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South Korea's National Identity Sensitivity: Evolution, Manifestations, Prospects

by Gilbert Rozman

National identity in South Korea is steeped in historical regret laced with wishful pursuit of idealistic absolution. Intemperate bouts of seeking immediate satisfaction draw support from the right or the left, leaders above or the public below. This is a situation in clear contrast to the postwar pattern in Japan of a persistent buildup by forces of the far right to shift the national identity equilibrium, and in China of two sustained drumbeats orchestrated by the left from the top down. In those two states the objective has been to restore a full measure of pride after a historical interlude regarded as abnormal by political elites. In contrast, South Koreans seek to discover a suitable source of pride in a history that provides few heroes amid continuing confusion over what might be considered normal. Three lengthy experiences of kowtowing *sadae*,* the two shocks of decapitation by the Japanese and dismemberment at the hands of the Soviet Union and the United States, and repeated frustrations of overreaching and being taught the lessons of helplessness remain fixated in the national mentality. Pride in an exceptional record of postwar achievement is clouded by a dearth of self-confidence under the weight of such nationalistic emotions.

Over just 10 years observers have repeatedly been drawn to bursts of expression of national identity in South Korea. In 1997–98 the response to the Asian financial crisis puzzled many: a combination of resentment against the International Monetary Fund, sacrifice for the nation, and reaffirmed globalization. This was followed in 2000 when the inter-Korean summit stimulated a mix of new national pride, unexpected adulation of Kim Jong-il, and reconsideration of the importance of the United States with the potential to unleash long-suppressed resentment. In 2002, cohosting the World Cup brought nationalist intensity to a high pitch: the Red Devils' collective boosterism swept the nation along with pride in the soccer team's performance. By year end another target had emerged for nationalist emotions: anti-Americanism took center stage,¹ impacting the presidential election while accelerating a shift in political influence across generations. During the summer of 2004 passions turned to the Koguryo issue, seen as China's usurpation of Korea's history.² By the spring of 2005, as in 2001, the vil-

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lain was Japan, rekindling long-felt antagonism in a more comprehensive manner: casting doubt on the normalization of relations, challenging its international aspirations, and fixating on its territorial and military ambitions as latent threats.³ In 2007 it appeared that these bouts of nationalism had passed in sobering reflection on the stormy tenure of Roh Moo-hyun and unusual consensus behind the businesslike presidential candidacy of Lee Myung-bak.⁴ Yet, in the spring of 2008 an outcry against Lee's decision, useful to ratification of the bilateral free trade agreement, to resume U.S. beef imports demonstrated that even an obscure spark could reignite the nation's emotions. They had barely settled when other perceived shocks raised anxiety levels again and again. Instead of abating in 2008 under a president reluctant to stir up emotions, national identity themes are again in the forefront.

In 2008 the spotlight kept falling on the impact of national identity in South Korea. After the December 2007 election of staunch conservative Lee to replace unpopular Roh, a fervent progressive, Koreans awaited a far-reaching shift in domestic and foreign policy. Yet, in a deeply divided country one could not anticipate a smooth transition. In these circumstances, one symbol of national identity after another emerged as a bone of contention: dependency on the United States arose in relation to the decision to resume beef imports despite health fears; historical memories associated with Japan reappeared in response to its new guidelines for Dokdo/Takeshima coverage in school textbooks; sinocentrism figured into disputes over China's Olympic torch relay through Seoul and the booing of South Korean teams at the Olympics; following the shooting death of a South Korean tourist at the Mt. Kumgang resort, tensions grew over the North's refusal to investigate as the North proceeded to sever most ties with the South and reverse a decade of steps toward reunification; the world financial crisis beginning in fall 2008 reopened decade-old fears of vulnerability to globalization; and on October 30 an order was issued to the anger of progressives to delete or revise high school textbook passages seen by conservatives as undermining the legitimacy of the government. At stake was not only the outcome of a polarized political battle but also the reconstruction of a national identity that had never found broad consensus and lately appears increasingly in dispute.

Observers have been slow to awaken to the problematic nature of South Korean national identity. After all, there has long been awareness of the homogeneous nature of the population, its staunch nationalism on occasions such as the 1988 Seoul Olympics and 2002 World Cup, shared confidence in the country's "economic miracle," and joint antipathy to Japan's revisionist history. Before the 1990s few doubted the prevalence of anticommunism;

pride in premodern symbols such as King Sejong, the originator of the hangul script; determination to preserve an insular society; and gratitude to the United States as defining elements of a South Korean overall identity. Even as the democratic movement put progressives in ever-more-prominent roles, this was typically seen as part of a political struggle rather than of a more fundamental clash over national identity. Yet, as divisions have intensified over history, society, and foreign policy, it has become clear that Koreans remain deeply split over matters central to a basic understanding of what their nation represents and what implications should flow from that at home and abroad.⁵

The past two decades have exacerbated the divisions over national identity, but a changing regional and global environment in 2009 may offer some promise. A dual crisis in the world economy and in North-South relations may lead to reconnecting with Cold War challenges and recognizing more continuity in national identity. For this to happen, however, reasoning about national interests must overcome oversensitivity about identity at the same time as leadership forges a new synthesis with appeal across the spectrum. A solution cannot be found by pretending that national identity does not matter; a solution must rest on some kind of compromise highlighting elements of identity that serve urgent goals.

Evolution of Korean National Identity

The ideological paralysis over history bedevils efforts to bring clarity to national identity. Marxist-derived analysis similar to the historiography that prevailed in Japan or even China in the 1950s never lost its hold in progressive circles. The result is excessive negativity about the country's past, marked by a distorting focus on "revolutionaries" as heroic fighters against an oppressive environment. Those with three-dependency thinking (fixated on successive subservience to China, Japan, and the United States) are blinded to the positive forces in national history, as if there is room only for narratives about how Korean history was derailed. Sandwiched between China with its precocious premodern past and record of regional centrality and Japan with its late premodern dynamism and modern rise to regional ascendancy, Korea pales in comparisons that fail to appreciate its own relative strengths on an international comparative scale and its lack of reasons for guilt in external relations. This is especially true in the postwar period, about which there should be ample reason for pride as well as identification with the United States as the global leader whose inclusive values opened an opportunity for South Korea's economic miracle and democratization. Through revised comparative analysis, Koreans could take pride in how their country has repeatedly seized opportunities in confining circumstances.

Conservatives also have eschewed forthright comparisons in order to put positive spin on a history that they too find problematic. This includes mythologizing about the reputed founder, Tangun, of the Korean nation and exaggerating the distinctive character of its past without due acknowledgment of some of its shortcomings and incorporating forthrightly their own repudiation of much of history. Their anachronistic desire to cling to patriarchal values and Confucianism in the face of the customary pressures from modernization for more equality reflect defensiveness owing to their own dearth of confidence in integration with the outside, including acceptance of universal values. In Korean textbooks, media coverage of events, and government dealings with foreign states, excessive nationalism shadows the balanced narrative expected of a mature democracy. There is also a lack of independent sources of legitimacy—for elites of old, for the civil service, for liberal values, for trust in democratic institutions and the rule of law.⁶ Given unequivocal successes in borrowing, catching up, and contributing to the global order, Koreans can take due pride in their nation's achievements without having to gloss over its shortcomings and becoming mired in incessant fighting of domestic ideological wars.

Chinese Confucianism became the core of the traditional Korean worldview with many positive consequences for state building, family cohesion and mobility, and interest in learning.⁷ The fact that Confucianism was imported and also left a negative legacy that still requires some de-Confucianization should not detract from recognition of it as an inseparable part of history with lasting impact on national identity.⁸ Its stress on ritualism has parallels to constitutionalism in setting the standard for judging political leadership, even if applying that standard became mired in factionalism.⁹ Japanese modernization aided and inspired Korea's transformation as it prepared the way for Korea's so-called economic miracle. Humiliating memories and justifiable frustration with Japan's self-serving view of its role on the peninsula should not interfere with a balanced evaluation that recognizes the lingering effect of colonial rule on Korea's development and identity.¹⁰ Above all, U.S. protection of the South, assistance in development, and inspiration for democratic change deserve recognition as part of rightful pride in the postwar era, which provides a shared success story despite images of "dictatorial developmentalism" or "democracy in the grip of unceasing demonstrations."¹¹ Through an objective comparative perspective on the three stages of evolution to the end of the Cold War, Koreans could show pride in the state's extraordinary achievement without whitewashing stains in historical memory.

South Korea spent the entire twentieth century frustrated by its repeated inability to exercise sovereignty in the manner of other states. Nationalism emerged belatedly in the frustrating circumstances of Japanese colonization

and then cultural genocide.¹² It was rekindled by military dictators intent on channeling it into support for authoritarian rule, but it broke free in the 1980s in the midst of further frustration over delayed and then only incomplete democracy. At critical moments in the 1990s the amount of democracy was eclipsed in people's minds by the issue of the amount of sovereignty. The result was little common ground for syncretism owing to a record of identity obliteration: Japanese hostility to the Chinese-centered Choson order; postwar Korean repudiation of the colonial order; democratized Koreans' criticism of the dictatorial era; and, in post-Cold War years, conservatives and progressives taking turns at repudiating each other's rule. Such narrow negativity leaves little basis for developing a broad notion of national identity that could emerge, in stages, from Korea's past. Discontinuous history with virtually no positive models is a recipe for confusion, apparently leading some to grasp for utopian solutions.

A combination of four developments tested South Korean national identity anew. First, democratization in 1987 followed by national embrace of the Olympics of 1988 put the public in the forefront, and in the course of recurrent demonstrations and newfound civic organizations top-down management of nationalism no longer was possible. Second, the end of the Cold War in 1989 leading to normalization with Moscow and then Beijing as well as the isolation and greater sense of urgency in Pyongyang altered the prism for viewing the diplomatic and strategic environment critical to national identity. Third, a new view of the United States was gradually forming in the 1990s, driven by its unilateralism in the first nuclear crisis with North Korea and the Asian financial crisis, highlighting the South's lack of control over its own destiny. Finally, the impoverishment of the North as seen in its famine and the prospect of direct dealings with it, punctuated by the summit of 15 June 2000, offered promise, albeit mixed with great uncertainty, for the South to play a very active role not only on peninsular matters but also in rallying the powers in the region to address its most significant strategic challenge. After long periods of suppressed debates about national identity, these developments brought an outpouring of views, especially stimulating progressive voices to challenge earlier thinking.

Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun sought to transform Korean national identity. The Sunshine Policy was presented as consistent with alliance relations, international responsibilities, and improved ties to each of Seoul's neighbors. Yet, its implementation revealed a deeper purpose with radical implications. Offering bribes to Pyongyang with the expectation that they would be forthcoming at each stage of improved relations even if reciprocity was meager while empowering nongovernmental organizations with an idealistic worldview meant a distorted kind of Koreanization. Pyongyang could set the terms of the relationship, as South Koreans in their 30s incubated in the

democratization movement of the 1980s challenged some deep assumptions of postwar national identity. The result was further confusion about national identity with no prospect of resolving mounting contradictions.

All over the world national identities have been in flux since the abrupt changes from 1989 to 2001 in the global geopolitical and economic order but also in response to new flux in 2008–09. In the case of South Korea, we can identify many forces that accelerated change in identity more than elsewhere in the first transition and with potential to exert a strong influence in the second one. For those who argue that the greater the structural discontinuity, the more the flux in identity, the South stands as a candidate for a tectonic shift. It was at the front line of the Cold War that has ended, dramatically changing its diplomatic partners. Its economic system was abruptly transformed from a model of unparalleled success to a kind of albatross to be removed. Long-frozen prospects for reunification with the North reappeared suddenly on the political agenda. Finally, a nation accustomed to high levels of economic and cultural autarchy, protected by numerous barriers, precipitously faced a massive infusion of global and regional influences. Given such radical disruptions, we should not be surprised that South Korea is a world leader in speed of change in national identity and confusion over it.

Yet, amid much uncertainty, some realities do not seem to have changed much at all. As an ally of the United States and a democracy, the South could not shake the view that China and Russia retain an alien quality. In 1999–2007 the economy gained a reprieve, but again beginning in 2008 economic crisis put its prospects in doubt. Above all, North Korea repeatedly challenged the South's assumptions and in 2008–09 carried this to an extreme. Remnants of the old identity are resurfacing, even as progressives struggle to sustain their worldview. Rapid transformation in national identity also may occur in this second period of transition. This offers an opportunity as well as poses a danger of paralysis in trying times.

Manifestations of National Identity

Confusion over national identity allows political leaders to arouse emotions while reducing the possibility of centrist thinking gaining ground at the expense of ideological extremes. It leaves in doubt how consensus can be reached over policies aimed at forging a more just society. In these circumstances, foreign policy cannot easily be pursued on an even course. The result also is that history becomes a contested battlefield rather than a source of shared inspiration. Given the depth of contestation over South Korean national identity (including confusion over the place of North Ko-

rea), initiatives by one president or another or by a U.S. president arouse suspicion with little chance of building cohesion.

The upsurge in national identity consciousness gave national leaders new reason to play on public emotions in order to raise their popularity or realize their agenda. From Roh Tae-woo to Roh Moo-hyun, manipulation of public opinion intensified. Roh Tae-woo was most cautious. His *nordpolitik* toward Russia and China as the Cold War was ending removed anticommunism as a rallying cry. While Japan remained an easy target, such as when Kanemaru Shin went to Pyongyang bypassing Seoul in search of a breakthrough, it was not singled out. Also, in the midst of U.S. pressure to open the South's protected economy and with memories of Olympic resentment toward U.S. athletes, Roh Tae-woo hesitated to cater to the emboldened progressives. This was also the inclination of Kim Young-sam, but he proved to be more mercurial toward Japan, North Korea, and even the United States. Inconsistencies toward Japan especially marked this period as Kim Young-sam took populist measures, as in 1995 when the architectural symbol of colonial rule was razed. Kim Dae-jung adopted a different approach to arousing national identity. While agreeing with Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo to put the history issue aside and to undertake a mutual cultural opening and reassuring President Bill Clinton of his embrace of globalization after the financial crisis, Kim concentrated on the Sunshine Policy, thus transforming the image of North Korea into one of a partner able to embrace reunification even when its domestic policies, development of weapons of mass destruction, and belligerent rhetoric cast doubt on this decision. Finally, Roh Moo-hyun activated national identity emotions repeatedly, catering to anti-Americanism beginning with his election campaign in 2002, shifting in 2005 to the most vitriolic anti-Japanese rhetoric in decades, and manipulating views on North Korea for domestic and international objectives with insufficient regard for national security.

Complicating the quest for a balanced approach are contested, misleading images of the identities and foreign policy explanations of three states central to South Korean thinking about their own national identity: North Korea, Japan, and the United States. A candid assessment of North Korea as a totalitarian regime destructive of the national heritage can best underscore a sound understanding of the South's identity. This does not mean revival of the crude anticommunism steeped in demands for censorship or warnings of subversion of past years, nor is it incompatible with measured engagement of the North as a path to regional stability and possible reform there. Instead, it could bring a sober awakening conducive to bridging the ideological divide after the heady optimism in progressive circles in 1998–2007.¹³ The goal of such engagement is less reunification in the foreseeable future than adjustment in national identity. The six-party talks opened the door to

measured engagement, but Roh Moo-hyun sought ways to refocus on inter-Korean relations, culminating in the October 2007 Pyongyang summit that delinked large-scale economic projects from the denuclearization process and pointed to “three- or four-party talks” on establishing a peace regime. To the extent that progressives could create a sense of optimism about such projects and the path forward with the North, they could undercut, first, the anticommunist legacy of postwar identity and, second, the justifications for deference to the United States. In this way, the theme of Korean nationalism could be released from tight restraints. This approach only widened the gulf inside South Korea.

Mischaracterization of Japan also mars thinking about national identity. Not enough credit is given to its postwar transformation or its role as the demilitarized engine of the entire region’s rise. Recognition of reality in Japan does not require relaxation of criticisms of revisionist tendencies, but it would serve Korea’s own search for identity as well as mutual trust in bilateral relations.¹⁴ South Koreans are particularly prone to status disappointments even when the events in question appear to others to be inconsequential. Japan’s quest to become a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council in 2005 along with three other states posed the danger of a new dividing line between the world’s elite states—the permanent five transformed into the permanent nine—and those left behind, such as South Korea, which recently perceived itself as 10th–13th economically and in other respects as well. If much of the fault lies with Japanese leaders, the outcome remains a tinderbox for South Koreans who seek to put national interest above identity.

Finally, renewed consensus on behalf of U.S. liberal values and alliance support need not mean deepening of South Korean dependence on the United States or amnesia about U.S. missteps, often associated with failing to adhere to its liberal values.¹⁵ Made easier by the Obama administration’s less hypocritical espousal of values, a consensus on the U.S. role in Asia since 1945 might be the single most important step in clarifying South Korean national identity as it concerns views about countries critical to national status and prospects. By taking discussions of human rights off the table in dealing with North Korea, Roh Moo-hyun left vague his nation’s commitment to universal values. In contrast, Lee Myung-bak put them high on his agenda even as the North vehemently denounced him for interference in its domestic affairs. Because this was done after U.S. officials had dropped regime change from their agenda and stopped prioritizing human rights toward the North, this did not mean succumbing to the unilateralist early Bush interpretation of values. Yet, it affirmed South Korean globalization and the potential for liberal values to advance between the extremes of progressivism and conservatism.

Seoul lacks significance in Washington to influence policies toward the great powers. It also lacks credibility for letting national identity issues get in the way of realist calculations. Domestic politics appear too antagonistic for reasoned exchange. Reactions to Japan fly in the face of U.S. realist arguments. When U.S. officials have taken a broad regional or values perspective they have not found a receptive audience. In this context, problems in national identity contribute to overreach in international relations: turning the mission of strong state guidance of catch-up development into overbearing dictatorial intervention, distorting steps toward globalization by keeping a distance from the U.S.-dominated international community, rushing a perceived opportunity to engage North Korea into the incautious Sunshine Policy of secret payments bereft of reciprocity, and adjusting to a new balance of power in the region by claiming to be a balancer rather than filling a more modest role of facilitator at moments when interests overlap. Indicative of these problems is a record of peripatetic responses to insensitive Japanese provocations. Also evident are bouts of unguarded romanticism or at least loss of caution toward China and Russia too.¹⁶ Without a shared national vision and a realistic timetable for reducing the country's dependency, South Koreans have little prospect of gaining acceptance as a respected member and possible inspirational voice of an emerging East Asian community.

The struggle between contrasting worldviews came to a head at the end of 2008. Lee Myung-bak issued a statement charging that the national identity had been under attack and that he was determined to crack down on intensifying ideological provocations by domestic left-leaning forces that further threaten it. As his spokesman Lee Dong-kwan explained, "President Lee is concerned that the constitutional values of the Republic of Korea are increasingly challenged by leftist forces seeking to promote anti-U.S., pro-North Korea and anti-market viewpoints across society."¹⁷ At stake are efforts to rewrite textbooks, to change the bias of the national television stations, and to define the meaning of the Korean War, as Lee made plans to host a summit of all 21 nations involved. Yet, as a partisan leader, Lee's credibility may not suffice for uprooting progressive distortions.

Another sign of identity confusion is the increasing struggle between an assertive notion of cultural homogeneity and newfound confusion over the core of "Koreanness." Diversification of experience—including immigration, emigration, intermarriage, internationalized life experiences, priority of English language learning—has muddied the once pure notion of a unified nation in ways that are more unsettling than where heterogeneity is more expected. Ethnicity has proven difficult to separate from national identity.¹⁸

Signs of unstable, unbalanced national identity appear in the contentious political arena, the sharp media divergence of views, the pronounced divide

in society, and recent inconsistent messages conveyed to foreign governments. Given the strong presidency, South Korea is not blocked from policy initiatives, but ideological paralysis makes vital clarification of national identity inconceivable in the short run. Missing is a civil service that operates as the pillar of the state in a manner such that changes in administration do not shake the foundation of a consensus-driven society. In comparison with Japan or the United States, the bureaucracy in South Korea does not fill this role. Crony appointments of successive presidents deny it this potential. Deficiencies in decentralization or division of power exacerbate the problem. Social cohesion is missing in a society where the state has an excessive impact and hierarchical control interferes with initiative at lower levels. Yet, society is experiencing great flux, perhaps opening the door to leadership that would finally reconstruct social cohesion and, with it, a more coherent national identity.

Prospects for National Identity

Whether exuberant claims by a president or candlelit vigils by young crowds, the messages from South Korea keep complicating foreign relations. Because the United States is still regional leader as well as an ally and is the only state capable of setting the agenda in Northeast Asia, it bears the burden of charting a foreign policy course that could serve to balance South Korean national identity concerning surrounding states. Unilateral moves such as in the early George W. Bush years do not suffice. They reinforce a sense that the South is dependent and does not have any control over its own destiny. Weak policies that leave the impression of U.S. abandonment offer no reassurance either, as there is no reason to trust regional states to resolve any pressing problems. The shadow of North Korea darkens the region, and the credibility of U.S. leadership depends on a strategy to manage its threatening existence. To avoid exacerbating the divide between progressives and conservatives and to ease the way for the South to find a new identity equilibrium in dealing with states active in the region, U.S. leaders need to offer reassurance about the alliance, a carefully calibrated mix of carrots and sticks toward the North, and a regional agenda that holds out promises for stability and security as well for narrowing values differences.

With support from the United States, South Korea has a chance, briefly seized by Kim Dae-jung, to be a facilitator in forging a vision of regionalism on the foundation of universal values. As it simultaneously works to enhance the alliance triangle tied to the U.S.-Japanese dyad, the six-party framework's peace regime group with the Sino-U.S. dyad in the forefront, as well as the denuclearization triangle with the U.S.-North Korea dyad, South Korea can broaden its understanding of national identity. Opposing North Korean belligerence through coordination centering first of all on the

United States is an essential starting point for a long-term strategy directed at regional cooperation and pride.

Fragmentation profoundly influences South Korea. The conservative-progressive divide has not subsided. Views of politics remain steeped in regional roots to the degree that voting strikingly reflects one's geographical location. The upwardly mobile middle class enmeshed in well-established organizations stands in sharp contrast with the new idealist nongovernmental organizations and the militant labor movement. The failure of the state to stand above the fray as a respected pillar of social order lies at the heart of these divisions. Among conservatives and progressives there are further divides, causing instability in political parties and uncertainty about how to forge a shared vision. The dual crisis in 2009 of the world economy and North Korean belligerence could narrow these differences if U.S. leadership proves inspiring and South Korean leadership forges collective confidence.

Koreans often have blamed themselves as much as the United States for the failure to normalize identity. Similar to Japanese conservatives who were vigorously pressing for "normality" against the perceived opposition of the leftist media, teachers, political parties, and even "Asianist" bureaucrats, Korean progressives were leading the charge. They blamed the dictatorship and incomplete democratization as they waited for the opportunity for one of their own to become president, which finally happened in 1998. Removed from power for a long time and finally able to take over the powerful office of president, they intensely sought to express their version of national identity. Yet, it was difficult to act because the president lacked legitimacy. Under Japanese rule and nearly four decades of assaults on democracy in the name of promoting it, South Koreans had become accustomed to doubting their leaders. Democratic elections did not change that. Widespread corruption and cronyism put the state in the hands of cliques not trusted for competence or fairness. This made the push for national identity less about reclaiming the honor of the state and rebuilding its authority than about creating a radically new state steeped in a pure identity unknown in the past. If Japanese revisionism had deep roots in realism, imagined or actual, South Korean progressivism was more utopian than realist. After all, dictators had abused the notion of realism in pursuit of a monopoly on power and their own twist on national identity; progressives continued to face conservative pressure in the name of realism as they impatiently tried to break free of its restraints. A new outlook on realism is necessary, steeped in crisis but also targeted at hard choices.

Koreans struggle with notions of national humiliation. The shame of annexation by Japan was not erased, leading Park Chung-hee to trace it back millennia to failings in the nation's traditional culture. The dilemma of a

divided nation, severed so completely that there was no way to know if one's separated family members were alive or dead, showed no prospect of being resolved. Dependency on the United States was a troubling necessity, and economic reliance on Japan, with which diplomatic normalization had occurred on embarrassingly expedient terms, could not be overcome. Divided at home and in a weak position in relations with the great powers, especially the United States, Koreans could find no way to gain satisfaction about Korean national identity. This persistent frustration led some groups to desperate choices inconsistent with the realities Koreans faced. A more serious set of realities in 2009 may at last dislodge these negative self-images.

Koreans share the desire for more autonomy in international relations, a higher status in relation to key countries, and unification of the peninsula. Yet conservatives are prone to put these in the context of preservation of the existing social order at home and coordination with a dependable ally as part of international society that can be trusted. In contrast, progressives impatiently set aside some restraints in search of a breakthrough process with the North with far-reaching identity consequences from the outset. Unlike China or Japan, South Korea is not a great power and has no memory of challenging for regional hegemony. In all directions it sees states that at some point have denied its status aspirations. Recently, there has been a repeat of these frustrations: the United States in 2001–03 was blamed for stifling Kim Dae-jung's diplomatic endeavors; Japan is accused repeatedly—because of its textbook revisions and territorial claims—of insulting Korean sentiments; and China with its historical assertions about the Koguryo state and treatment of South Korea during the Olympics has reminded people of the arrogance of sinocentrism. Instead of new signs of Koreanization, there have been repeated reminders of marginalization. The reality has fallen far short of expectations, as economic crises a decade apart compounded fears of national vulnerability. Grievances cannot be resolved. Only pragmatic acceptance of the nation's difficult circumstances in the short term buttressed by renewed pride over what was accomplished in the Cold War era offers hope for coping in troubled times.

What could break the impasse in South Korean national identity? A crisis in which the North Korean military threatens and targets the South along with Japan and the United States would bolster the conservative worldview. If this were accompanied by a loss of confidence in China, as diplomatic broker and economic engine, a sharp shift might follow. This is more likely than a collapse of North Korea that leads to reunification. It also may be made easier by financial crisis that exposes serious limitations in China's model of growth and reinvigorates the international community aware of the still indispensable role of the United States and its renewed potential under a leader such as Barack Obama. Yet, clarity about identity cannot

be expected just from danger that puts national interest in the forefront. It must also find substance from reexamination of the country's past and of its international linkages. Conservatives may gain an edge over progressives, but they must take care to construct a shared narrative if they aspire to leave an enduring legacy.

Although diverse views exist on what might constitute a shared source of pride for most South Koreans, I conclude by listing four elements: (1) Cold War achievements, economically with rapid growth, politically with genuine democratization, militarily with growing capacity to resist aggression, and socially with remarkable mobility and entry into the international community; (2) the "Korean wave" as indication of cultural vitality; (3) adaptability in the post-Cold War era, responding to economic crises, showing a spirit of generosity to North Korea when possible, and accelerating globalization; and (4) vision and promise as the facilitator of regionalism in Northeast Asia that could reconcile serious differences in an area with exceptional promise. Compared with other states around the world, South Koreans have ample reason to take pride in their national identity.

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