Status and Leadership on the Korean Peninsula

by David C. Kang

David Kang is Professor of International Relations and Business and Director at the Korean Studies Institute for the University of Southern California.

Abstract: *This article examines both South and North Korea's search for status in international relations. By exploring how these countries seek status for themselves, how states define status for themselves and others, and also what status they are willing to grant other regional states, this paper concludes that crafting a stable regional status hierarchy will be as important to future stability on the Korean peninsula as will be the crafting of a stable balance of power or deepening economic interdependence.*

There is intense interest among policymakers and scholars about whether the future of East Asian international relations will be stable or conflictual. The majority of these studies focus on the standard factors that are deemed central to international relations, such as military power and economic wealth. Thus, studies explore whether a rising power will upset the balance of power in the region or whether increasing economic interdependence can mitigate potential conflict.[1] While these are clearly important, other forms of power may be just as important in international relations. Fully explaining the dynamics in East Asia may require exploring these other forms of power as well.

Although largely overlooked in international relations, psychologists, sociologists, and other social scientists generally agree that the desire for social status is a fundamental motivation for human behavior.[2] While it may be intuitively plausible that states value material gains such as economic wealth or military power, it is just as plausible that states, publics, and individuals value

[1] Robert Ross, "Balance of Power Politics and the Rise of China: Accommodation and Balancing in East Asia," *Security Studies* 15, no. 3 (2006), pp. 355-395; and Aaron Friedberg, "The Future of U.S.-China Relations: Is Conflict Inevitable?" *International Security*, (Fall 2005), pp. 7-45.

[2] Richard Ned Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge, 2008). Robert H. Frank, *Choosing the Right Pond: Human Behavior and the Quest for Status* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Robert Wright, *The Moral Animal: Evolutionary Psychology and Everyday Life* (New York: Pantheon, 1994); and C. Loch, M. Yaziji and C. Langen, "The Fight for the Alpha Position: Channeling Status Competition in Organizations," *European Management Journal* 19, (February 2001).

© 2010 Published by Elsevier Limited on behalf of Foreign Policy Research Institute.

their status and seek social recognition and prestige. Thus, it may be just as instructive to ask what role status plays in the region, what status East Asian countries seek, and whether they agree on what constitutes status. In addition, questions of historical memory, "soft" or "smart" power, changing nationalisms, and regional integration are intimately linked to questions of status, and how publics and governments view their own and other countries' places in the region.

The Korean peninsula is a useful case study for investigating whether status is a key consideration and how status concerns manifest themselves in international relations. The region itself is in flux, not only with changing wealth and military power, but, just as importantly, the status states seek and give to each other. Is South Korea or the Republic of Korea (ROK), a middle power? Is it the closest U.S. ally? Is it equal to Japan? Are either China or Japan hoping to replace the United States as the regional leader? North Korea, of course, desperately desires even the most basic of status: that of a sovereign nation-state equal to all others.

Because the concept of status is not as commonly studied in international relations as are concepts such as the balance of power or economic interdependence, this paper will take a small detour to briefly clarify the term and its use.

Status and Leadership in International Relations

Social scientists have long identified three fundamental motivations for human behavior: wealth, power, and status.[3] Following Richard Ned Lebow, William Wohlforth, and Alastair Iain Johnston, among others, I define status as "an individual's standing in the hierarchy of a group based on criteria such as prestige, honor, and deference," where status is an inherently social concept and manifests itself hierarchically.[4] Thus, status is a *rank-order*, an ordinal

[3] Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, ed. Guenther Roth, Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); John Harsanyi, *Essays on Ethics Social Behavior, and Scientific Explanation* (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel, 1976); R.V. Gould, *Collison of Wills: How Ambiguity about Social Rank Breeds Conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

[4] Alastair Iain Johnston, *Social States: China in International Relations, 1980-2000* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 82; Richard Ned Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.); William Wohlforth, "Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great-Power War," *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (2009), pp. 28-57; Larson, Deborah Welch, and Alexei Shevchenko. "Shortcut to Greatness: The New Thinking and the Revolution in Soviet Foreign Policy." *International Organization* 57, no. 1 (2003), pp. 77-109; Peter Hays Gries, "Social Psychology and the Identity-Conflict Debate: Is a 'China Threat' Inevitable?" *The European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (June 2005), pp. 235-265; and Andrew Hurrell, "Rising Powers and the Question of Status in International Society," paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, New York, NY, February 15-18, 2009; Barry O'Neill, *Honor, Symbols and War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999); Jonathan Mercer, "Anarchy and Identity," *International Organization* (Spring 1995).

hierarchy measured from highest to lowest, and "refers to some kind of arrangement or rank, among people, groups, or institutions."[5] For an individual to be at the top of a hierarchy necessarily implies that others must be below. Just as important, then, as exploring the top of the hierarchy is exploring secondary states and their views and attitudes towards the status hierarchy.

Key to this definition is the social nature of status. Status is different than military power or economic wealth because it must be given by other states. Although a state can invest in its military and craft policies that foster economic growth, Lebow notes that status "is a gift, bestowed upon actors by other actors…it has no meaning until it is acknowledged."[6] Indeed, status is more relational than either wealth or power, and one can only have status if one is a member of a group. A state has far more control over its military and economic actions than it does over its own status. Critical to the concept of status is how and whether states arrive at a consensus about what constitutes the status hierarchy, how it is achieved, and who is allowed to gain status and who is not.

Scholars of international relations rarely place status concerns as central to analyses of East Asian international relations, and although the modern "Westphalian" system is comprised of formally equal units, we see substantial status hierarchy even today. Perhaps the most obvious manifestation of status is the intense attention devoted to "leadership" in international relations. After all, leadership necessarily implies that there are followers, which places the social rank-order of leaders above followers. The two are not equal in voice, responsibility, standing, or influence. Furthermore, a leader only exists if the followers agree that a state is a leader. Thus, debate about the future of "U.S. leadership" in East Asia, or questions about Japanese or Chinese competition for leadership, all imply a different status among states.[7]

Leadership implies more responsibility than followers, and also implies that the leader has more right or ability to set the course of action for the future than do followers. Leadership can only emerge if there is consensus on what comprises leadership, how it is measured, and who gets to lead. As an aspect of status, leadership is inherently a *social* phenomenon. While much of the scholarly focus concentrates on the great powers, it is probably more instructive to study leadership from the perspective of all actors in the system. Whether and why secondary states are willing to follow leaders is as important a question as why other states contend for leadership itself. In addition, questions of historical memory, "soft" or "smart" power, changing

[5] Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*, p. 4.

[6] Ibid, pp. 64, 67.

[7] Kent Calder, "China and Japan's Simmering Rivalry," *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2006); Joseph S. Nye, "Transformational Leadership and U.S. Grand Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 2006); Robert G. Sutter, "China's Rise: Implications for U.S. Leadership in Asia," *Policy Studies*, no. 21 (Washington, D.C.: East-West Center, 2006).

nationalisms, and regional integration are intimately linked to questions of status, and how publics and governments view their own and other countries' places in the region.

Status is, of course, much more than leadership. All states (and peoples) seek status in the form of social recognition from their peers. At its most obvious, status involves formal recognition by other states of one state's right to exist and be treated as an equal;[8] that is, diplomatic recognition as a sovereign nation-state. Yet status is more than that. What comprises status, how to get it, and how to measure it, must be worked out among states themselves. A clear status hierarchy that constitutes status fosters stability; ambiguity fosters instability.

This abstract detour helps focus this paper: How do states define status, and what status do they seek in East Asia? What status do they grant? Has the United States retained its leadership in East Asia? Do other countries contend for leadership? What status do South and North Korea seek, and can all states get and give status in a stable, enduring manner?

South Korea and Status

South Korea is an interesting case study for exploring the role status plays in international relations. Although it has no dreams of becoming a hegemon itself, or even of becoming a regional leader, it does seek a positive role for itself both regionally and globally. Furthermore, the status hierarchy in Northeast Asia has not yet been sorted out, and it is not clear what status South Korea is willing to grant to other regional states.

Indeed, although both South Korean leaders and the public have been very aware that status is a central aspect of international relations, they have not yet decided on what status exactly South Korea should seek, nor how it should go about seeking it. A good time to mark the emergence of the issue of status in South Korean foreign policy is 1997. Before 1997, South Korea's place in the world and the status it sought was fairly clear. South Korea was a close follower of U.S. Cold War strategy, strongly anti-communist and, in particular, anti-North Korean, and was most notable for the astonishing economic success it had achieved over the previous generation. Most notably, South Korea's triumphant accession into the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) and the consolidation of its democracy in the mid-1990s, established South Korea as a potential middle power, deeply ensconced in the U.S. orbit.

But following the 1997 Asian financial crisis, it was not clear how South Korea should proceed. South Korea was now an advanced industrial country but one that clearly was not as advanced as it thought it was, and in need of

[8] Bridget Coggins, "States of Uncertainty: Secession, Recognition and Constitutive Sovereignty," (m.s., Dartmouth College, 2009).

more reform and restructuring of its economic and political systems. As North Korea suffered through a devastating drought and famine but still pursued antagonistic foreign policies, the consensus over how to deal with North Korea unraveled. Some wanted to continue the containment and balance of power strategy, while others advocated using economic interdependence and engagement to solve the North Korean problem. This shift in strategy was accompanied by a shift in South Korean public views towards the North, from viewing them as a threat to viewing them as a "poor cousin."[9] In regional relations, the US-ROK alliance came under pressure as some domestic interest groups sought a more equal relationship.[10] Relations with Japan and China became more important as these countries rapidly changed. In this new world, it is not clear what South Korea's role was, nor what status South Korea had or should seek. As of 2010, South Korean society is in flux, and there is intense debate about Korea's values, identity, and place in the world.

Current president Lee Myung-bak has been particularly concerned about South Korea's international image. South Korea's 2009 National Security Strategy notes that, although hard power remains vital to a nation's influence, "the multifaceted and complex nature of contemporary international order. . .[means that] international leadership is assuming greater importance. A nation's image and reputation are also important..."[11] In the past few years, the ROK government has been devoting a healthy amount of resources to burnishing Korea's national brand. For example, the ROK Government created a "Presidential commission on national brand," in January 2009; the country pays close attention to its ranking on the national brand index; and numerous government agencies are involved in promoting Korean public diplomacy and a positive image of Korea abroad.[12] This has involved promoting Korean cuisine as an international phenomenon, hiring famous actresses to be cultural diplomats for Korea, and seeking to capitalize on the wave of interest in Korean movies and television series ("hallyu") that has swept through East Asia and even the rest of the globe. In fact, the Presidential commission pledged to raise Korea's brand to fifteenth in the world within five years.[13]

South Korea's headlong rush for status appears unlikely to be successful because the country itself is not sure about what it stands for and what type of status it seeks. There is nothing wrong with engaging in public diplomacy

[9] Victor Cha, "South Korea: Anchored or Adrift?" *Strategic Asia 2003-2004* (Seattle, WA: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2004).

[10] Katharine H.S. Moon, "Resurrecting Prostitutes and Overturning Treaties: Gender Politics in the "Anti-American" Movement in South Korea," *Journal of Asian Studies* 66 (2007), pp. 129-157.

[11] Republic of Korea, *Global Korea: The National Security Strategy of the Republic of Korea* (Seoul: Cheong Wa Dae, 2009), p. 10.

[12] Jon Huer, "De-branding Revolution for Korea," *Korea Times*, (August 12, 2009) accessed at http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2009/09/260_50028.html.

[13] N.a., "National brand committee plans to uplift to the 15th ranking within 5 years," Korean.net accessed at http://eng.korean.net/wcms/view.jsp?bID=27273&pageID=01085266.

and seeking to capitalize on current trends in popular culture to the advantage of a nation's image. However, the relationship is not at all clear between popular culture and the deeper views that others hold of a nation, or that popular culture can reflect deeper values and goals of a society in a meaningful manner. The current interest in a national brand is more a marketing exercise than a deeply thoughtful consideration and consensus about its identity, values, and goals.

Regarding more specific attempts by the Korean government to forge its foreign policies, the recent South Korean national security strategy listed three core values as "Peace and Justice, Common Prosperity, and Globalism." [14] Also, since "more democratic international relations" (a la Chinese foreign policy) and "global democracy promotion" (a la the Bush administration) have controversial and contested meanings, perhaps democracy was purposely not mentioned among the worldview principles. The NSS does, however, make clear that Seoul sees democracy as something to be advanced in societies around the world and that democratic politics is a key value that South Korea shares with its partners.[15] Beyond this boilerplate, deeper clues are to be found: "Cooperation among Korea, the United States, and Japan should be rooted in a partnership based on free democracy and free market values, while augmenting interdependencies in the economic, trade and socio-cultural areas, not to mention political and security spheres."[16]

Thus, the larger branding exercise in Korea is only loosely linked to more specific foreign policy values and goals. Yet clearly, a key priority for the ROK is to maintain and strengthen a close U.S.-ROK alliance. The United States remains a global hegemon, and the most important nation to have interests in Northeast Asia. To that end, the ROK has recently joined in the proliferation security initiative (PSI) that is intended to curb North Korean illegal export of nuclear materials to other countries, and President Lee pledged to expand Korea's Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Afghanistan to support the U.S. effort there as well. After a decade in which South Korea's engagement strategy toward North Korea was at odds with a more coercive U.S. approach, current South Korean president Lee Myung-bak has taken a harder line towards the North. South Korea has been more focused on engaging conditionally, upon reciprocity from the North, and, for the time being, the U.S. and ROK's policies and interests are aligned.

Thus, in the short term, it appears that the Obama and Lee governments hold quite similar views toward the peninsula. There is widespread agreement among U.S. analysts that the current policies are appropriate, and

[14] Republic of Korea, *Global Korea*, p. 13.

[15] "The international community is called upon to forge and disseminate a consensus on freedom and democracy, humanitarian values, and market economy, Republic of Korea, *Global Korea* p. 8.

[16] Republic of Korea, *Global Korea* p. 25.

the United States should not be offering concessions to a North Korea that has obviously violated international norms. It should be cause for optimism that both the United States and ROK may be able to act in concert with each other and present a more consistent and unified approach toward North Korea. Previously, it was possible for North Korea to have one relationship with one country and a different relationship with the other country. To the extent that policies and overall strategies are consistent, this is a positive step.

However, South Korean society remains deeply divided, and the vibrancy of South Korean democracy was dramatically revealed in 2008, when South Korean people elected a conservative president in Lee Myung-bak but then engaged in massive protests against the importation of U.S. beef products. While South Koreans overwhelmingly hold positive views of the United States and desire a strong relationship with America, many also increasingly want a more equal relationship with the United States, and they want their own president to acknowledge and reflect their concerns.[17] It is not clear today how South Korea will actually arrive at a stable consensus about its position in the world and relations with other major powers.

To that end, the desire for close U.S.-ROK relations will not limit South Korea's foreign policy. The Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (FTA) is clearly most important in the mind of South Korean president Lee Myung-bak. There was intense speculation in the South Korean press before President Obama's November 2009 visit about whether or not the U.S. president would commit to a timetable for passing the FTA through the U.S. Congress. Although Obama did positively mention the FTA, he also refused to commit himself to a timetable. The South Koreans, for their part, have negotiated an FTA with the European Union and are in the process of negotiating an FTA with India. While it is clear that South Korea would prefer to sign an FTA with the United States first, it is also just as clear that they are moving on within their trade agenda with the region and the world.[18]

In sum, South Korea has not yet arrived at a stable consensus concerning its own national identity, nor the place it seeks in the region. This is partially a result of a changing domestic society, and partially because other states in the region are also changing rapidly. The current South Korean government clearly values its relationship with the United States and for the time being the aims of both countries are roughly in concert. Yet, South Korea is seeking to define for itself a role and status in the region and around the globe. In this way, exploring the status Korea gives to other states is as important as exploring the status Korea seeks, and with that we turn to how South Korea views its relations with both China and Japan.

[17] Gi-wook Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea: Genealogy, Politics, and Legacy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).

[18] Remarks by Tami Overby, "the KORUS FTA," at the symposium "Ideas 2009," Korean Studies Institute, University of Southern California, November 18, 2009.

Regional Leadership: Japan and China

Just as important as the status that South Korea seeks, is the status that South Korea is willing to give to other regional actors. The region itself is in flux, and there is no common agreement on what constitutes status and what defines the hierarchy. Perhaps the most obvious aspect to status is leadership, and a question for the future will be whether South Korea views the United States, China, or Japan as the regional leader. Indeed, part of the uncertainty in East Asia is that states not only are unsure of their own beliefs about others, but they do not yet know for themselves what they want. The United States remains the global hegemon, and claims to be a Pacific nation.[19] Yet its attention over the years has been intermittent, and while both China and Japan have practiced "relatively low-key forms of regional leadership and have revealed certain aspirations to become stronger regional leaders," both countries have also avoided directly challenging the status quo.[20]

Japan and China pose different challenges to crafting an enduring status hierarchy in Northeast Asia. For Japan, the question over the past 150 years has been whether it would accept its historical Asian identity, or whether it was "really" only partially Asia, and partially an "honorary" Western nation.[21] The pendulum of Japanese public and official opinion continues to swing, with new Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama reflecting the latest change. As for China, the question is whether an authoritarian and rapidly growing great power can craft a place for itself in the region, and the world, that fits comfortably within the current Western, Westphalian norms of international relations. From the perspective of status, the most difficult element to stability in China's place in the world may not be its military or economic growth, but instead could be the problem of its values and its non-democratic institutions.

Japan

Japan is perhaps the most perplexing state in the region, especially regarding its relationship with Korea. Korea and Japan are both advanced economic countries with stable democracies, and both have decades-long alliance relationships with the United States. Furthermore, both share deep

[19] David A. Lake, "American Hegemony and the Future of East-West Relations," *International Studies Perspectives* 7 (2006), pp. 23-30, p. 28; Michael Mastanduno, "Incomplete Hegemony: The United States and Security Order in Asia," in *Asian Security Order: instrumental and normative features,* edited by Muthiah Alagappa, (Stanford, CA: Stanford 2003); and G. John Ikenberry, "American hegemony and East Asian order," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, (September 2004), pp. 353–367.

[20] Christopher Dent, "Introduction," in Dent, ed., *China, Japan and Regional Leadership in East Asia* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2008), p. 10.

[21] Shogo Suzuki, *Civilization and Empire: China and Japan's Encounter with European International Society* (London: Routledge, 2009).

cultural traits and history. It would appear that these two countries would be the obvious starting place for an alliance based on common interests and common values.

Yet the Japanese, at times, have been bafflingly tone-deaf towards South Korea. Perhaps the best example was a Japanese proposal put forth in 2006, calling for the United States, Japan, India, and Australia to conduct regular dialogue among the major Asian democracies. When Foreign Minister Taro Aso announced the plan, he said, "I firmly believe that Japan must make its ties even firmer with friendly nations that share the common views and interests, namely of course the United States as well as Australia, India, and the member states of the EU and NATO. . ."[22] Pointedly missing was any mention of South Korea, a vibrant democracy with a population four times that of Australia and less than fifty miles from Japan. In response, of course, Korea firmly opposed Japan's desire for a permanent seat on the UN Security council. [23] In a different matter, the Japanese prioritization of resolving the question of their two-dozen abducted citizens by North Korea as more important than solving the nuclear crisis did not sit well with South Koreans, especially in light of the Japanese government's refusal to acknowledge the 200,000 or so "Comfort women" forced into sexual slavery during World War II.[24]

Indeed, both official and public South Korean opinion remains wary about Japanese intentions, and both China and South Korea have reacted negatively to Japan's nationalist and territorial claims over the past few years. National reaction was similar in both countries to Japan's claims about comfort women, nationalist textbooks, the Dokdo/Takeshima and Diaoyutai/Senkaku islands, and Japanese politicians visiting Yasukuni Shrine. To cite one of many examples, a South Korean poll taken in 2007 revealed that while 63.9 percent of South Koreans believed North Korean nuclear weapons posed a potential threat, over 90 percent believed that a nuclear-armed Japan would pose a threat.[25] Recurrent Japanese claims to the Dokdo islets in 2008 prompted the Lee Myung-bak government—which had originally promised a policy toward Japan of "not dwelling on the past but proceeding forward"—to consider reducing or cutting military exchanges with Japan.[26]

[22] Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Speech by Mr. Taro Aso, Minister for Foreign Affairs on the Occasion of the Japan Institute of International Affairs Seminar "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity: Japan's Expanding Diplomatic Horizons" (November 30, 2006) accessed at http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/fm/aso/speech0611.html.

[23] Joel Brinkley, "As Nations Lobby to Join Security Council, U.S. Resists Giving Them Veto Power," *New York Times* (May 15, 2005) accessed at http://www.spinwatch.org.uk/latest-news-mainmenu-10/172-united-nations/1207-as-nations-lobby-to-join-security-council-us-resists-giving-them-veto-power.

[24] Richard Samuels, "The Politics of the Japanese Abductee Issue," at the symposium "Ideas 2009," Korean Studies Institute, University of Southern California, (November 18, 2009).

[25] Andrei Lankov, "Staying Alive; Why North Korea Will Not Change," *Foreign Affairs* (Mar/Apr 2008), p. 11.

[26] Jung 2008b.

Did these concerns in both countries have any effect on their relationship? Or is this all peripheral to the real relationship? The problem with calling Dokdo and other "historical" disputes peripheral is that such an explanation cannot account for why the two countries have been unable to formally delineate their border forty years after normalizing their relations. The recurring problems with disputed territories, or competing claims over history, such as the "Comfort women," are more than simply isolated squabbles in the larger context of the relationship. Indeed, they appear to be central and related to the status both sides seek and give; and the recurrence on both sides speaks to their importance in both Korea and Japan.

The most direct evidence illustrating that status and legitimacy have a tangible effect on countries' behavior lies in both Japan and Korea's inability to formally delineate their maritime border. There is no treaty in place that formalizes ownership of the Dokdo islands. If this were inconsequential, it would have been done already. That is, status considerations have a direct effect on their foreign policies. As Tomoharu Nishino writes, "The issue may be symbolic but the costs are real. Whether it be the (stalled) FTA negotiations, or the closer ties between Busan and western Japan, Korea has a lot to gain from closer economic ties with Japan. . .and it would provide a much needed jolt to the slow moving Japanese economy. Certainly the costs of this dispute to Japan is not trivial. . . ."[27] Although South Korea normalized relations with Japan in 1965, it restricted the import of most Japanese goods until 1998—such as cars, electronics, and cultural goods, including anime and pop music. The two sides squabbled over whose name would go first when they co-hosted the 2002 World Cup soccer tournament. The problem manifests itself in future relations, as well. Collapse of North Korea or unification of the peninsula will require extensive coordination among all the countries in the region; and a festering dispute that limits Japanese and Korean cooperation and coordination.

In fact, the continued salience of historical disputes makes more sense if we look beyond mere material or institutional factors, and ask whether disputes over territory and history could affect the status and legitimacy of both countries. Continued claims on territory strike at the heart of a country's national narrative about itself and its place in the world; to claim territory inherently implies that the legitimacy of the other side is in question, and to continue denials about historical actions demeans the status of the other side. International relations are stable when states receive believable assurances from potential adversaries that they wish to craft peaceful relations.

There has been extensive research on the problem of crafting credible commitments in international relations, but the focus here is on one key task—setting mutually recognized borders. Formal delineation is important because

[27] Tomoharu Nishino, (accessed February 21, 2009) at http://www.rjkoehler.com/2008/07/29/intelligent-commentary-on-dokdo/.

clear boundaries between states are a good indicator of states' status quo interests toward each other. In this way, "political divides [are] the result of state building," and they are a useful indicator of a state's acceptance of the status quo.[28] Beth Simmons notes that, "when they are mutually accepted, [borders] drastically reduce external challenges to a government's legitimate authority...and clarify and stabilize transnational actors' property rights."[29] Yet borders are not mere functionally rationalist institutions designed to communicate preferences—they also inherently assume the existence of two parties that recognize each other's legitimate right to existence. Demarcation of a boundary is thus a costly signal that a state intends stable relations with a neighbor.

The Dokdo islands are militarily and economically meaningless. Viewed this way, Korea's sensitivity toward Japan may be as much about legitimate recognition and relative status as it is about potential Japanese military actions. How these and other issues will be resolved is unclear. However, to call these "historical" disputes is a mischaracterization, and obfuscates more than it illuminates. While some dispute is actually about historical facts, much revolved around the meaning of those facts, and *whose side of the story gets told*. In fact, if disputes were actually about economic resources or military intentions, they would be easier to resolve: status and legitimacy are not divisible goods, like wealth or power.

Historical disputes have arisen from the changing, and unresolved, status identities and lack of legitimacy in the political relationships in the region, and the manner in which national narratives have dealt with history. The debate is over how history is remembered, and characterized in the present, and is merely the most obvious indicator for how Japan and its neighbors view each other, themselves, and their roles in the region. Indeed, the issues would be much easier to solve if they really were about history: just find better historians and archeologists. But while history is the proximate cause, it is underlying mistrust between the neighboring countries about not only the intentions of other states, but also their underlying identities, that is the real cause of friction.

The current situation holds some promise, however. South Korean President Lee Myung-bak was the first head of state to call Hatoyama to congratulate him on his party's victory in the August 30, 2009 Lower House election. With the inauguration of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ)-led Hatoyama administration, Japan-South Korea relations can be summarized as

[28] Michiel Baud and Willem Van Schendel, "Toward a Comparative History of Borderlands," *Journal of World History* 8, No. 2 (1997), pp. 211-242, p. 214; Bruce Batten, *To the Ends of Japan: Premodern Frontiers, Boundaries, and Interactions* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003); Adelman and Aron Stephan, "From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in between in North American History," *The American Historical Review* 104 No. 3 (1999.), pp. 814-841.

[29] Simmons 2005, p. 827.

guardedly optimistic, as both sides look to bring bilateral ties to another level of cooperation. Hatoyama is clearly a leader who views Japan as Asian, and the pendulum is swinging in that direction for the time being.

If there is one sure sign that this power shift in Japanese politics might bring a positive change in the always bumpy Japan-South Korea relations, it will be over the issue of the Yasukuni Shrine. It was Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada himself in 2005, then President of DPJ, who attacked former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's controversial visits to the Yasukuni Shrine for damaging Japan's ties with Asia. Okada claimed that the Japanese Prime Minister's visit was likely to sabotage Tokyo's attempt to work closely with its neighbors over North Korean issues, and to reduce Japan's chances of becoming a permanent member in the UN Security Council. Consistent with the DPJ's foreign policy platform that places a greater emphasis on the importance of Japan's friendly ties with Asia, Prime Minister Hatoyama has declared that he will not visit Yasukuni Shrine, and has asked his Cabinet ministers to do the same. Hatoyama is an advocate for the construction of a non-religious war memorial to replace the Yasukuni Shrine as the site for official visits by Japanese politicians.

However, the Hatoyama administration's emphasis on friendship with Asian neighbors does not appear to translate into actual policy changes over vexatious territorial disputes with any of its neighbors. Indeed, strong public opinion is constantly expressed about various controversial historical issues. This summer, a total of 1,886 South Korean citizens filed a suit against Japan's conservative daily *Yomiuri Shimbun* for what they claimed to be misrepresentations about the Dokdo/Takeshima islets issue and requested to that the *Yomiuri* pay a fine of 4.11 million won. The *Yomiuri* had reported on July 15, 2008, that President Lee did not strongly oppose then Prime Minister Fukuda's decision that Japan's manuals for middle school teachers would refer to the Dokdo/Takeshima islets as Japanese territory. Another example came later in August 2009, when South Korean activists—seemingly unaware that such displays often provoke more amusement than outrage in the United States—ran full-pages ads in major U.S. newspapers, like the *Washington Post, the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal,* making the case that the waters between South Korea and Japan are called "East Sea," not "Sea of Japan."

On Japan's part, the defense white paper released in July 2009 designated the Dokdo/Takeshima islets as part of Japanese territory, which led South Korea's Defense Ministry to issue a strong protest. In the meantime, more local boards of education in Japan, such as in Aichi Prefecture, Yokohama and Suginami-ku, decided to adopt the controversial history textbook authored by nationalistic scholars known as the "Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform." To gauge how the Hatoyama administration is going to respond to these issues, Foreign Minister Okada's remarks on the Dokdo/Takeshima islets issue provides a hint that Japan's actual policy on the islets

will remain much the same, despite DPJ's emphasis on facing up to the past. Okada, while acknowledging the importance of understanding each other's position, said that, "it should not be a big deal to state in textbooks that it is Japan's territory in view of the fact that the Japanese government upholds the view." Such territorial disputes are not unique to Japan-Korea relations, either. Prior to the election, the DPJ, then the main opposition party, promised in their party manifesto for the August 30 election that they would "tenaciously hold talks to achieve an early and peaceful solution to the issues of northern territories [its dispute with Russia] and Takeshima over which Japan has territorial sovereignty."

In sum, while Japan and Korea continue to move their relationship forward, it is also clear that South Korea is wary about Japanese aims and goals. South Korea certainly is wary about ceding too much momentum to Japanese foreign policy initiatives. In this situation, where two advanced industrialized democracies cannot agree on a border and cannot agree to treat each other as equals, it is not a surprise that Japan is not a realistic leader in East Asia.

China

The subject of status and leadership, however, arises more often in questions about the future role of China than it does with Japan. Five hundred years ago, China was an acknowledged hegemon, and enjoyed widespread legitimacy and unquestioned status as a political, economic, cultural, and diplomatic leader. Today, however, as China increasingly appears poised to return to its position as the most powerful country in East Asia, there is correspondingly increasing concern about whether or not China can live in a Westphalian world. That is, as China has grown increasingly powerful and self-confident, speculation about how it might act in the present has increased. Most notable are questions about whether China can adjust itself to the Western international norms and rules that have dominated the world for the past few centuries, and whether China will attempt to challenge the U.S.'s position as global hegemon.

To date, China has not provoked the same type of fear, wariness, and balancing behavior that many scholars predicted.[30] However, this only means that China is not yet causing anxiety among the peoples of East Asia. The real question is whether the East Asian states can develop a clear, *shared*, set of beliefs and perceptions about each others' intentions, and their relative positions in the regional and global order. That is, although it is natural for contemporary scholars to focus on measurable yardsticks such as economic growth or military size, the more important questions have to do with the intentions and beliefs concerning each other.

[30] David C. Kang, *China Rising: Peace, Power, and Order in East Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

This is most clearly reflected in the fact that nobody today considers China the civilizational center of the world. Although China may have been the source of a long-lasting civilization in East Asia in the distant past, today it has no more civilizational influence than does modern Greece. That is, ancient Greek ideas and innovations had a central influence on Western civilization, and Greek concepts continue to be interwoven and influential today—whether they be democracy, algebra, or logic. Yet contemporary Greece has no discernible "soft power," and little influence on the thinking about modern life. In the same way, few contemporary East Asian states or peoples look to China for cultural innovation or for practical solutions to present problems, despite the historically deep cultural impact of China on East Asia.

Thus, while China has grown much larger in the past 30 years, it is nowhere close to being a hegemon or even a regional leader. The key criterion for leadership is not relative size, but the explicit acceptance by other states of the legitimacy of a powerful state's right to lead. While China may soon become the largest economic or military power in East Asia, it has virtually no cultural or political legitimacy as a leading state. By this criterion, then, China has a long way to go before displacing the United States. In fact, while many are wary about Chinese leadership, others want more Chinese leadership, not less. Scott Snyder and Brad Glosserman, for example, criticize China for not taking more responsibility in world affairs—from issues on the Korean peninsula to Iran to regional trade and climate change.[31]

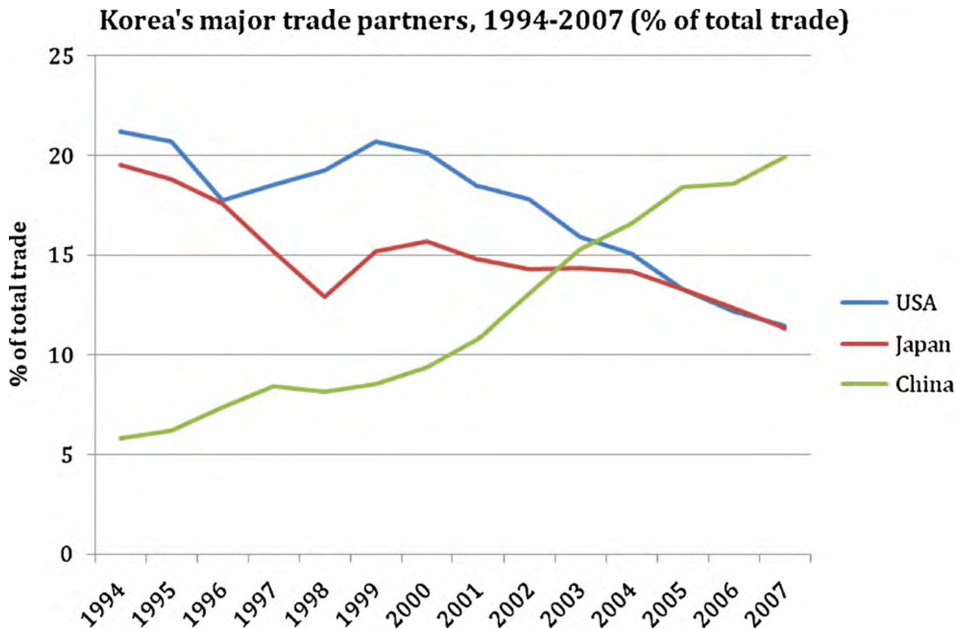
The question remains: can China—under a Western, U.S.-dominated set of international rules—behave with restraint? Can China ever become a place of cultural and political innovation, where other states admiringly look to it as model, guide, and inspiration? There is grudging respect for Chinese economic accomplishments, to be sure, but there is just as much wariness about Chinese internal cultural beliefs: will it become nationalistic, brittle, insecure, and defensive? Or will it have the self-confidence of centuries ago? The Chinese people—as evidenced by the hysterical response to protests about Tibet in the spring and summer of 2008—show that they are far from comfortable with their own position in the world.

However, the ambiguous and changing nature of relations in Northeast Asia demonstrates that even a supposed conservative like South Korean president Lee realizes that dealing with China is now as important as dealing with the United States and Japan. For example, in 2008 President Lee said that, "It is not desirable that Korea sides with a particular country. To maintain peace in the region, a balanced diplomacy is needed....Korea-U.S. relations and Korea-China relations are not contrary to each other but mutually complementary."[32] These ideas are notably similar to the concept floated

[31] Scott Snyder and Brad Glosserman, "Not too fast with China," *Global Security*, (November 13, 2009) accessed at http://sitrep.globalsecurity.org/articles/091113506-not-too-fast-with-china.htm.

[32] *Donga Ilbo* on May 30, 2008.

Figure 1. ROK major trade partners, 1994-2007 (% of total trade)



Source: data extracted on 25 Sep 2009 21:52 UTC (GMT) from OECD.Stat.

by Roh Moo-hyun, who in 2005 called on South Korea to be a "balancer" in the region. In a process that Jae-ho Chung calls "the choice of not making choices," South Korea and China have increasingly close economic and cultural ties and share a similar wariness about Japanese historical claims, but South Korea has not allied with China, nor does it wish to abandon its close ties with the United States.[33] Indeed, as Scott Snyder points out, "China-centered economic interdependence is unlikely to provide the political rationale for a marginalized U.S. role; rather, it may motivate U.S. allies to more deeply and broadly enmesh the United States in Northeast Asian affairs."[34]

This ambiguity in political relations contrasts with growing China-Korean economic and cultural relations. China replaced the United States as South Korea's largest trading partner in 2005, and the trend appears to be continuing (Figure 1). This growing stability in, and importance of, Sino-Korean relations was reflected in the successful Lee-Hu summit in May 2008, where China and South Korea agreed to upgrade their relationship to the level

[33] Jae-ho Chung, *Between Ally and Partner: Korea-China Relations and the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

[34] Scott Snyder, *China's Rise and the Two Koreas: Politics, Economics, Security* (Boulder, CO: Lynne-Reiner Press, 2009), p. 214.

of a "strategic cooperative partnership," the highest level of diplomatic relations that China maintains with other countries.

Furthermore, the South Korean populace evinces mixed responses to China's rise. The fact is that relations between all the countries in the region are in flux, and no stable views have emerged regarding the relative relationships between various countries. For example, the percentage of South Korean public opinion that positively evaluated China's role was similar to that of the United States until 2008. In December 2007, 49.8 percent evaluated the U.S. role as positive, versus 43 percent evaluating the Chinese role as positive. Yet by February 2009, those numbers had diverged, with 57.4 finding the U.S. role positive, but only 38.3 percent finding the Chinese role positive. [35]

Yet South Korean actions are perhaps more illuminating than their polling preferences. South Koreans flock to the United States to study, but they are increasingly also going to China. According to data from the Institute of International Education, 33 percent of all foreign students in China came from South Korea, or almost 65,000 South Korean students. This number is similar to the 70,000 South Korean students currently studying in the United States. [36] These numbers are almost equal, and while the United States will continue to remain an important destination for South Korean students, China is clearly also becoming an important destination. In 2008, over 800,000 South Korean tourists visited the United States; in 2006, 3.9 million South Koreans visited China.[37] Obviously, China is closer, cheaper, and culturally more similar to Korea than is the United States. Regardless of the cause, however, the fact remains that four times as many Koreans visit China than visit the United States.

In sum, the status hierarchy in East Asia is in flux, and no state has clearly emerged as a potential replacement for U.S. leadership. At least in Korean eyes, Japan appears unlikely to be a realistic contender, and Korea-Japan relations need to become more stable with views of each other before any realistic region-wide role can emerge. China has more potential to reclaim its position as regional leader, but it is severely restricted by the authoritarian political system of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the uncertain nature of its nationalism. For the time being, the United States remains the only country with widespread legitimacy and status. However, this should not keep Americans from recognizing and adjusting to the many profound changes in the region.

[35] East Asia Institute, "Rising North Korean Threat Perception and Support for Korea-U.S. Alliance," (April 10, 2009) accessed at http://www.eai.or.kr/type/panelView.asp?bytag=p&catcode=&code=eng_report&idx=223&page=1.

[36] "China 2008," Institute of International Education, accessed at http://www.atlas.iienetwork.org/?p=53467, and Institute for International Education, "Open Doors Factsheet 2008," accessed at http://opendoors.iienetwork.org/page/131583/.

[37] Data from the China National Tourism Office, accessed at http://www.cnto.org/chinastats.asp#Stats; U.S. Office of Travel and Tourism Industries, accessed at http://tinet.ita.doc.gov/outreachpages/inbound.general_information.inbound_overview.html.

North Korea and Status

The search for status is central to North Korea's foreign policy. The U.S. reluctance to grant North Korea status similar to other states is evident across administrations and the political spectrum. Recent informal examples include Hillary Clinton's verbal sparring with North Korea, complaining that North Koreans act "like small children and unruly teenagers and people who are demanding attention."[38] Previously, former U.S. Defense Secretary Rumsfeld called the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) leaders "idiotic," while then-president George Bush was quoted as saying, "I loathe Kim Jong-Il—I've got a visceral reaction to this guy..."[39] Put that way, it is not at all clear that the United States really does want to live with North Korea. Our hesitance and skepticism about North Korea is evident across administrations; and thus renders any more specific policy agenda quite difficult. As Victor Cha has written, "North Korea doesn't just want the bomb. It wants to be accorded the status and prestige of a nuclear power."[40]

More concretely, the United States both implicitly and explicitly realizes that formal recognition and diplomatic status for North Korea as a sovereign nation-state deserving to be treated equally in the international community is a tremendous honor for North Korea, and withholding of this is also a strategic U.S. tool. While normal relations hardly stop nations from going to war if they choose, it does confer legitimacy, prestige, and status. The United States is clearly reluctant to confer such status on North Korea as long as it so willingly violates international norms in so many different areas. As President Obama said in August 2009, "We just want to make sure the government of North Korea is operating within the basic rules of the international community."[41]

The North Korean desire for this status as a nation-state runs deep. There is a famous museum in Pyongyang that houses only gifts from foreign dignitaries attesting to North Korean "greatness." Although this normally provokes snickers outside of North Korea, it reveals a deep-seated insecurity

[38] Quoted in Ryan Witt, "Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and North Korea have a verbal brawl," (July 24, 2009) accessed at http://www.examiner.com/x-5738-St-Louis-Political-Buzz-Examiner~y2009m7d24-Secretary-of-State-Hillary-Clinton-and-North-Korea-have-a-verbal-brawl.

[39] U.S. Department of Defense, "DoD News Briefing - Secretary Rumsfeld and Gen. Myers," December 23, 2002 accesed at http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=2960; Bill Powell, "Nuclear Blackmail: North Korea is no Iraq. There's no military option. So how do you get a defiant Kim Jong Il to give up his nukes?" *Fortune*, (January 20, 2003) accessed at http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune_archive/2003/01/20/335652/index.htm.

[40] Victor Cha, "Up Close and Personal, Here's what I really learned," *Washington Post* (June 14, 2009) accessed at http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/06/12/AR2009061202685.html.

[41] David Sanger, "Coming to Terms With Containing North Korea," *New York Times*, (August 8, 2009) accessed at http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/09/weekinreview/09sanger.html.

and desire on the part of the North Korean leadership for recognition. Similarly, Barbara Demwick of the Los Angeles Times reported that

> North Koreans are obsessed with the United States. They hold the U.S. responsible for the division of the Korean peninsula and seem to believe that U.S. foreign policy since the mid-twentieth century has revolved around the single-minded goal of screwing them over. *The cruelest thing you can do is tell a North Korean that many Americans couldn't locate North Korea on a map.*[42]

The most recent example of North Korea's intense desire for "normal" status came from the arrest of two U.S. journalists who had crossed the border from China into North Korea. It appears that North Korea's main purpose in arresting, sentencing, and then releasing the journalists to a major U.S. political figure was to be treated as a sovereign nation with its own laws and territory. North Korea's actions from the beginning of this incident displayed a heightened desire for recognition of its status as a nation-state. Thus, arresting the two journalists for "illegal entry" was a statement that its borders are sovereign and must be respected; putting them through the judicial process (however maligned) was a performance that emphasized that North Korea also has laws and processes.

Both the United States and North Korea kept the issue of the two journalists quite separate from their other diplomatic and political problems; and Clinton's visit was aimed solely at getting the two journalists released. North Korea charged the journalists with "illegal entry," and not with espionage. Nor did it politicize the arrest of the American journalists in a way linking them to the nuclear crisis. For its part, the United States did not attempt to link the two issues. Perhaps most importantly, releasing the two journalists to a major political figure after the process had run its course was a way of gaining the status Kim Jong-Il so clearly craves.

Indeed, much of the criticism that came from the U.S. side focused on the dubious wisdom of sending a former president to North Korea, despite the fact that the trip was explicitly a private, non-governmental affair. The implication is clear: North Korea does not deserve a visit from a man of such stature. As former vice president Dick Cheney commented, "I think when a former president of the United States goes and meets with the leader and so forth, that we're rewarding their bad behavior, and I think it's a mistake."[43]

Status, as it is used here, does not mean diplomatic niceties of being polite and providing "face" for the North. That is an element of status, to be sure. But the point is more fundamental—North Korean behavior exhibits a clear recognition that the DPRK does not have the formal status as a sovereign

[42] Barbara Demick, "Barbara Demick on Life in North Korea," *The New Yorker*, (October 26, 2009) accessed at http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2009/10/barbara-demick-conversation-north-korea.html.

[43] Hwang Doo-hyong, "Cheney depicts Clinton's North Korea trip as mistake," *Yonhap*, (August 3, 2009) accessed at http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/national/2009/08/31/26/0301000000AEN20090831000200315F.HTML.

nation-state equal to other nation-states in the modern world. Furthermore, the behavior of the United States and other regional states reveals that they, too, implicitly recognize that granting North Korea status as a sovereign nation-state is a tremendous honor, one that can be awarded to the North only after it modifies its ways. There appears to be little room for compromise on this issue, on either side. Would it be possible for the United States and other countries to live with a North Korea that somehow abandons its nuclear programs but remains a totalitarian, closed, militaristic, and repressive regime? Although there is no obvious answer, such a question surely does pose a challenge for other states as they decide how to deal with the reclusive leadership in Pyongyang.

Conclusion

The challenges of cooperation on the Korean peninsula are much greater than merely the coordination of North Korea policy. The United States, China, and Japan—not to mention Russia—have a number of concerns that have a direct impact on the peninsula. Coordination of increasingly integrated and complex military and economic relations, environmental concerns, and overall strategic and security institution building are tasks that as yet have been much discussed but little implemented. The future will see only greater pressure for coordination, with corresponding greater risks if steps are not taken.

The message should not be complacency, but rather caution. The United States retains considerable legitimacy in the region, and the rules of the game are accepted by everyone, including China. However, the region is still experiencing change, and the U.S. actions, policies, and strategies can play an important role in helping the region evolve in a direction of greater stability and legitimacy. The recent sinking of South Korean warship, Cheonan, demonstrates how tricky this process can be. The United States and South Korea attempted to pressure China to support measures to punish North Korea by framing China's involvement as either following global norms and U.S. leadership or Chinese irresponsible national particularism. Unfortunately, the Chinese viewed the situation differently, emphasizing the endemic maritime skirmishes between the South and North in the West Sea. South Korea found that even ASEAN states were not willing to involve themselves with what they viewed as an inter-Korean dispute. The different views and policies revealed the differing status claims have not yet been sorted out with any precision.

In sum, the chief concerns may not involve deepening economic integration or crafting a stable balance of power, as important as those may be. Rather, sorting out and agreeing on a role and status for each state may be just as important. Whether this is possible remains to be seen. Despite many successes and an optimistic outlook on the future, the South Korean leadership and public demonstrate a deep insecurity and ambiguity about North Korea's role and place in the world, and of those countries in its neighborhood.