

SAMUEL S. KIM

THE TWO KOREAS AND THE GREAT POWERS

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This book explores Korea's place in a rapidly changing world in terms of multiple levels and domains of interaction pertaining to foreign policy behaviors and relations with the four regional/global powers (China, Russia, Japan, and the United States). The synergy of global transformations has now brought to an end Korea's proverbial identity and role as the helpless shrimp among whales, and both North Korea and South Korea have taken on new roles in the process of redefining and projecting their national identities. Synthetic national identity theory offers a useful perspective on change and continuity in Korea's turbulent relationships with the great powers over the years. Following a review of Korean diplomatic history and competing international relations theoretical approaches, along with a synthetic national identity theory as an alternative approach, one chapter is devoted to how both Koreas relate to each of the four powers in turn, and the book concludes with a consideration of inter-Korean relations and potential reunification.

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Columbia University



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*For
Helen,
with Gratitude,
Joy, and
Love . . .*

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Preface

The Korean peninsula, although situated at the crossroads of Northeast Asia, has often been home to political entities that sought isolation from the world outside. In the twentieth century, however, Korea's attempts to maintain itself as the "hermit kingdom" were overthrown in succession by Japanese colonization, the World War II settlement, the beginning of the Cold War, the end of the Cold War, and the intensification of globalization. Because of the course of international history following World War II, on the Korean peninsula today there are two Korean states, whereas for the 1,269 previous years there had been only one. North and South Korea as we know them today do not exist as entities entirely of their own making but rather as two incomplete nation-states with national identities crafted in the cauldron of Cold War conflict and galvanized in the post-Cold War age of globalization.

With a synthetic interactive approach to studying foreign relations as its starting point, this book explores how the identities of North and South Korea have evolved in relation to the Big Four of Northeast Asia: China, Japan, Russia, and the United States. Just as for individuals there can be no definition of the self without reference to some other, so with nation-states there can be no development of national identity without reference to the set of other actors in world politics. For the two Korean states, these referents include the Confucian empire-cum-socialist experiment, China; the former colonial occupier, Japan; the formerly meddlesome and now cautious friend to all, Russia; the South Korean savior and North Korean nemesis, the United States; and, perhaps most important, the mirror against which each Korea most closely judges itself – the other Korea across the thirty-eighth parallel.

As regional and international politics interact on the Korean peninsula, the synergy of momentous global transformations – democratization, the

end of the Cold War and its superpower rivalry, and globalization – has now brought Korea's proverbial identity and role as the helpless shrimp among whales decisively to an end. Even though Korea's search for a national identity has been unusually tumultuous because of the vast gap between role capabilities and role commitments, South Korea today is no longer a pawn but a pivotal player in Northeast Asian economics, security, and culture. North of the demilitarized zone, the other Korean state has survived, despite a rapid succession of external shocks on top of a series of seemingly fatal internal woes. In fact, not only has North Korea, the weakest of the six main actors in Northeast Asia, continued to exist, but it has also catapulted itself as a primary driver of Northeast Asian geopolitics through its strategic use of nuclear brinkmanship diplomacy.

In North and South Korea, we have two countries that hearken back to bygone historical eras even as they herald the coming of new ones in Northeast Asia. Through the lens of the Korean peninsula, we can examine how Northeast Asia has evolved in the post–Cold War world from a region firmly entrenched in East–West conflict to one with a broader range of possible alliances and antagonisms, and we also can forecast possible futures for the regional order, including issues of security conflict, economic cooperation, cultural assertion, and Korean reunification. Through the lens of the Big Four of Northeast Asia, it becomes clear how North and South Korea are integral to these processes, and how they have been and will continue to be defined as nation-states in the context of regional history and ongoing processes. There is much movement and fluctuation in Korean foreign relations, but by looking at how national identity interacts with military, economic, and functional foreign policy goals, it is the intention in this book to pin down these trajectories and locate them in a space to which all global citizens can relate.

It is somewhat embarrassing to admit that this book has had a gestation period of almost a decade. A study of this nature and duration owes a great deal to the contributions of many people who have participated in the conception of the work, as well as in the individual and collective remedies to the many problems and shortcomings.

From the very beginning, the research and writing of this book has been closely keyed to and shaped by my teaching of a graduate course in Korean Foreign Relations for the past twelve or so years in the Department of Political Science at Columbia University. This experience served as a kind of force multiplier, providing not only the primary reason and audience, but also an ideal testing laboratory and an invaluable opportunity to try out some of the ideas embodied in the book. In a real sense, then, this book is an offspring of this course (as my lecture notes and many discussions with my students provided first-cut materials and ideas to further my research and rewriting). So my thanks go to many serious students in the course for their contributions to the shaping of the book.

Without field interviews of many different kinds, this study would have lost a vital primary source for delineating the motivational and behavioral dimensions of the many contentious issues involved in the relations of the two Koreas with the Big Four. From May to June 1998 and from early to late June 2000, I conducted field research in Seoul and Beijing, as well as conducted many interviews with current and former government officials on a confidential basis in order to broaden my understanding of behind-the-scenes internal debates on many controversial political, military, and diplomatic issues. Unfortunately, my contacts with North Korean diplomats were limited to only two closed executive – Track I.5 – meetings in New York and a few visits by North Korean “NGO” delegations to Columbia’s Center for Korean Research. I have liberally taken advantage of my position as chair of the (monthly) Contemporary Korean Affairs Seminar (1994–present) in conducting “informal interviews” – the functional equivalent of my extensive field interviews in the United States, as it were – either before or after the formal seminar presentations of the participants. The keynote seminar speakers were more or less divided evenly between Americans and South Koreans: former U.S. government officials or ambassadors and then-current South Korean ambassadors to the United States and prominent Koreanist scholars and journalists. This book has been immeasurably enriched by the many informal interviews with those keynote seminar speakers: Donald Gregg, William Gleestein, Thomas Hubbard, Wendy Sherman, Charles Kartman, Phillip Yun, Charles Pritchard, Robert Gallucci, Desaix Anderson, Mitchell Reiss, Lee Hong koo, Park Soo Gil, Yang Sung Chul, Marcus Noland, Nicholas Eberstadt, Bruce Cumings, Kathy Moon, Victor Cha, John Merrill, Leon Sigal, David Steinberg, Steve Linton, Chong Sik Lee, Myung Soo Lee, Choi Jang Jip, Don Oberdorfer, Selig Harrison, David Kang, Chung-in Moon, Ilpyong Kim, Manwoo Lee, Sonia Ryang, Seungsook Moon, Scott Snyder, C. Kenneth Quinones, Lee Sook-jong, and Cameron Hurst.

I have benefited from the critical reading and helpful comments of a number of individual friends and colleagues in the fields of Korean studies and international relations. James Seymour, John Feffer, Jack Snyder, and Matt Winters all read parts of the manuscript with helpful comments and suggestions for substantive improvement. In the course of the peer review and vetting process at Cambridge University Press, three anonymous readers provided critical and perceptive comments and suggestions for the final revisions of the manuscript for publication.

During the preparation of this work, I was greatly assisted by the overall facilities and congenial atmosphere provided by the Weatherhead East Asian Institute (WEAI) and the Department of Political Science, Columbia University, and want to express my thanks to my area studies and international relations colleagues for their continuing support and encouragement. The WEAI’s research atmosphere was most congenial to

my particular project because each academic year it attracts a dozen visiting scholars and professional Fellows from China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan to interact with resident faculty members in East Asian area studies drawn from political science, history, sociology, and economics through numerous brown-bag noon lecture series, colloquia, Weatherhead Policy Forum, faculty research lunches, and so on.

As befits a project so long in the making, I have received considerable research help from a number of my graduate student research assistants in recent years – Joon Seok Hong, Abraham Kim, Ji In Lee, Emma Chanlett-Avery, Erik Tollesfson, and Janice Yoon. I would like to thank them all for their diligent library or online research tasks. Above all, I am most grateful to Matthew Winters, who read my next-to-last draft with care and insight that would amaze anyone unacquainted with him; as a graduate student, he is already endowed with the critical, conceptual, and analytical power of an established international relations scholar.

The McCune-Reischauer romanization system is used throughout this book, with some familiar exceptions for well-known place names (e.g., Pyongyang, Seoul, Pusan) and personal names (e.g., Syngman Rhee, Park Chung Hee, Kim Dae Jung, Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il, Kang Sok Ju) that would otherwise be difficult to recognize.

It was a pleasure to work with Cambridge University Press in the production of this book. I am particularly grateful to Frank Smith, social science editor, for his support and encouragement and for his role as an invaluable navigator throughout the publication process. Special thanks are due to Cathy Felgar and for the publisher's efficient steering of the manuscript through the various stages of production.

As always, without the unflagging forbearance, support, and music of my wife Helen, the most significant other – yes, she is a professor of music, not political science – this project would never have come to fruition. By participating in every step of this long and seemingly endless journey of revisions and updates, and by providing me the chance to share its opportunity costs with a collaborative spirit, she sufficiently prodded me to finish this project before it finished me. Hence, this is as much her book as it is mine.

Because the two Koreas still remain in many ways moving targets on turbulent and indeterminate trajectories, I am reluctant to declare the manuscript complete. Nonetheless, I do so now – without a sense of completion but with a deep sigh of relief and a deep sense of gratitude to the many individuals who helped me along the endless road. The usual disclaimer still applies: I alone am responsible for whatever local, inter-Korean, regional, and global errors in fact or interpretation may remain in the book.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Korea and the Great Powers in a Changing World

A shrimp gets crushed to death in the fight between whales.

– *An old Korean saying*

Historically, we Koreans have lived through a series of challenges and have responded to them. Having to live among big powers, the people on the Korean Peninsula have had to cope with countless tribulations. For thousands of years, however, we have successfully preserved our self-respect as a nation as well as our unique culture. Within the half-century since liberation from colonial rule, and despite territorial division, war, and poverty, we have built a nation that is the 12th largest economic power in the world.

– *President Roh Moo-hyun's Inaugural Address,
February 25, 2003*¹

The Three Koreas Revisited

The previous old Korean saying pithily captures the conventional realist wisdom about the security predicament of the weak in the region of the strong. Indeed, there is no mistaking the extraordinary ramifications of great-power rivalry for Korea's place in world affairs. For more than a century, and especially between 1894 and 1953, the Korean peninsula became a highly contested terrain that absorbed and reflected wider geopolitical struggles and even sanguinary wars involving, to varying degrees, imperial Japan, czarist Russia, the Soviet Union, Qing China, the People's Republic of China (PRC), and the United States – variations on the Big

¹ An English text available at http://english.president.go.kr/warp/app/en_speeches/view?group_id=en-ar...

Four of contemporary Northeast Asian international relations.² During this period, except in the Korean War (1950–53), an aggressive, imperial Japan was at the forefront of hegemonic wars in a quest to extend the Japanese hegemony over Korea to the entire Asia-Pacific region – the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95 to gain dominance in Korea, the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5 for mastery over Manchuria and Korea, the Sino-Japanese War of the 1930s, and the Pacific War of 1941–45 (World War II in the Asia Pacific). In the process, Korea as the hermit kingdom was conquered, colonized, liberated, divided, and devastated by civil-cum-international war, spawning a three-stage mutation of Korea's stunted national identity as a shrimp among whales from Chosun (Yi) Korea (1392–1910) to Colonial Korea (1910–45) to Divided Korea (1945–).

Soon after the eclipse of Japanese control over the peninsula came the Korean War, by any reckoning an event beyond compare. More than any other international event since the end of World War II, the Korean War served as the most important determinant in shaping the character not only of the two Koreas, but also of great-power politics in Northeast Asia (NEA) and beyond. Although fueled by escalating political tensions within Korea from 1947 to 1950, and although the idea of initiating the war came directly from Kim Il Sung, in actuality it was a great-power war fought on Korean soil. The United Nations (UN) also involved itself in the war through so-called police action, with sixteen member states dispatching combat troops of varying sizes and incurring casualties of varying magnitude.³

The Korean War served as the chief catalyst for a quadrupling of U.S. defense expenditures; for the proliferation of a series of bilateral defense treaties with Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, South Vietnam, the Philippines, and Thailand; and for an ill-conceived and short-lived multilateral security organization, the South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). Yet, as diplomatic historian William Stueck argues, the greatest paradox of the Korean War was how the conflict devastated Korea, militarized the Cold War, and subsequently threatened to escalate out of control, but in the end functioned as a proxy war for what could have been an even more destructive great-power war in Europe – that is, as a substitute for World War III.⁴ Its aftereffects were felt for decades as the Cold War played out on the Korean peninsula.

Particularly significant, but not sufficiently acknowledged, is the role of the Korean War in the creation of Cold War identity in NEA and beyond.

² For a multidimensional and multidisciplinary analysis of contemporary Northeast Asian international relations, see S. S. Kim (2004e).

³ For a detailed breakdown of the number of participating member states' troops and war casualties, see Ministry of National Defense (2000: 355–56).

⁴ Stueck (1995: 3, 370).

For both Koreas, the experience of the Korean War initiated a decisive shift in identity politics from the competition of multiple identities to the dominance of the Cold War identity. As a consequence, the collective identity of Korea as a whole nation was weakened radically.⁵ Although the Korean War accelerated and completed the process of Cold War identity construction, decades later the end of the Cold War, as well as the collapse and transformation of the communist world, failed to turn inter-Korean identity politics around.⁶

The United States, too, owes to the Korean War the crystallization of its Cold War identity, which in turn gave birth to an American strategic culture that thrived on a Manichaeian vision of global bipolarity and the omnipresent communist threat. Similarly, until the latter half of the 1980s, Soviet strategic culture was anchored in and thrived on its own Cold War identity. The simplicity of a stark bipolarized worldview provided an indispensable counterpoint for the quest for superpower identity and security in the region dominated by American hegemony. Soviet geopolitical conduct seems to make no sense, except when viewed as the drive to assume a superpower role and acquire equal status with the United States to compensate for its siege mentality and to legitimize its authoritarian iron hand at home. Indeed, the United States was the Soviets' "significant other," the dominant international reference actor, to be envied, emulated, and at times cajoled for condominium collaboration. It is worth noting in this connection that some of the U.S.–USSR rivalries during the Cold War had more to do with the promotion of national identity as status competition than with the promotion of any identifiable "national interest."

As for China, although its troops suffered huge casualties in the Korean War, Beijing succeeded in forcing the strongest nation on earth to compromise in Korea and to accept China's representatives as equals at the bargaining table. No one in the West would ever again dismiss China's power as U.S. General Douglas MacArthur had in the fall of 1950. Indeed, the Korean War confirmed for the national self and "significant others" that China could stand up against the world's antisocialist superpower for the integrity of its new national identity as a revolutionary socialist state.

For Japan, the Korean War turned out to be a blessing in disguise because Tokyo reaped maximum economic and political benefits. By the end of the war, Tokyo had regained its sovereignty and had skillfully negotiated a new mutual security treaty that provided for U.S. protection of Japan, while allowing Tokyo to escape the burden of joint defense. Without becoming involved in the bloodshed or material deprivation, Japan was able to reap the benefits of a war economy that had been imbued

⁵ C. S. Chun (2001: 132). ⁶ C. S. Chun (2001: 142).

with new potential as a logistical base for the United States and as a key manufacturing center for war supplies.⁷ The Korean War and the resulting globalization of antagonistic Cold War identities throughout Asia and Europe have also made it possible for Tokyo to avoid coming clean on its imperial past (thus planting the seeds of post-Cold War identity conflicts in NEA). Emblematic of this phenomenon was the reemergence of Kishi Nobusuke as prime minister in 1957; Nobusuke was the former head of the Manchurian Railroad, a Minister of Munitions in the Tojo government, and a signatory of the 1941 declaration of war against the United States. The return to power of such a person as prime minister was a turn of events that would have been unthinkable in the German context.

Thanks to the end of the Cold War and the other global transformations of the past two decades – globalization and the “third wave of democratization” – South Korea is no longer the marginal shrimp but now a pivotal player in Northeast Asian economics, security, and culture. After South Korea had already taken on a new economic and political identity as a newly industrialized country (NIC) and a newly democratized country (NDC), President Roh Moo-hyun pledged in his inaugural address of February 23, 2003 to devote his “whole heart and efforts” to bringing the Age of Northeast Asia to fruition “at the earliest possible time.” Roh also challenged South Koreans to embrace the growing regionalism in NEA and to play a leading role as the hub of a wheel with collaborative spokes integrating its neighbors into a single unit, a wheel ready to roll on the road of a globalized economy. More recently, in a speech on March 22, 2005, Roh presented his most striking articulation and projection of Korea’s future role that “Korea will play the role of a balancer, not only on the Korean peninsula, but throughout Northeast Asia.”⁸

North of the demilitarized zone, the other Korean state has survived, despite a rapid succession of external shocks – the crumbling of the Berlin Wall, the end of both the Cold War and superpower rivalry, the demise of the Soviet Union and the international communism at its epicenter – on top of a series of seemingly fatal internal woes, including spreading famine, deepening socialist alienation, and the death of its founder, the “eternal president” Kim Il Sung. In fact, not only has North Korea, the weakest of the six main actors in the region, continued to exist, but it has also catapulted itself as a primary driver of Northeast Asian geopolitics through its strategic use of nuclear brinkmanship diplomacy.⁹ From this

⁷ The United States spent nearly \$3 billion in Japan for war and war-related supplies from 1950 to 1954. See J. E. Woo (1991: 33–34).

⁸ An English text available at http://english.president.go.kr/warp/app/en_speeches/view?group_id=en-ar. . . .

⁹ S. S. Kim (1995).

transformed geopolitical landscape emerges the greatest irony of the region: today, in the post–Cold War world, each of two incomplete Korean nation-states seems to command greater security sovereignty than was ever enjoyed by a unified Korean state.

For six decades now, two Koreas have existed where there had been only one for more than 1,000 years previously. None of the other countries divided by the Cold War had known such extensive national unity, and yet along with China, the division of Korea has the distinction of having survived the deterioration and dismantling of the bipolar world that had given that division birth and had more generally defined most of the history of the latter half of the twentieth century. Both North Korea (the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or DPRK) and South Korea (the Republic of Korea, or ROK) still proclaim sovereignty over the whole of the Korean peninsula. Yet, over the years, each has also developed mechanisms that allow it to function as a “normal” nation-state in the world community. Like conjoined twins attached at the hip, each half of Korea has operated with the knowledge that both its every move and its national identity are reflected in its ideologically opposed doppelganger.

The foreign relations that define the place of North and South Korea in the world community today are therefore the product of the trajectories that the states have chosen to take – or were forced to take – given their Cold War identity and politics. In addition, the choices of the Korean states are constrained by the international environment in which they interact, given that NEA is a region in which four of the world's great powers – China, Japan, Russia, and the United States – uneasily meet and interact. North and South Korea each remain entangled with one of the Big Four through a Cold War alliance: the DPRK to China and the ROK to the United States. Despite the historical identity of Korea as a shrimp among whales, both the DPRK and the ROK have found a new capacity for taking initiatives that would not have been possible during the Cold War years. The synergy of momentous global transformations – democratization, the end of the Cold War and its superpower rivalry, and globalization – has now brought Korea's proverbial identity and role as the helpless shrimp among whales decisively to an end.

The simultaneous potential for new initiatives and lingering regional and global constraints became manifest when South Korean President Kim Dae Jung and North Korean Chairman Kim Jong Il embraced each other at an inter-Korean summit in Pyongyang, symbolically signaling their acceptance of each other's legitimacy. The summit was most remarkable because it was initiated and executed by the Koreans themselves in the absence of any external shock or great-power sponsorship. The summit seemed to have brought the two Koreas down from their respective

hegemonic unification dreamlands to a place where peaceful coexistence of two separate states was possible. While in the wake of the summit Pyongyang proclaimed publicly for the first time that “the issue of unifying the differing systems in the north and the south as one may be *left to posterity to settle slowly in the future*,”¹⁰ South Koreans have been increasingly wary of a German-style unification by absorption and more supportive of engaged interaction with the North, as demonstrated in the “Sunshine Policy” under the Kim Dae Jung administration and the “Policy of Peace and Prosperity” under the Roh Moo-hyun administration. Since the summit, the two countries have arranged family reunions, increased trade, and developed tourism to Mt. Kumgang in North Korea. Although Kim Dae Jung proclaimed frequently that he did not expect Korean reunification on his watch or in his lifetime, the gradual and functional pathway to a peaceful reunification of Korea seems more apparent today than ever.

In October 2002, only two years after the Pyongyang summit, in a dramatic although not necessarily surprising turn of events, North Korean leaders were depicted by the Bush administration as having revealed to U.S. interlocutors that they had a highly enriched uranium (HEU) nuclear program under development. This “admission” has led to a series of trilateral and six-party talks involving the Big Four and both Korean states. From the beginning of the talks, the United States expected its South Korean ally to fall in line and support its all-or-nothing demands on North Korea. But the ROK has taken a more moderate position, trying to temper U.S. and DPRK belligerence toward one another and working with China and Russia on more flexible, compromise proposals. Such an alignment of stability-centered interests – with the ROK, China, and Russia all working together – would hardly have been imaginable during the Cold War, yet the fact that the same set of Cold War players are involved indicates a certain sense of *plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose* (the more things change, the more they stay the same).

Although the nuclear standoff has been the focus of attention regarding North Korea in Washington and consequently in the U.S. press, Seoul – the presumed prime target of any North Korean nuclear weapons – has continued to pursue functional linkages with the DPRK and has played down the standoff. For the Roh Moo-hyun administration, a government elected in part because of a platform that promised to distance Korea from the United States, the desired international image of North Korea is that of the 2000 summit, not that of the 2002 nuclear revelation. The contrast between these two events and between their legacies reflects the multiple levels at which Korean foreign relations occur.

¹⁰ *Rodong Sinmun [Worker’s Daily]*, June 25, 2000, p. 6; emphasis added.

This highlights with particular clarity that the stability of Korean national identities is not exclusively or even largely a domestic phenomenon, but rather is closely keyed to and conditioned by the stability of the Northeast Asian environment.

Korean Identity in the Regional Environment Old and New

In the early years of the new millennium, there is something both very old and very new in the regional security complex surrounding the Korean peninsula. What remains unchanged and unchangeable is the geographical location of the Korean peninsula, tightly enveloped by the three big neighboring powers. As Jules Cambon wrote in 1935, “The geographical position of a nation is the principal factor conditioning its foreign policy – the principal reason why it must have a foreign policy at all.”¹¹ Of course, geography matters in the shaping of any state’s foreign policy, but this is especially true for the foreign policies of the two Koreas and their three neighboring powers. A glance at the map and the geopolitical smoke from the latest (second) U.S.–DPRK nuclear standoff suggests why NEA is one of the most important yet most volatile regions of the world. It is hardly surprising, then, that each of the Big Four has come to regard the Korean peninsula as the strategic pivot point of NEA security and therefore as falling within its own geostrategic ambit.¹² The Korean peninsula, divided or united, shares land and maritime borders with China, Russia, and Japan, uniquely situating it within the geopolitics of NEA. Crowded by all four great powers, Korea’s unique place in the geopolitics of NEA remains at once a blessing, a curse, and a Rorschach test.

From China’s geostrategic perspective, Korea has been a *cordon sanitaire* against Japanese continental expansionism. Lying in the path of Russia’s southward expansion in search of an ice-free port, Korea has been a major focus of strategic interest for Russian foreign policy in the Far East. For Japan, Korea served not only as an indispensable corridor for continental expansionism – or as a threat of continental retaliation, “a dagger pointed at the heart of Japan,” in the words of Meiji oligarch Yamagata Aritomo¹³ – but also as a major source of agricultural supplies for Japanese industrialization and militarization. For the United States, Korea was initially a backwater in which it had to accept Japanese surrender, later transformed into a frontline domino state, standing against communist expansion.

In the age of great-power rivalry at the end of the nineteenth century, Korea had found itself at a loss. Locating itself in an East Asian regional

¹¹ Cited in Pastor (1999: 7). ¹² See Eberstadt and Ellings (2001).

¹³ Green (2001: 113).

order and not in a larger international community, Korea deferred to China, with which it maintained a (tributary) relationship, when the West came knocking at the door. Korea preferred to remain a Confucian hermit kingdom, isolated from the “barbarian” outsiders. Despite having been subject to numerous invasions and occasional occupations during its 2,000 years of recorded history, Korean civilization possessed and maintained a distinct one-nation identity. When Japan forced China, through treaty, to enter the world of modern nation-states, Korea’s entrance was not far behind. But its existence as an independent nation-state was short lived because Japan exercised increasing control over the country, relieving China of influence in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95, doing the same to Russia in 1904–5, and then beginning full colonization of Korea in 1910.

Without the chance to conceive of itself as a modern nation-state before the onset of colonization, Koreans did not do well in forming a cohesive national identity during the colonial period. The March First Uprising of 1919 symbolized a nascent awareness of national identity, but its suppression forcibly transformed the Korean nationalists into a movement of exiles abroad and underground at home. The Korean Provisional Government in Shanghai quickly became embroiled in intense factional conflict, and the Korean communist movement also degenerated into factional strife. The Korean Communist Party (KCP), founded in April 1925, suffered so many defeats that its checkered life was brought to an end by 1931.¹⁴

On the eve of liberation in 1945, the Korean nationalist movement was fragmented, frustrated, and without a charismatic leader to herald the returning nationalists from abroad. The exile movement suffered from protracted combat fatigue and had been factionalized to such an extent that it would have been extremely difficult, if not impossible, for any one nationalist leader to unify the newly liberated country.¹⁵ Except for the negative anti-Japanese identity that was shared by all, the nationalist exiles returned home with a set of mutually competing foreign sources of legitimacy; the groups were, in varying degrees, Americanized, Russianized, Sinicized, Communized, or Christianized. Given these divided and divisive identities, Kim Il Sung in the North – and to a lesser extent Syngman Rhee in the South – was driven to link his legitimacy to the national political mythology by exaggerating and even falsifying his national revolutionary background abroad.¹⁶ Just as no single national movement formed before or during colonization, neither did one precipitate after liberation. This was reinforced by the division of the country into zones controlled by the USSR and the United States.

¹⁴ D.-S. Suh (1967: 117–41). ¹⁵ S. S. Kim (1976); C. S. Lee (1963).

¹⁶ J. A. Kim (1975: 287, 338).

The Korean division along the thirty-eighth parallel was initially imposed as part of an ad hoc U.S. zonal plan proposed by Harry Truman on August 15, 1945 – to which the Soviet Union agreed the next day – for dividing up Japanese troop surrender arrangements in the wake of Japan’s unconditional surrender on that same day (the biggest national holiday, the Day of Liberation [*Kwangbok chol*]). The hardening of the division was a direct consequence of early postwar superpower conflict. The first blood of the Cold War was spilled in Korea with the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950, and at the end of its three years, the war’s fatalities would number several million. The war had the impact of restructuring national, regional, and global systems; it had the decisive catalytic effect of institutionalizing the rules of the Cold War zero-sum game, thereby congealing patterns of East–West conflict across East Asia and beyond.¹⁷ The 37,000 U.S. troops stationed on South Korean soil today (to be reduced to some 25,000 as of 2008) serve as a reminder of Korea’s role in the Cold War and also indicate the extreme local legacies of that global conflict. The lesson to be acknowledged is that a country’s foreign relations are never limited to domestic sources but are products of both regional and global environments, even for a self-defined hermit kingdom like Korea.

In fact, Korea has a long history of being at the center of the Northeast Asian region. For centuries, NEA has comprised China, Korea, and Japan, with only brief interruptions due to the Mongol and Manchu invasions. Therefore, through the various incarnations of regional order – from the Sinocentric world of the Middle Kingdom, to the Japanese imperial world, to the Cold War world, to the post–Cold War era of U.S. hegemony – Korea has remained central, although historically this has not meant that ties were particularly deep.¹⁸ Japan’s imperialism and later economic power, Russia’s rivalry with Japan and headquartering of a world socialist movement, China’s ascendancy at the end of the twentieth century, and the U.S. role as global hegemon have all assigned identities to Korea as these processes worked to define the region and the world.

Nonetheless, NEA is more than a geographical referent. Although geographical proximity is important, defining East Asia or especially NEA in these terms alone is more problematic than may be apparent because any strictly “geographical” approach would hide rather than reveal the critical role of the United States in Northeast Asian international relations and especially geopolitics.¹⁹ If NEA as an international region is

¹⁷ Jervis (1980).

¹⁸ For a collected volume addressing Korea’s role in each era, see Armstrong et al. (2006).

¹⁹ The common use of “East Asia” and “Northeast Asia” as one and the same had to do with the fact that Asia, in general, and East Asia, in particular, are so overwhelmingly Sinocentric. As a result, the concept of East Asia “has conventionally referred only to those states of Confucian heritage.” See Ravenhill (2002: 174).

defined in both geographical and functional terms (i.e., in terms of the patterned interactions among its constituent member states) – as it is in this study – it encompasses China, the two Koreas, and Japan as core states, with the addition of the Russian Far East, and it also involves the United States as the extraterritorial, lone superpower. NEA is said to hold vital importance in America's security and economic interests, and the U.S. role remains a crucial component (perhaps the most crucial) of the regional geostrategic and geoeconomic equations. The United States, by dint of its deep interest and involvement in Northeast Asian geopolitics and geoeconomics, provides more than 80 percent of the 100,000 troops deployed in the Asia-Pacific region, concentrated mostly in Japan and South Korea.²⁰

Accordingly, the world's heaviest concentration of military and economic capabilities is in this region: the world's three largest nuclear weapons states (the United States, Russia, and China), one seminuclear state (North Korea), three threshold nuclear weapons states (Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan), the world's three largest economies on a purchasing power parity basis (the United States, China, and Japan),²¹ and Asia's three largest economies (Japan, China, and South Korea). It was in NEA that the Cold War turned into a hot war, and the region was more involved in Cold War politics than any other region or subregion without nonaligned states. Even with the end of the Cold War and superpower rivalry, the region is still distinguished by continuing, if somewhat anachronistic, Cold War alliance systems linking the two Koreas, Japan, China, and the United States in a bilateralized regional security complex.

As this might suggest, for several reasons, the divide in NEA between regional and global politics is substantially overlapped, if not completely erased. First, the region is "strategic home" to three of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, which are also three of the five "original" nuclear weapons states that are shielded by the two-tiered, discriminatory Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime. Second, Japan, Greater China, and South Korea alone accounted for about 25 percent of world gross domestic product (GDP) in 2000.²² As of mid-2005, NEA

²⁰ In the latest Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) Report, "Northeast Asia" and "the East Asian littoral" are defined as "critical areas" for precluding hostile domination by any other power. See United States Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, September 30, 2001, p. 2 (hereafter cited as *QDRR 2001*) at <http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/qdr2001.pdf>.

²¹ According to the purchasing power parity (PPP) estimates of the World Bank (which are not unproblematic), China, with a 1994 GDP just less than \$3 trillion, had become the second largest economy in the world, after the United States. By 2003, China's ranking as the world's second largest economy remained the same, but its global national income (GNI)/PPP more than doubled to \$6,435 billion. See *Economist* (London), January 27, 1996, 102; World Bank (1996: 188); World Bank (2004: 256).

²² See Ellings and Friedberg (2002: 396).

is home to the world's four largest holders of foreign exchange reserves: Japan (\$825.0 billion), China (\$711.0 billion), Taiwan (\$253.6 billion), and South Korea (\$205.7 billion).²³ In addition, Japan remains the world's second largest financial contributor to the United Nations and its associated specialized agencies. Finally, the rapid rise of China's economic power – the country has sustained the world's fastest economic growth in the post–Cold War era – and related military power has sired many debates among specialists and policy makers over how much influence Beijing actually exerts in NEA and what this means for U.S. interests or emerging Northeast Asian order.²⁴

With the overarching superpower conflict and overlay gone, local and regional dynamics are becoming ever more salient, and the two Koreas are experiencing greater latitude in the shaping of their regional security environment and policies. But the same cannot be said in the economic domain, where all East Asian states – including the two Koreas but more the South than the North – are participating in an East Asian economic regionalism, based on the shared embrace of economic development and well-being, as well as the shared sense of vulnerability associated with the processes of globalization and regionalization. Greater regional cooperation is one of the few available instruments with which East Asian states can meet the double challenge of globalization from above and localization from below. Operating in a regional context, the East Asian states can “Asianize” their individual responses to globalization in a politically viable form.

Nonetheless, NEA is not without its share of territorial and maritime disputes in varying degrees of intensity: China–Russia border (low), China–North Korea border (low), China–Tajikistan border (low), China–Japan maritime (the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands) (moderate), Japan–Russia maritime (the Northern Territories) (moderate), Japan–South Korea maritime (Tokdo/Takeshima Islands) (moderate), North Korea–South Korea (the Northern Limit Line on the Yellow/West Sea) (low), and China versus six other East Asian states on the Spratly Islands (low).²⁵ With the entry into force of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1994, the enlarged exclusive economic zones (EEZs) pose the clear and present danger of a new pattern of maritime conflict in the region.

Furthermore, in the late 1990s, the volcano of potential security eruption in the North seemed to have become more active than ever before. An unstable or collapsing North Korea, given its proximity to Seoul (in

²³ Edmund L. Andrews, “Shouted Down: A Political Furor Built on Many Grudges,” *New York Times*, August 3, 2005, p. C1.

²⁴ See Buzan and Foot (2004); Johnston (2004); Goldstein (2005); Deng and Wang (2005); Shambaugh (2004/05; 2005); Sutter (2005).

²⁵ See J. Wang (2003: 385).

rocket sights within 3 minutes) and inordinate asymmetrical military capabilities, could have extraordinary refractory ramifications for great-power politics in NEA and beyond. The necessity of coping with North Korean security or insecurity behavior in multiple and mutating forms, aided and abetted by America's rogue-state demonization strategy, has become an integral part of both the NEA security problem and the NEA security solution.

Yet, there has also been an underemphasized peace in NEA. Despite periodic tension escalations on the Korean peninsula, there has not been a single intrastate or interstate war during the post-Cold War era. Part of the answer to the question of recent, relative peace in NEA lies in the rise of China as a responsible regional power that has transformed not only Chinese foreign policy, but also in the process the geopolitical and geoeconomic landscape of Asia, including NEA. Within the wheel of emerging East Asian regionalism, China serves as the hub power and has managed to radiate a series of cooperative bilateral and biminilateral (minimultilateral) spokes.²⁶ The combined interactive effects of (1) the globalization pressures that sharply increase the costs of the use of force; (2) China's successful settlement of territorial disputes with most of its neighbors, with the corresponding sense of enhanced state sovereignty; (3) the demise of ideological conflict; and (4) the substantial accomplishment of China's status drive as a great power all augur well for the peace and stability of the East Asian region and beyond.

At still another level of generalization, as a result of the uneasy juxtaposition of continuity and discontinuity, there is emerging in place of the clarity, simplicity, and apparent discipline of bipolarity a new Northeast Asian regional order with multiple complexities and uncertainties that is of indeterminate shape and content. The structural impact of power transition and globalization seems to have accentuated the uncertainties and complexities of great-power politics in the region. The centripetal forces of increasing economic interaction and interdependence are grating against the centrifugal forces of historical and national identity animus and differing notions of conflict management in NEA. In the absence of superpower conflict, the foreign policies of the two Koreas and the Big Four are subject to competing pressures, especially the twin pressures of globalization from above and localization from below. All are experiencing the wrenching national identity difficulties in adjusting to post-Cold War realignments, and all are in flux regarding their national identities and how these relate to the region as a whole.

As a consequence of the uncertainty surrounding these identity adjustments, the security situation of the NEA region is vastly more complex

²⁶ S. S. Kim (2004d).

than any other region of the world, and in subsystemic terms, the region is almost undoubtedly multipolar, despite the existence of global unipolarity. This is the only region where so many combinations and permutations of two, three, four, two-plus-four, and three-plus-three power games can be played in both regional and global arenas. In one sense, the region is as much under the sway of unipolarity as anywhere else, given the unchallenged hegemony of the United States and its aggregate structural power.²⁷ However, given the emergence of China as a nuclear power in the 1960s, as a political power in the 1970s, and as an economic power in the 1990s, along with the rise of Japan as an economic superpower in the 1980s, the region is more multipolar than is any other. Complicating matters is the fact that the Korean peninsula is divided, so the Big Four cannot address the threats and opportunities inherent in the peninsula without paying heed to inter-Korean relations, and the seemingly local and bilateral relations between the two Korean states are, in reality, part of the nexus of great-power politics.

Assessing the future of the region, some have suggested that the Korean peninsula could become the pivot point of Sino–U.S. relations, whereas others have focused on the intricacies and dangers of a Beijing–Seoul–Pyongyang strategic triangle involving three sets of asymmetrical mutual interests and perceptions. Still others have imagined an emerging Sino–Russian strategic partnership as “the beginning of a new quadrilateral alignment in East Asia in which a ‘continental’ Russo-Chinese bloc balances a ‘maritime’ American-Japanese bloc,” with the Korean peninsula caught in the middle.²⁸ Regardless of which scenario most accurately reflects the trajectory of NEA, the unifying characteristic that the Korean peninsula is at the center of each – a consequence of geography – cannot be mistaken. What will determine which, if any, of these paths is followed is the way in which the participant countries come to define themselves in East Asia vis-à-vis their neighbors.

Since the end of the Cold War, the foreign policy makers of the ROK and the DPRK have had to consider these alternative worlds in which conflict no longer takes place along a clear East–West divide. With so little regionalism in NEA²⁹ – given the paucity of regional organizations and the painful memories of historical and national identity enmity – it is difficult for a state that has fallen from the Cold War world order to feel that it has landed in any sort of firm international society.³⁰ At the same time, the way that the great powers have all had their eyes focused on

²⁷ On post–Cold War unipolarity, see Krauthammer (1991); Wohlforth (1999).

²⁸ Brzezinski (1997); Bedeski (1995); Garver (1998).

²⁹ For the most comprehensive study of Northeast Asian regionalism, see Rozman (2004).

³⁰ On the idea of an international society that defines the rules and norms by which a system of states operates, see Bull (1977).

the Korean peninsula – and still do – imparts a power to the two Korean states that might not otherwise be reconcilable with their capabilities. For more than a century, Korea has had a variety of opportunities and capacities to be an agenda setter, a spoiler, or simply a conduit. Whereas in premodern times Chinese culture spread to Japan through Korea, today Japanese culture spreads to China in the reverse direction. With astounding economic growth in Japan in the 1980s and in China in the 1990s, Korea is positioned as the third leg of a hypothetical Northeast Asian free trade zone, high-tech industrial belt, or (when Russia is involved) energy corridor.

South Korea has recently taken on a new leadership role in a somewhat unexpected domain, one that deals inherently with national identity: culture. One way that NEA has become a defined region is via the growth of international media conglomerates, which has led to the export of Korean television and film to hungry markets in Taiwan and China, where other sources have either dried up or have been found politically incompatible. Korean fashion styles have likewise become common on the streets of Shanghai and Taipei. The future status of Korean cultural production, however, will depend on the growth of China's and Taiwan's own cultural production industries. The prominence of the "Korean wave" will decline, but the contents of Korean culture will become ingrained in the everyday life of those cultures where it is now popular. On a grander scale, we cannot discount the impact that growing cultural awareness and transculturation can have on regional cultural cooperation and understanding.³¹

This burgeoning economic and cultural regionalism with its shared identity component, however, is often overshadowed by conflict among national identities. This paradox is explained in part by the fact that the Korean peninsula's geographic centrality has aided and abetted the competitive foreign policies of North and South Korea, which are linked to their respective struggles for national identity and state legitimacy, and are conceived under the microscope of the Big Four. So, the received wisdom about the traditional Korean security predicament as a helpless shrimp has not since the late 1980s been as reliable a guide in explaining epochal peninsular and regional developments. Neither are the major theories of international relations (neorealism and neoliberalism) much help, if they are taken to be encompassing. To the contrary, Korea demonstrates the contingencies that exist in the application of international relations theory and the need for a synthetic theory that recognizes the contingent nature of relations among states and peoples.

So, scholars and policy makers alike, as they seek to divine the shape of things to come in Korea's international life, are challenged by a rather

³¹ J. S. Park (2006).

unique and complex cocktail of regional characteristics: high capability, abiding animus, deep albeit differentiated entanglement of the Big Four in Korean affairs, North Korea's recent emergence as a nuclear loose cannon, the absence of multilateral security institutions, the rise of America's unilateral triumphalism (or "new imperialism"), growing economic integration and regionalization, and the resulting uncertainties and unpredictability in the international politics of NEA. Regional cooperation to alleviate the security dilemma or to establish a viable security community is not impossible, but it is more difficult to accomplish when the major regional actors are working under the long shadows of historical enmities and contested political identities. The [next section](#) assesses what theories of international politics might be useful in assessing the possible futures of NEA. It argues for a break from the tradition of grand systems-level theorizing and a more direct incorporation of domestic-level national identity issues into explanations of the international relations behavior of individual states.

Theoretical Perspectives on Korea–Great Power Relations

For many area specialists and policy pundits, international relations (IR) theorizing may seem like a misguided, irrelevant, or unreal exercise, especially when IR theories have been so inept at explaining, let alone predicting, the momentous transformations that occurred in world politics in the late 1980s and early 1990s.³² This is no less true for the field of Korean foreign policy because IR theory seems preprogrammed for great-power conflict or cooperation.³³ As if to further compound the matter, there is the consensus, at least in the United States, that theory building and policy making remain disconnected.³⁴ Much of IR theorizing is

³² For a trenchant critique of realism's explanatory and predictive failures with reference to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, see Deudney and Ikenberry (1991); Gaddis (1992/93); Kegley (1994); Kratochwil (1993); Lebow (1994); Lynn-Jones and Miller (1993).

³³ Most studies on small states focus on external systemic variables impacting and shaping small states' policies and behaviors. They analyze the power of small states within alliances and the influence of small allies on their great-power allies within tight or loose bipolar systems, paying little attention to the dynamics of domestic politics in the shaping of their alliance behavior. The near consensus in the literature can be summarized as follows: (1) small states are more sensitive and more vulnerable to structural constraints than great powers; hence, the primacy of external systemic factors in the shaping of small state behavior; (2) small states can still play a role in world politics only in the bipolar international system – that is, the higher the superpower rivalry and tension, the greater the leverage of small states – the "power of the weak" paradox; and (3) small states are more likely to bandwagon with, rather than balance against, an aggressive great power. See Morrison and Suhrke (1979); Rothstein (1968); Vital (1967); Handel (1981); Paul (1994); Schou and Brundland (1971); Walt (1987); Elman (1995).

³⁴ See Tanter and Ullman (1972); George (1993).

perceived in the American policy community as an endless “mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all” beauty contest of, by, and for the chosen few, with little if any inclination to communicate with policy specialists or area specialists. The theory/practice gap can be bridged, if not completely eliminated, Alexander George argues, by developing “policy-relevant theory.”³⁵ Policy makers and policy specialists, regardless of whether they realize it, inevitably draw on certain theory-related assumptions and perspectives in the decision-making process. As Harold and Margaret Sprout once sharply pointed out, a “perspective-less book” on IR is the rarest item in any library, and the choice is not between “an explicitly stated perspective and an implicit, concealed, or disguised perspective, bootlegged in by the back door, so to speak. . . . [In] assessing a particular chosen perspective, the relevant question to ask is not whether it is right or wrong, but whether it contributes more than other perspectives to a better understanding of the subject at hand.”³⁶ Ultimately, the *raison d'être* of any theoretical approach is a commitment to seek truth, not parsimony; that is, theories should be accepted or rejected on the basis of their ability to be consistent with the evidence.³⁷ What follows is a critical assessment of the explanatory ability of the three dominant IR theoretical paradigms – neorealism, neoliberalism, and constructivism – followed by an argument for synthetic interactive explanations as a more suitable alternative framework.

Realist Perspectives

Modern IR theory was born with the Cold War in the wake of World War II. Realist perspectives, which cast states as unitary actors and privilege the pursuit of material power over any altruistic or ideological motives, proved dominant for much of the Cold War. When realism appeared to be ceding ground to other perspectives, Kenneth Waltz published his landmark *Theory of International Politics*, and neorealism was inaugurated.³⁸ This structural theory is said to have given classical realism the kind of theoretical rigor and parsimony that such traditional realists as Hans Morgenthau and others had long promised but never quite delivered. Waltz's deductive theory conceptualized international politics as a system composed of a structure and units in which the structure acts as a constraining and disposing force, producing a systemwide consistency in foreign policy behavior. State behavior is then constrained, almost to a fault, by the international distribution of aggregate state power. Balance-of-power theory is seen as the most essential political

³⁵ George (1993). ³⁶ Sprout and Sprout (1971: 13); emphasis in original.

³⁷ Vasquez (1992: 841). ³⁸ Waltz (1979).

theory of international politics, and bipolarity is a key system-defining and system-stabilizing element of world politics.

The parsimony of neorealism allows no room for the internal attributes of states because behaviors of similarly situated states are similarly determined and thus predictable. It is only “to the extent that dynamics of a system limit the freedom of its units [that] their behavior and the outcomes of their behavior become predictable.”³⁹ As a system theorist, Waltz elegantly simplifies and synthesizes classical realism by replacing the first image (human nature) with the third image (anarchy), while continuing to ignore the second image (regime attributes and domestic dynamics). Structural realism offers a macrostructural explanation to replace the unit-level account of classical realism, and the units are rendered undifferentiated and lacking in identity. The impact of macrostructural variables, nonetheless, is conceptualized in deterministic rather than dynamic and probabilistic terms. In the quest for a parsimonious and deductive metatheory, Waltz seems to have reconceptualized the dynamics of the international system as mechanical, “clocklike” general laws.⁴⁰ Parsimony in *Theory of International Politics* was purchased at the expense of the multilayered thinking in Waltz’s earlier work, *Man, the State, and War*.⁴¹

Neorealism, therefore, provides a permissive cause for why wars can occur (i.e., anarchy) but does not specify the proximate causes that determine when and which wars do occur, causes that seem more likely to deal directly with intermediate, second-level characteristics. Waltz and his realist followers would respond by saying that structural realism is a systems theory of world politics, not a foreign policy theory, and that as such the theory should not concern itself with the character of the units making up the system.⁴² But this distinction is logically and operationally flawed: although the character of units is excluded from structure, it is, by definition, part of the system. As Barry Buzan succinctly points out, “system = units + interaction + structure.”⁴³ Besides, Waltz himself implies in a number of places in *Theory of International Politics* that his structural balance-of-power theory leads to “many expectations about behaviors and outcomes.” For example, in a self-help system, states that do not help themselves will fail to prosper or “states will engage in balancing behavior, whether or not balanced power is the end of their acts.”⁴⁴ If this is not a theory of foreign policy, what then is? Yet even so, it is a theory of foreign policy that has little concern for the actual foreign policies of the states involved: the way that they choose to express themselves through action in the international system and with reference to their neighbors in that system.

³⁹ Waltz (1979: 72). ⁴⁰ Almond and Genco (1977). ⁴¹ Waltz (1959).

⁴² See Wohlforth (1994/95). ⁴³ Buzan (1991: 153). ⁴⁴ Waltz (1979: 118, 128).

Waltz also overestimates the degree of anarchy and underestimates the degree of order in the international system because he treats anarchy and order as an either/or condition, whereas they are better seen as poles on a continuum.⁴⁵ Even in times of stability the international system provides only the context within which a state may act. How each state actually behaves in a given situation depends on a host of other factors, such as its own definition of the international situation (which may not correspond with the reality of the international structure), its perceptions of national interests (which seem to change more rapidly than do shifts in the configuration of power), its negotiating skills and resources, and so on. In short, the state is a pivot, not a billiard ball, adjusting between domestic and international pressures, as well as between and among competing internal pressures.⁴⁶

One of the most problematic features of the so-called structural balance-of-power theory has to do with its conception of power in world politics. The traditional military-strategic notion of power pays too much attention to a state's aggregate power (i.e., its power potential as inferred from its as-yet-nonconverted resources and possessions) and too little to more dynamic, interactive, and interdependent notions of power in issue-specific domains or relationships – power “as the ability to prevail in conflict and to overcome obstacles” or power “conceived in terms of control over outcomes.”⁴⁷ Waltzian structural realism exactly fails to distinguish between aggregate structural power and usable issue-specific power, and as Alexander George reminds us, “The distinction is often critical for understanding why powerful states do less well in military conflicts and trading disputes with weaker states than with strong states.”⁴⁸ In fact, Thucydides' long-standing realist maxim, “the strong do what they have the power to do, the weak accept what they have to accept,” does not always hold in asymmetrical international negotiations between strong and weak states.⁴⁹ Consider the North Korean case – how a small and weak state was able to obtain almost everything it wanted from the lone superpower during the nuclear negotiations of 1993–94; the DPRK was able to mobilize its tactical bargaining power against the massive aggregate capabilities of the United States.⁵⁰ The literature on asymmetric conflicts shows that weaker powers have engaged in wars against stronger adversaries more often than not, and big powers frequently lose wars in asymmetric conflicts (e.g., the Vietnam War).⁵¹ According to a recent study, weak states were victorious in nearly 30 percent of all asymmetric wars in the approximately 200-year period covered in the *Correlates of War* data set. More tellingly, weak states

⁴⁵ Vasquez (1992: 854). ⁴⁶ See Putnam (1988); J. Snyder (1991: 317).

⁴⁷ Deutsch (1988: 20); Keohane and Nye (1977: 11). ⁴⁸ George (1993: 111).

⁴⁹ Thucydides (1978: 402). See Habeeb (1988). ⁵⁰ See S. S. Kim (1997b).

⁵¹ See Mack (1975); Paul (1994); Christensen (2001).

have won with increasing frequency over time.⁵² Weaker states have also initiated many brinkmanship crises that fell short of war, a strategy that North Korea has employed repeatedly.⁵³

Modified realism in the form of “balance-of-threat theory,” as expounded by Stephen Walt,⁵⁴ is a better fit for explaining the security behaviors of the two Koreas because it focuses on the alliance behaviors of great powers and small states. Although accepting the core assumptions of realism, balance-of-threat theory modifies balance-of-power theory by predicting that states will primarily balance against threats rather than against power alone. Threats are defined as a function not only of power (albeit the most important factor), but also of geographic proximity, offensive power, and aggressive intentions.⁵⁵ In Walt’s balance-of-threat theory, threat perception is conditioned mainly by whether perceived intentions of other states are aggressive or not. In this process of defining a state’s perceptions on other states’ threats and intentions, historical experience could play a significant role. While the traditional balance-of-power theory focuses on state capabilities alone, balance-of-threat theory gives further consideration to the process of identity-cum-threat (enemy or friend) formation.

The balance-of-threat theory, however, seems fairly indeterminate because it catalogues no less than four independent variables without providing an *a priori* aggregate weighting formula. Balancing behavior is also said to be more common than bandwagoning behavior, which is confined to especially weak and isolated states. In other words, the theory would predict that North Korea as a weak and isolated state would bandwagon with rather than balance against the most threatening state.

As the realist state encounters the turbulence of domestic politics in the post-Cold War era, more scholars have been shifting their attention away from conventional concerns about great-power wars and super-power rivalry toward domestic and societal sources of international conflict. The current position of domestic societal-level explanatory variables at the center of the study of international conflict is a belated acknowledgment of and response to their long neglect in the literature, to the growing empirical anomalies of structural realism, and to the increasing salience of the “black-hole syndrome” affecting many weak or failing states.⁵⁶ A new breed of Young Turks espousing neoclassical (neotraditional) realist theories of foreign policy typically allows significantly more latitude for the role of individual leaders, although they continued to posit power – traditionally conceived – as the central variable.⁵⁷

⁵² Arreguin-Toft (2001: 96). ⁵³ Lebow (1981). ⁵⁴ Walt (1987).

⁵⁵ Walt (1987: 264–65). ⁵⁶ Levy (2001); Holsti (1996).

⁵⁷ See Rose (1998); Zakaria (1998); Christensen (1996); Wohlforth (1993); Schweller (1998).

This is not to say that balance-of-power or balance-of-threats realism has lost all its relevance and salience in NEA geopolitics surrounding the Korean peninsula. With a strong China and a strong Japan trying to balance each other for power and influence, and with the constant attention and sometimes interference of the United States and Russia, the Northeast Asian geopolitical field resembles the multipolarity of Europe in the nineteenth-century age of great European powers. China is also widely recognized as the nearest competitor to the hegemonic United States, and the contest is becoming increasingly even on China's home turf. The proactive conflict management role played by China in Asia and in the second U.S.–DPRK nuclear standoff, in particular, should be taken as representative of the “soft” balance between the United States and the PRC.

The idea that Northeast Asian politics around the Korean peninsula closely match the image of a multipolar world has found special resonance in Moscow, at least since the mid-1990s. It is said to be the foreign policy concept most vigorously advanced by Foreign Minister Yevgeni Primakov as an overriding guide to Russian foreign policy. The eight-point DPRK–Russia Moscow Declaration of August 4, 2001, issued at the end of the second Putin–Kim summit in Moscow, speaks volumes about the emerging multipolar world order.⁵⁸ Tellingly, Primakov argued that in NEA two types of multipolar systems are vying for primacy: on the one hand, the old classical multipolar system within which Russia can attempt to balance the United States and China, and on the other hand, the new contemporary multipolar system based on multilateral cooperation and interdependence within which Russia can and should become part of any negotiated solution and achieve its foreign policy goals through cooperation with other powers.⁵⁹

Of all three variants of realism, a neoclassical realist theory of foreign policy, which emphasizes the role of leadership change, seems to be the best fit for explaining the changing foreign policy behaviors of the two Koreas and the Big Four, especially in South Korea and the United States, in post–Cold War years. However, better theoretical logics might be found in some of the paradigms that have grown out of the response to realism.

Liberalist Perspectives

During the 1980s, neorealism's main competitor for the position of lead paradigm in international relations was neoliberal institutionalism.

⁵⁸ For an English text of the Moscow Declaration, see Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), August 5, 2001, at www.kcna.co.jp/index-e.htm.

⁵⁹ Sokov (2002: 135).

Classical international liberalism – as compared with classical realism – argued that domestic politics matter and that different regime types will interact in different ways with one another. Classical liberalism also argued that commerce would reduce the risk of war by creating interdependencies between countries.⁶⁰ Scholars such as Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye revived the interdependence argument in the 1970s.⁶¹ Then, neoliberal institutionalism developed in the 1980s, taking neorealism's primary assumptions as its own but drawing different conclusions from them. Neoliberalism disputed neorealism's claim that states could not cooperate with each other because of relative gains concerns, by arguing that states care about absolute gains and, given a long shadow of the future, can cooperate to achieve welfare improvements.⁶² In the early 1990s, several rational choice models demonstrated that the neorealist–neoliberal debate was one over special cases of more generalized models in which relative gains mattered in some circumstances but not in others.⁶³ Therefore neoliberalism might more clearly be seen as a variant within the neorealist paradigm rather than as an alternative to it.

Other scholars in the neoliberal tradition have looked explicitly at domestic politics – at the patterns of different regime types and the constraints imposed on leaders by domestic political actors.⁶⁴ These theories claim that a state's foreign policy behavior, in general, and its war-prone behavior, in particular, depend more on its particular type of national government or social system than on the structure of the international system. Democratic peace theory has gained much ascendancy in the international relations literature, with both empirical data and a variety of theories as to why democracies fight only very rarely with each other while still fighting wars in general.⁶⁵ The new emphasis on domestic politics and ideology came as no surprise to area specialists. Even a cursory review of the literature on Chinese foreign policy suggests that the overwhelming majority of Chinese foreign policy specialists focus on a variety of domestic factors in the search for a fitting explanatory model.⁶⁶ It is

⁶⁰ The classic statement of trade liberalism is Angell (1913).

⁶¹ See Keohane and Nye (1977).

⁶² See Axelrod (1984); Keohane (1984); Oye (1985); Baldwin (1993).

⁶³ See Powell (1991, 1994); Niou and Ordeshook (1994).

⁶⁴ Bueno de Mesquita and Lalman (1992) present a formal model with *realpolitik* and domestic constraints versions; in empirical testing, the latter easily proves more fruitful and accurate than the former. See also Rosecrance and Stein (1993); Kapstein (1995); J. Snyder (1991).

⁶⁵ See Doyle (1983a, 1983b); Russett (1993); Russett and Oneal (2001) for contributions to the democratic peace theory. The domestic politics matter is not necessarily a new claim. Proceeding from sharply divergent premises, Kant, Wilson, and Lenin all situated the causes of war and the conditions for peace in the nature of the social and political systems of the state.

⁶⁶ See S. S. Kim (1998c: 3–31) for a review.

worth noting, however, that a second image (domestic regime) theory with ideology as the key determinant has been critiqued in the field of Soviet foreign policy studies because it seems to imply an unbroken continuity of Soviet foreign policy from the 1917 revolution to the 1991 fall of the empire, something that is empirically not true.⁶⁷ More recently, Robert Litwak sharply argued that it is regime intention (leadership) more than regime type that is the more accurate and critical indicator of a country's decision to go nuclear.⁶⁸ There can be little doubt that the Bush Doctrine has delivered a serious body blow to the democratic peace theory. What structural realist or Kantian liberal would have predicted in 2000 that, within a year or so, George W. Bush would launch a preventive war against Iraq or emerge in many parts of the world, including both Koreas, as the most disliked American president ever?

Constructivist Perspectives

Beyond an inclusion of new domestic variables, the post–Cold War period also gave increased momentum to an entirely different current in international relations theorizing: constructivism. The new school of constructivist scholars challenges the acultural and ahistorical bases of neorealism and its claim to universality. Constructivism posits that international politics is “socially constructed,” which implies that the fundamental structures of world politics are social rather than strictly material and that these ideational structures shape not only state behavior, but also state identities and interests.⁶⁹ In effect, states are concerned with the meaning of their actions, not merely the material reasons for or results of them. As Max Weber put it, “We are *cultural beings*, endowed with the capacity and the will to take a deliberate attitude towards the world and lend it *significance*.”⁷⁰ So, foreign policies are concocted with a concern for the meaning of the policies.

Unlike primordialists, social constructivists argue that national identity is formed and changed through repeated interactions with significant international reference groups. The identity of a state (national identity) provides a cognitive framework for shaping its interests, preferences, worldviews, and consequent foreign policy actions. A state actor in the international system understands other states based on the identity it ascribes to them and often responds accordingly. Hence, the distribution of identities of relevant states, rather than the international power

⁶⁷ Wallander (1996). ⁶⁸ Litwak (2003: 11).

⁶⁹ Wendt (1995: 71–72). See also Wendt (1987, 1992, 1994, 1999); Ruggie (1998); Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein (1996).

⁷⁰ Quoted in Ruggie (1998: 856); emphasis in the original.

structure (structural realism) or international regimes (neoliberal institutionalism), best explains and predicts whether international cooperation is possible. Collective memory of the past is central to the constructivist thesis.⁷¹

Although constructivism spawned several contending approaches all keyed to the level at which state identities and interests are produced and reinforced (e.g., systemic or structural constructivism, normative constructivism, and domestic-social constructivism), it seems useful to describe the theory in the terms of Alexander Wendt, who has put forth the most comprehensive constructivist theory of international politics. Indeed, Wendt is to constructivism what Waltz is to neorealism (structural realism). In *Social Theory of International Politics* (1999), Wendt presents a “structural idealist” theory of international politics by situating his approach between mainstream neorealism and neoliberalism, on the one hand, and postmodern critical theory, on the other hand. Because culture supervenes on nature, any analysis of world politics should begin with culture, contrary to neorealism and neoliberalism, and only then move to power and interests.⁷² It is more sensible to begin our theoretical inquiry with the distribution of ideas in the international system and “then bring in material forces rather than the other way around.”⁷³ All the same, Wendt rejects the “idea *all* the way down” thesis that he says is associated with a “thicker, more radical constructivism.”⁷⁴

In a cultural theory of international politics, according to Wendt, a fundamental determinant that helps shape state interests and capabilities, as well as behavioral tendencies in the international system, is whether states view each other as (Hobbesian) enemies, (Lockean) rivals, or (Kantian) friends, thus echoing his famous pronouncement in 1992, “Anarchy Is What States Makes of It.”⁷⁵ State interaction at the systemic level changes state identities and interests, and state *realpolitik* self-help behavior is therefore a function not of anarchical international structure but of how states identify who their friends and enemies are and, in part, how they identify themselves. In short, a state’s *realpolitik* behavior is socially learned from social interaction with other states.⁷⁶

The basic idea of Wendt’s structural idealist theory – he also characterizes his approach as a “cultural theory of international politics” or a

⁷¹ “Collective memory, by its very nature, impels actors to define themselves intersubjectively. Shaped by past struggles and shared historical accidents, collective memory is both a common discriminating experience and a ‘factual’ recollection of the group’s past ‘as it really was’.” See Cruz (2000: 276).

⁷² Wendt (1999: 193). ⁷³ Wendt (1999: 371).

⁷⁴ Wendt (1999: 371); emphasis in original.

⁷⁵ The main title of Wendt’s 1992 article in *International Organization*. See Wendt (1992).

⁷⁶ Wendt (1992, 1994).

“theory of the international system as a social construction” – is summarized as follows:

identities and their corresponding interests are learned and then reinforced in response to how actors are treated by significant Others. This is known as the principle of “reflected appraisals” or “mirroring” because it hypothesizes that actors come to see themselves as a reflection of how they think Others see or “appraise” them, in the “mirror” of Others’ representations of the Self. If the Other treats the Self as though she were an enemy, then by the principle of reflected appraisals she is likely to internalize that belief in her own role identity vis-à-vis the Other.⁷⁷

Shared knowledge is all about ideas, and “this dependence of social structure on ideas is the sense in which constructivism has an idealist (‘idea-ist’) view of structure.”⁷⁸ Shared understandings, expectations, and knowledge define social structures, constituting actors and the nature of their relationships, whether conflictual or cooperative. Therefore, a *security dilemma* is considered a social structure composed of intersubjective understandings by which states are so distrustful of each other that they define interests predominantly in egotistical or self-help terms. Conversely, a *security community* is considered a social structure in which shared knowledge is based more on trust and cooperation.⁷⁹

Therefore, on one level, constructivism strives to demonstrate the way that a social environment constitutes actors with identities and interests, and provides meaning to certain material capabilities. At the same time, it also emphasizes how “agency and interaction produce and reproduce structures of shared knowledge over time.”⁸⁰ If a state engages in hostile action such as military buildup, it can threaten other states and compel them to arm as well. But if a state conducts policies of reassurance, as the Soviet Union did at the end of the Cold War, it can move a hostile structure toward one of cooperation. Structure and agency thus is a two-way street of mutual interaction and influence. Because past actions have created a structure in which a state currently finds itself, practice and process are important. As Wendt notes, “*History matters*.”⁸¹ As is argued here and throughout the book, a historical identity – or the quest to craft an identity for history – also matters.

⁷⁷ Wendt (1999: 327). This strikes me as a restatement of the famous statement made in 1928 by W. I. Thomas, the dean of American sociologists: “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.” Some two decades later, Robert K. Merton declared that the Thomas statement has now become “a theorem basic to the social sciences.” See Thomas (1928: 572); Merton (1949: 179).

⁷⁸ Wendt (1995).

⁷⁹ Wendt (1995). Wendt’s understanding closely echoes Hedley Bull’s notion of the rules that define the “anarchical society” (Bull, 1977).

⁸⁰ Wendt (1995: 76). ⁸¹ Wendt (1995: 77); emphasis in original.

To explain the behavior of specific states, constructivists draw on the power of ideas and norms, the sometimes visible remnants of historical experience. A state's experience of colonialism, national liberation, or political change through revolution can leave lasting traces on its identity, interests, and behavior. Strategic cultures develop within states, such that they choose to use force or not, and to use it in particular ways, based on historically rooted strategic preferences that are context specific and not determined precisely by objective changes in the strategic environment.⁸² Constructivism returns agency to the state such that states are not merely mechanical balancers, but rather they act – as rational units or because of domestic interests – because they have notions of how they should be acting.

There is little doubt that Wendt has provided a rich “structural idealist” understanding of international politics at the systemic level. Nonetheless, Wendtian systemic constructionism suffers from a “too much, too little” problem – too much discourse on ontology, epistemology, and postmodern critical theory at the highest level of systemic abstraction; too much dense postmodern prose, which Robert Gilpin and others have accused of giving a bad name to social science; and too little in the way of country-specific empirical case studies.⁸³ Not unlike Waltz, Wendt defensively argues that his main concern – and objective – “has been with international politics, not foreign policy.”⁸⁴ Even more surprisingly, Wendt claims that explaining identities and interests is not his main goal because *Social Theory of International Politics* is all about explaining the international system – a “systems theory” approach to IR – rather than explaining the *behavior* of individual states. Wendt declares, “Like Waltz, I am interested in international politics, not foreign policy.”⁸⁵

Toward Synthetic Interactive Explanations

The theoretical/analytical perspectives reviewed previously command varying degrees of explanatory power. The complex and evolving relations between Korea and the great powers in a rapidly changing post-Cold War world cannot be explained adequately without reference to material, institutional, and historical/ideational factors. That is to say, realism, liberalism, and constructivism each offer insights into the various dimensions and interactive effects in various issue areas regarding the place of Korea in world politics. To fully capture the dynamic interplay

⁸² Johnston (1995).

⁸³ For country-specific case studies of the interplay between national identity and foreign policy, see Dittmer and Kim (1993); Prizel (1998); Hopf (2002).

⁸⁴ Wendt (1999: 371). ⁸⁵ Wendt (1999: 11).