



## The Politics of Asian Regionalism in Korea: *Identity Politics and Its Implications for U.S.-ROK Relations*

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*Drawing from the concept of national identity in the Constructivist School of International Relations, this paper sheds light on the interaction between identity politics and pan-Asian regionalist vision in South Korea today by examining how competing political groups – the progressives, leftists and conservatives – have formulated differing regional policies and long-term goals. After showing that each group's distinctive identities toward North Korea and the United States have influenced the formation of controversies over regionalist visions, this paper suggests that successful future community building in Asia hinges upon the creative resolution of a multilateral blueprint with existing bilateralisms in the region, and most importantly upon closer policy coordination between South Korea and the United States.*

### Introduction

Extensive research has analyzed an intriguing yet still inconspicuous trend in today's international politics: Asian regional integration. In observing the tendency, it is worth noting the historical fact that pan-Asian visions have repeatedly surfaced onto the world stage in various forms and contexts. From the Japanese imperial ambitions clothed with the pan-Asian slogan of a "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" in the mid-twentieth century, have developed their own geopolitical visions, through the discourse of "Asian values"<sup>1</sup> as underlying cultural contributors to the developmental miracles of East Asian nations in the '80s and '90s, and finally to the current manifestations of what some already began to term as "a new pan-Asianism,"<sup>2</sup> intellectuals and politicians of Asia from nearly the entire ideological spectrum. Korea has been no exception; as Gi-Wook Shin argues, since Korea's "incorporation into the modern world system in the late nineteenth century,"<sup>3</sup> various forms of Asianist visions have emerged and declined. Contemporary South Korean politics also manifest distinctive visions and policies regarding the future of Asia and Korea's geopolitical strategies. Excepting the former Roh regime's idea of

Korea as the "regional balancer of Asia," the issue of regional policies has seldom been subject to the intense politicization<sup>4</sup> typical of Korean politics, which is divided along ideological lines. The close examination of news editorials, party platforms and governmental policies, nevertheless reveals that each of the conservatives, progressives, and leftists<sup>5</sup> in South Korea has formulated their respective regional vision. Those differing visions and policy lines reflect the gaps between each political faction's strategic views on major regional actors such as China, North Korea and the U.S. South Korea's geographic location amidst stronger neighbors as well as its unique situation of peninsular division and strategic alliance with the U.S. has compelled its citizens to define their national identity in terms of their country's relationships with the U.S., North Korea and more recently, China. Scholars have used the term "identity politics" or "politics of identity"<sup>6</sup> to refer to the continuing contestation of national identity in South Korea, in which groups of different political beliefs strive to advance their own perceptions of those major neighbors as the legitimate visions of national identity. The objectives of this paper are: (1) to highlight how South Korean identity politics are

reflected in the Asian policy platforms of the progressives, leftists and conservatives, and (2) to review the implications of findings for U.S.-ROK relations. As a necessary preliminary to these topics, however, we begin by discussing previous scholarly discourses on identity politics, and some broad manifestations of this idea in South Korea.

### Identity Politics and South Korea

National identity as a concept has attracted a significant amount of attention from both social sciences and humanities. This includes the recent scholarship in the Constructivist school of international relations,<sup>7</sup> a few social scientists' ambitious project to establish identity as a variable, sociologists' use of the concept in their politico-historical discourses,<sup>8</sup> and the critical assessment of national identity and culture as a problematic concept from the perspective of cultural studies,<sup>9</sup> to name but a few. Most importantly, the Constructivist school has emphasized the importance of analyzing the role of state identity and interests in the formation of actual foreign policies. The common understanding of the concept of state identity has been that it involves a state's perception of other states. Peter Katzenstein explains that "in constructivist analyses of state behavior and the relations between states, ideational factors and processes are expected to be important for tracing whether collective actors are likely to construct or diffuse enmity or amity between self and other."<sup>10</sup> It has also been pointed out that state identities, that is, perceptions of other states, vary across the differing political positions or ideologies within a society. Thomas Berger argues that "different subgroups within a given society... may hold very different conceptions of state identity and state interest."<sup>11</sup> Identity politics ensue when those political subgroups within a society compete over the legitimization of particular perceptions of other states in trying to justify their viewpoints in the name of national interest.

In the case of South Korea, national politics has to a large extent been marked by the struggles between the holders of different perspectives toward the United States and towards North Korea, two important others, often resulting in emotional confrontations. According to J.J. Suh at Johns Hopkins, there are basically "two conflicting identities" within South Korean politics: "the alliance identity that sees the United States as a friendly provider and the nationalist identity that pits Korean identity against the United States."<sup>12</sup> The "alliance identity" of the conservatives has been described as going hand in hand with their staunch stance toward the North

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Korean regime. The "nationalist identity" of the progressives and the leftists, on the other hand, has been affiliated with their moderate or sympathetic stance toward the North. Gi-Wook Shin, quoting Suh's remarks, also argues in his book on U.S.-Korea relations that both North Korea and the U.S. have become two significant others against which Koreans shape their sense of national identity and that both progressives and conservatives "seek to define their vision for national identity with reference to" the two nations.<sup>13</sup> In short, different perceptions of the U.S. and North Korea, and the diverse state identities affected thereby, have competed with each other in South Korea. It will be shown in the next part of this paper that such identity politics in South Korea has shaped or at least influenced the

formation of controversies over different Asian policies and visions among the progressives, leftists and conservatives.

### **The Progressives: The Regional Balancer Thesis**

When candidate Roh Moo Hyun won the 2003 presidential election amidst rising anti-American sentiments in South Korea, the Roh government and its Uri party (now divided into the Democratic Party and the Participation Party) were perceived by the U.S. policymakers as “implacably anti-American” and pro-North Korean.<sup>14</sup> Conservative commentators in South Korea as well continuously condemn the nationalist identity of the Roh regime, and acrimonious politics of identity overwhelmed the nation during the entire ruling period of the progressive powers. When president Roh proclaimed his vision of South Korea to be a “balancer of Northeast Asia” in the forthcoming “era of Northeast Asia,” followed by explanatory documents from the administrative office of the National Security Council and the Presidential Commission on Policy Planning,<sup>15</sup> such geopolitical conceptions were considered to have been motivated by the nationalist identity vis-à-vis the U.S.-ROK alliance and North Korea. The governmental documents stated that the Roh regime’s regional visions were not in contradiction with the alliance and denied the existence of any hidden intention to bandwagon with the rising regional power, China. The documents instead argue that South Korea’s assumption of a proactive role as a balancer—coordinating regional policies within the U.S.-China-Japan triangle—would be in line with the U.S. policy stance to establish a cooperative order with China. The underlying idea is that South Korea could prevent the possibility of diplomatic as well as military conflicts among the powerful regional actors in their hegemonic rivalries. It was also claimed that the regional visions are not necessarily concerned with the issue of North-



*Korea occupies a critical position between China and Japan.*

South relations and that the denuclearization of the North is to be achieved through multilateral frameworks such as the Six-Party talks.

Despite the efforts of the Roh government to convince Korean conservatives and the Bush administration that its regionalist ideas were in fact in accordance with the interests of the U.S., U.S. policymakers, the media and many in academia bombarded the progressive resident of the Blue House with harsh criticisms. Most of all, conservative Korean news media that were already at the front line of denouncing progressive governmental policies turned their gunpoint to the regional balancer thesis. For instance, a 2005 editorial of Chosun Ilbo, one of the prominent conservative newspapers in South Korea, viewed the idea of “Northeast Asian balancer” as markedly contradictory to the U.S.-ROK alliance: “the idea of Northeast Asian balancer sounds as if South Korea could jump onto the side of China to succeed as a balancer. Is that even possible? Moreover, if South Korea jumps onto the left side, what would happen to the other side? I mean, what about the U.S.-ROK alliance?”<sup>16</sup>

Scholars based in the U.S. also commented on the Roh government’s proposition as a premature, if not totally improper, vision driven by nationalist identity. Shin argued that the progressives’ new version of Asianism embodied their revisionist stance toward the U.S.-ROK alliance and general

discontent with the Bush administration’s foreign policies. In his 2006 work he wrote, “the current version of Korean Asianism,” advocated by progressive scholars serving the Roh government, “seeks to distance Korea from American hegemony and to grant it a more appropriate role as a hub in the region.”<sup>17</sup> Again in his 2007 book, the regionalist vision was seen as a reflection of “Koreans’ discontent with American policy ... [as] its proponents are unhappy with what they perceive as the one-sided and unequal nature of the U.S.-South Korea alliance.”<sup>18</sup> He also observes the pro-North Korean identity of the progressives behind the slogan of the Northeast Asian era; “Its [Asianism’s] proponents argue that U.S.-led globalization unfairly excludes North Korea and that a new strategy of national survival must incorporate the North. A report by the Presidential Commission on Policy Planning defines this recent Asianism as “a new perspective of history and worldview” with the ultimate goal of forming an “Asian Union” that would include the North.”<sup>19</sup>

Another sociologist and Northeast Asia expert Gilbert Rozman, in his short yet brilliant article on the South Korean national identity, has also analyzed the balancer thesis as “indicative of...unguarded romanticism”, without realistic calculations of the regional balance of power. He suggests that the regionalist vision failed to gain a shared national vision, provoking internal identity conflicts between the progressives and conservatives. Instead, the government should have focused on assuming a more modest and realistic role as a “facilitator at moments when interests [of regional powers] overlap.”<sup>20</sup>

The Roh regime’s vision of South Korea as a regional balancer, and its flowery slogan of the “era of Northeast Asia” led to the first major politicization of pan-Asian thought in the nation since 1945. While the explanatory documents highlighted the underlying intention to be in line with the existing alliance system and U.S. interests in Asia, the regionalist imagination was dismissed as

premature at best. Against the backdrop of antagonistic domestic politics and continuous regional policy disharmony with the Bush administration, president Roh’s independent conception of regional power realignment ended up fueling identity politics and lasted only a few months.

### **The Leftists: Party Platforms and Discourses**

Many leftists in South Korea who inherited the anti-American minjung (people’s) movement of the 1980s became fascinated with the seemingly anti-American and economically progressive stances of the 2002 Presidential candidate Roh Moo Hyun, whose surprising victory discommoded conservatives and the hawkish Bush administration and gave unprecedented hopes to the leftists. The latter’s disenchantments, however, arrived quickly when the government pushed for the dispatch of South Korean troops to Iraq and for the commencement of FTA negotiations with the U.S. Their sense of betrayal toward the progressive president appeared inevitable given the Korean leftists’ strong anti-American and progressive economic visions, which can also be seen in its regional policy lines. Supported mainly by labor unionists, activists, and intellectuals, the leftists in South Korea have regarded the U.S.-led Neoliberalism and American hegemony as the main culprit of economic inequality and the North Korean crises. Envisioning a new regional power alignment, therefore, which was necessary for the leftists, aimed both to achieve reunification as a way to free the peninsula from what they considered unequal U.S.-Korea relations, and to establish a pan-Asian new economic system that addresses the unfettered economic liberalism led by the U.S.

The current party platform of the New Progressive Party clearly reflects such regional visions (Appendix 1). Regarding the U.S.-ROK alliance as “based upon the American imperial domination strategy” and South Korea “taken as a hostage to the neoliberal capitalism,” the

platform states that a new peace system called “the Northeast Asian Multilateral Security Cooperation System” is to be established so that “the U.S. army stationed in South Korea is to be withdrawn.” Unification is the means and ends of the new peace system, bringing “the improvement of people’s lives in both South and North Korea.” The platform also calls for the solidarity and alliance of “the democratic progressive factions” of each Asian nation, to establish “sustainable economic systems” as an alternative to “bilateral free trade agreements that force structural adjustments.”

Besides party platforms, leftist intellectuals

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have formulated corresponding discourses on regional politics. An academic article by a professor at Sung Kong Hoe University, known for its large pool of faculty members with progressive and leftist leanings, argues that “It is not even possible to imagine a new Asia without taking actions together against the formidable capacity of the U.S. in ruling over and lining up the entire Asia-Pacific. The reason why we speak of Asia is that if Asian countries do not form solidarity, they really cannot survive...In this regard we have to learn from the symbiotic solidarity of Latin America which stabs a dagger right into the center of American hegemony.”<sup>21</sup>

The chance of any leftist party candidate’s ascendancy to the Blue House and of an actual materialization of such regional visions, however, remains quite low unless the leftists come to form a coalition with the Democratic Party against the dominant

conservative camps and overcome their lasting stagnation after the internal division and corruption scandals. Yet, the volatile political terrain of the nation vulnerable to events that could trigger intense politicization and mass reactions leaves open the possibility of resurging anti-American sentiments which could at anytime be linked to new geopolitical imaginations.

### **The Conservatives:**

#### ***President Lee’s Pragmatism***

Compared to the leftists and progressives, South Korean conservatives rarely promote a pan-Asian vision that satisfies their desire for strong bilateral relations with the U.S. and relatively antagonistic sentiments towards the North. Most of all, it seems the conservatives have not yet heeded much attention to resolving the tension between the existing U.S.-led bilateral alliance system in the region and a prospective multilateral structure necessary for regional community building.<sup>22</sup> Some news editorials’ comments on regionalist visions, such as the East Asian Community, present hawkish stances toward North Korea but not any serious discussion on the compatibility of regionalism with bilateralism. For instance, a 2009 editorial of Chosun Ilbo titled “For the East Asian Community not to be in vain”,<sup>23</sup> argues that the denuclearization of North Korea is a prerequisite to the idea of an East Asian Community proclaimed by Japanese Prime Minister Hatoyama to be materialized. Meanwhile, the Asian policies of the current conservative government under Lee Myung Bak have been saved from the acrimonious identity politics that overwhelmed his predecessor’s vision of Korea as a regional balancer. Most of all, the conservatives’ focus has been on economic regional agendas instead of on subtle geopolitical strategies that might elicit identity conflicts and misperceptions. The rhetoric of “the hub of Asia,” for instance, which the Roh government frequently employed, reappears in the New Asian Policy (Appendix 2) only

within the context of envisioning an expansion of bilateral FTAs in Asia. Regional economic issues such as free trade, IT technology, cultural markets, coordinated responses to financial crises and climate change, comprise the major portions of the policy. Such relative absence of identity-driven geostrategic visions among the conservatives could be understood in President Lee’s promotion of pragmatism in diplomatic, as well as domestic policies.

At the Asia Economic Community Forum held in November 2009 in South Korea, as a short response to my question about the difference between the Asian policies of the Roh and Lee governments, Grand National Party congressman Won Hee-Ryong remarked as follows;

“The essential difference between the current government and the Roh government is that the Roh government then referred to South Korea as a balancer of Northeast Asia and this concept of balancer attracted a lot of attention, fueling a controversy on whether this idea means a digression from the U.S.-ROK alliance. However, there is barely a difference in terms of actual policies. This (The Lee) government, however, approaches Asian policies more carefully and pragmatically.”<sup>24</sup>

“Pragmatism” was one of the key slogans of President Lee during his presidential election campaign in 2007. Promoting the image of the candidate as a non-ideological businessman (he is the former CEO of Hyundai), Lee’s election strategy aimed at appealing to a South Korean public who was already tired of acrimonious identity politics during the progressives’ ruling period. He promised to pursue domestic and foreign policies with realistic and pragmatic professionalism. The U.S. policymakers and academia welcomed the inauguration of the conservative government as they believed President Lee would take a more cooperative and cautious course of diplomatic relations with the U.S., and would not engage in unnecessary gestures that might fuel divisive politics of identity. The Lee

government’s regional vision, manifested in the New Asian Policy centered upon economic agendas, has accordingly been saved from any controversy, and the progressives and leftists have focused their energies almost exclusively on attacking domestic policies such as the Grand Korean Waterway project and inter-Korean relations.

### **Conclusion:**

#### ***Implications for U.S.-ROK Relations***

Currently there is no consensus among South Korean leaders over what kind of long-term geopolitical strategy the nation should adopt to help construct a stable and prosperous order that corresponds to the mutual interests of major regional actors, including the U.S. The progressives’ promotion of a pan-Asian slogan that manifested South Korea’s heightened expectation to assume a more proactive role as a regional balancer failed to garner a unified voice internally and delivered confusing messages across the Pacific that the longtime ally desires to bandwagon with the new regional power, China. Most of all, the progressive Roh regime’s failed regionalist proposition and the intense identity politics it fueled suggest that what South Korea needs at this time is a “compromise [among political elites] highlighting elements of identity that serve urgent goals”<sup>25</sup>, that include stabilizing the inter-Korean relations and promoting a peaceful regional order. Such a compromise must start with recognizing the significance of continued policy coordination between the ROK and the US to deal with North Korea and its Asian neighbors. A survey result indicates that Asian elites in general prefer U.S. support for and involvement in the long-term vision of an Asian community and corresponding regional institution building,<sup>26</sup> reflecting widespread concerns that an exclusive regional order might end up intensifying a rivalry structure between regional hegemony. In the face of escalating peninsular uncertainties amid the recent military ship sinking and the North’s own internal succession politics, South Korean



leaders are realizing again the importance of working closely with the U.S. on crucial regional agendas.

For the progressives and leftists, it should be noted that a successful national strategy on regional politics rests upon a shared vision and coordination with the nation's trustworthy allies. The conservatives, on the other hand, need to start spending their time and political resources on drawing a long-term vision that could promise pan-regional as well as peninsular stability. Most importantly, for a regional community to

## Endnotes

- 1 For detailed description and analysis of the "Asian values" discourses, see Mark T Berger, *The Battle for Asia: From Colonization to Globalization* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005) 174-197.
- 2 "The Tilt Towards a New Pan-Asianism," *The China Post* [Taipei] 14 July. 2008.
- 3 Gi-Wook Shin, "Asianism in Korea's Politics of Identity," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 2005, 6.4: 616-630.
- 4 According to de Wilde, politicization is defined as "a process that makes issues part of politics". The politicization of the Roh government's regional policy visions will be discussed in this paper. Katzenstein et al, *European Identity* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 15.
- 5 Despite the danger of oversimplification, as of May 2010, by the conservative I mean the supporters and politicians of either the Grand National Party or the Liberty Forward Party, by the progressive those of either the Democratic Party or the Participation Party, and by the left those of either the Democratic Labor Party or the New Progressive Party. To examine the Asianism of the progressive, the paper deals with the Asianist doctrines of the last Roh regime whose party in power was the Uri Party, a predecessor of the current Democratic Party and/or the Participation Party.
- 6 Gi-Wook Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).
- 7 Peter J. Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).
- 8 Shin 2006, Gilbert Rozman, "South Korea's National Identity Sensitivity: Evolution, Manifestations, Prospects" *Korea Economic Institute Academic Paper Series*. March 2009.
- 9 Naoki Sakai, "Nationality and the Politics of the "Mother Tongue"" *Deconstructing Nationality* (Ithaca: East Asia Program, Cornell University, 2005), Rey Chow, "Preface" *Women and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading Between East and West* (Minnesota: Minnesota University Press, 1991).
- 10 Peter J. Katzenstein et al, *Rethinking Security in East Asia: Identity, Power and Efficiency* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004). 9. Italics added.
- 11 Thomas Berger, "Power and Purpose in Pacific East Asia: A Constructivist Interpretation," *International Relations Theory and the Asia-Pacific*, ed. John Ikenberry et al (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003) 387-420. 391.
- 12 Peter Katzenstein et al 2004. 169.
- 13 Gi-Wook Shin, *One Alliance, Two Lenses: U.S.-Korea Relations in a New Era* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006). 18.
- 14 Peter Katzenstein et al 2004. 163.
- 15 Administrative Office of National Security Council (NSC), Explanatory Document on Northeast Asian Balancer, 27, Apr. 2005, 19, Nov. 2009 <[http://16cwnd.pa.go.kr/cwd/kr/archive/archive\\_view.php?meta\\_id=news\\_data&category=2&mode=notmem&id=3156e0ed75b5e6e6c5844a90](http://16cwnd.pa.go.kr/cwd/kr/archive/archive_view.php?meta_id=news_data&category=2&mode=notmem&id=3156e0ed75b5e6e6c5844a90)>, The Presidential Commission on Policy Planning, *A New Thinking Toward an Era of Northeast Asia of Peace and Prosperity*. Seoul: Republic of Korea.
- 16 Chun-Suk Kang, "The Dreams and Reality of the Northeast Asian Balancer Thesis," *Chosun Ilbo* 15, Apr. 2005. Print.
- 17 Shin 2006. 218-219.
- 18 Gi-Wook Shin, "Regionalism and Nationalism in Northeast Asia," *Cross Currents: Regionalism and Nationalism in Northeast Asia*, ed. Gi-Wook Shin and Daniel C. Snieder (Stanford: The Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, 2007). 20.
- 19 Ibid. 219.
- 20 Rozman. 5.
- 21 Won Dam Baek, "Why Asia? Cultural Choice, Cultural Communication and Solidarity (Oe Asiainga)," *Orientation and Prospects (Jihyanggwa Jeonmang)*, Spring 2007, 27 Nov. 2009 <[http://www.arko.or.kr/zine/artspaper2007\\_03/pdf/088.pdf](http://www.arko.or.kr/zine/artspaper2007_03/pdf/088.pdf) >
- 22 Katzenstein points out the difference between the case of Europe and Asia in terms of regional community building as in Asia the U.S.-led bilateralisms which have long provided regional stability must in some way be incorporated with a multilateral system required for prospective regional integration. Peter Katzenstein, *A World of Regions: Asia and Europe in the American Imperium* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).
- 23 Editorial, "For the East Asian Community Not to be in Vain," *Chosun Ilbo* 8, Oct. 2009. Print.
- 24 Hee-Ryong Won, Informal Personal Interview, Nov. 2009. Italics added.
- 25 Rozman 2009. 7.
- 26 Bates Gill, et al, *Strategic Views on Asian Regionalism: Survey Results and Analysis*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 24, Feb. 2010 <[http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/090217\\_gill\\_stratviews\\_web.pdf](http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/090217_gill_stratviews_web.pdf)>.
- 27 Rozman 2009. 7.

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