR 2094, and freeze North Korean Foreign Trade Bank accounts (ibid, p. 2). Most international observers do not expect China's policy toward North Korea to change significantly as long as Beijing is less uncomfortable with North Korean identity (especially those aspects attached to human rights violations and nuclear weapons development) than other countries and remains focused on defending the China-DPRK border and reducing U.S. influence in Asia (Scobell 2004).

In each of the national cases above, perceptions of North Korean identity are overwhelmingly negative and have been worsening. However, the DPRK is largely seen through the lens of each country's domestic politics, precluding a regional consensus on how to deal with Pyongyang. This complicates how relevant governments can leverage multilateral mechanisms vis-à-vis North Korea and pursue improvements in East Asia's regional order.

Conclusion: North Korean identity and regional integration

North Korea is certainly not part of a virtuous cycle in Asia's economic-security-identity nexus (Shin 2016, p. 71), but attributing a lack of regionalization or degradation in regional order to North Korea would be giving Pyongyang too much credit. The DPRK is a factor in a potential vicious cycle in East Asia, but economic and security ties among other countries in the region are strong and numerous enough that North Korea is not a deal breaker for a virtuous cycle, nor is it necessarily able to drive a vicious cycle in East Asia's international relations.

Nonetheless, North Korean identity appears to frame the DPRK's position in the regional order. A fundamental problem of dealing with North Korea is that the Kim regime has constructed a national identity that would be contradicted by submitting to the regional order. The deepening attachment of regime legitimacy to nuclear weapons and the image of a future without belt-tightening for its people causes North Korea to seek its own parallel reality.[13] In other words, North Korea's leaders want to benefit from a new version of "hot economics" despite "cold politics" and the challenges Pyongyang poses to regional stability. However, North Korea's maligned identity — human rights abusing and peace threatening — leave its neighbors committed to disallowing the success of Kim Jong-un's *byungjin* policy. North Korea's leaders may relish the divisions among neighboring countries on policy, but DPRK attempts to drive wedges in the region are likely to meet with less success if external perceptions of North Korean identity continue to decline.

North Korean identity has frustrated efforts to build an inclusive regional identity and has at times reinforced Cold War lines of division among national identities in East Asia. Regional economic and security mechanisms have exhibited little traction in terms of persuading Pyongyang

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[13] See the chapter by Evelyn Goh in the forthcoming volume, Yul Sohn and T.J. Pempel (Eds.), *Japan and Asia's Contested Order.*

to give up its nuclear missile efforts and belligerent foreign policy. Academic and policy debates continue over whether greater coordinated pressure or more credible incentives can change the strategic calculus of the Kim regime (CFR 2016; USKI 2016). The challenges are numerous as North Korean identity appears closely tied to its nuclear weapons program and perpetually antagonistic relations with its neighbors to maintain external threat justification for the continuation of the regime. Social structures and political institutions related to North Korean identity provide the regime a high tolerance for isolation and the suffering of its people. Meanwhile, the North Korean leadership perceives various threats to national identity: military inferiority, international condemnation of human rights conditions, North Korean refugees in China and defectors in South Korea, the danger of subjugation to China, and of course the blow to legitimacy represented by a more economically successful South Korea.

Whether regional neighbors can or should co-exist with North Korean identity is a difficult policy question that will continue to frame the engagement vs. containment vs. regime change debate. Policymakers should be reminded that identities change over time, but not overnight. North Korean identity is mutable and will evolve, perhaps in ways amenable to regional order, perhaps in service of the current regime in Pyongyang. Barring a significant change in North Korean identity associated with transformation of or an end to the Kim regime, how North Korea relates to the future regional order will largely depend on three developments. First, whether *byungjin* can survive economic sanctions and diplomatic and military pressure. An important factor for this question is the extent to which a more progressive South Korean administration led by Moon Jae-in reduces pressure in favor of engagement. Second, whether North Korean foreign policy provides greater tailwinds for South Korea-Japan cooperation than the headwinds of historical disagreements between Seoul and Tokyo (Ku 2016; Hong 2016). Third, whether North Korea is an issue for U.S.-China cooperation as President Trump and President Xi outlined in April 2017, or whether the overall relationship between Washington and Beijing drifts further from selective cooperation toward strategic competition.

Even if the Kim dynasty were to end, its rule over the past seven decades would offer complicating legacies for Korean identity for many years to come. With a better understanding of North Korean identity, it becomes clear that dealing with Pyongyang is not an area for wishful thinking. It is inadvisable to write off the DPRK as a bad actor doomed to collapse under the weight of its own contradictions. It is dangerous to caricaturize North Korea as a subject in need of “sunshine” or a member of an “evil” axis. Instead, North Korean identity merits further study so that policymakers in relevant countries can address its complexities and internal contradictions. Efforts to socialize North Korea into a regional order are not futile, but the burden is mostly on the leadership in Pyongyang to project an identity that can be more credibly associated with cooperation and norm compliance. North Korean choices will answer the outstanding question of whether East Asia’s evolving regional order will successfully support changes in North Korean identity, such that the northern half of the peninsula will enjoy the benefits of regional integration and no longer threaten regional peace.

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