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Measuring Pro-North Korean sentiment in South Korea during the Kim Jong-il Era

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes recent claims regarding positive sentiment towards North Korea among South Koreans using cross-sectional public opinion data from the 2004 and 2006 waves of the Asian Barometer. Pro-North Korean sentiments are proposed to be highest among those who feel a stronger sense of common ancestry and language with North Koreans, the wealthy, the younger, those who trust NGOs, those in Seoul and those in the southwest region. I use ordered logistical regression to test hypotheses derived from these propositions. I find support for the southwest hypothesis, though the percentage of South Koreans with these sentiments is actually very low. The results have important implications for relations on the Korean Peninsula and the study of North Korean politics.

1. Introduction

Attitudes are of particular interest to political scientists as they constitute an important dimension of an individual's psychological involvement in politics. They not only offer insight into the individual's interest and possible participation in politics, but also offer insight into public opinion towards the policies of their own government (Verba et al., 1978). Furthermore, attitudes provide the necessary insight into the psychological approval—or disapproval—of issues that may be of great importance to the state regarding domestic, regional and even international affairs.

One particular area in the attitudinal literature that has received limited attention is attitudes towards a hostile neighboring state. There are several present-day hostile dyads: China and Taiwan, India and Pakistan, Israel and the Palestinian territory and North Korea and South Korea (Ahmad, 1971; Berrebi and Klor, 2006; Kennedy, 2007; Lowrance, 2006; Ross, 2000; Sandel, 2003; Shalit, 1994; Varshney, 1991; Widmalm, 1997).[1] While all of these dyads have their unique set of contentions, only the latter dyad involves a territorial dispute that encompasses all of the territory of both states; the three former dyads only involve territorial disputes of a more limited nature. In other words, the territorial dispute of ownership on the Korean Peninsula is a winner takes all—that is, a zero-sum game—while the other dyads have more relative gains or losses. The importance of the Korean dyad is further amplified by the legitimate threat North Korea poses to the region and the rest of the world especially given its belligerent leadership and nuclear capabilities (Bleiker, 2003; Hathaway and Tama, 2004).

Relations on the Korean Peninsula have been extremely hostile since the official partitioning of the peninsula in the latter 1940s (McGuire, 1994). Immediately after the partitioning, the Korean War erupted in 1950 and lasted until 1953; this war claimed the lives of an estimated 4 million and the subsequent standoff between the Korean states has yet to be resolved (Cumings, 2011; Fisher, 1995; McGuire, 1994; Young, 2001). The Korean War was officially the first act of aggression by the

[1] This listing is illustrative of the more common hostile dyads and not exhaustive.

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north against the south. Since then, the north has conducted numerous acts of violence and terror against the south—that is, skirmishes on the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), abductions and kidnappings, ballistic missile development and launches over foreign territories, naval conflict with the south and the sinking of a South Korean naval vessel, procurement of nuclear weapons, several assassination attempts on South Korean presidents, hijacking and bombing of civilian South Korean flights, and the murder of innocent South Koreans and foreigners, to name a few (Bedeski, 2000–2001; Cho and Woo 2007; Chung, 2003; Crook, 2011; Hathaway and Tama, 2004; Horikane, 2005; Kim, 1996; Kim, Parker, and Choi, 2006a; Powell, 2010; Rahn, 2011; "Record of North Korea's" 2010; Segal, 1991; Tran, 2010; Zagoria and Kim, 1975). To a lesser degree, North Korea has also broken promises, dug secret tunnels under the DMZ, denied the International Atomic Energy Agency access to its nuclear facility in Yongbyon for inspection—even though they already signed the Nonproliferation Treaty—and exponentially expanded the size of its military (Niksch, 1981; "Record of North Korea's" 2010). Collectively, these hostile acts are constant reminders to South Koreans that relations with the north are still hostile and a North Korean invasion may still be imminent, forcing South Koreans to live in constant fear.

When states are hostile towards neighboring states, citizen attitudes towards hostile states are expected to be less than favorable. Several, including Bleiker (2003), Chung and Nagle (1992), Kim (2005), Niksch (1981) and Oh and Hassig (1999), suggest that this is the case for South Koreans towards North Korea. Under certain conditions, however, this may not necessarily be true. For instance, when teams are constructed of individuals from both states within the hostile dyad, the attitudes of the individuals may change (Desivilya, 1998). Over the past few decades, scholars—from Manheim (1990) and Chung and Nagle (1992) in the 1990s to the recent study of Myers' (2010)—have proposed that favorable attitudes towards North Korea, or pro-North sentiments, may exist among certain South Koreans. The proposed causes of pro-North sentiments range from a sense of common heritage, wealth and age to trusting NGOs and merely being from certain regions in South Korea, namely Seoul and the southwest region. None of these proposed causes have been empirically tested so it is not clear whether these are legitimate claims or not. This study therefore seeks to empirically test hypotheses derived from these causal propositions of favorable attitudes towards hostile neighbors by answering the following central questions:

- What impact do feelings of a common ancestry and language with North Korea have on pro-North Korean sentiments?
- What impact does wealth have on pro-North Korean sentiments?
- What impact does age have on pro-North Korean sentiments?
- What impact does trust in NGOs have on pro-North Korean sentiments?
- What impact does being from Seoul have on pro-North Korean sentiments?
- What impact does being from the southwest region have on pro-North Korean sentiments?
- What percentage of the South Korean population holds pro-North Korean sentiments?

This study unfolds as follows. First, I discuss the proposed causes of pro-North sentiments in South Korea stated above in more detail. Next, I discuss the data, variables and method in the data and methods section. Then, I discuss the results of this study in the analysis section. The results are that most of the proposed causes of pro-North sentiments simply do not garner empirical support, though those from the southwest region have greater pro-North sentiments than their counterparts. The importance of this finding is ultimately marginalized by that fact that only around 10 percent of the South Korean population holds pro-North sentiments. I conclude with a discussion of the important implications of this study.

2. Possible causes of pro-north sentiments in South Korea

For over two decades, scholars have pointed out possible causes of pro-North sentiment in South Korea. Manheim (1990) was one of the first to suggest that South Koreans who feel Koreans from both states share a common heritage, both ancestry and language, have high pro-North sentiments—a point Myers (2010) later emphasized. Myers (2010, p. 57) referred to the belief of a common ancestry and language as Koreanness and suggested that Koreans on both sides of the DMZ believe Koreans are a homogenous "pure-blooded people whose innate goodness has made them perennial victims of foreign powers." It is the sense of Koreanness, suggest Manheim (1990) and Myers (2010), that motivates strong pro-North sentiments in South Korea even though modern history between North and South Koreans has been extremely turbulent.

Wealthy South Koreans have greater pro-North sentiments. The wealthy, according to Myers (2010), have made a cognizant choice to pursue material wealth at the expense of sacrificing Korean tradition and values and were likely happy to do so. Korean tradition and values are encapsulated in homogeneity as well as the protection of the purity of the Korean race, culture, language and practices (Myers, 2010). On this point, Kim Jong Il was viewed as the great Korean race protector, which gave him the tacit authority to dictate the meaning of Korean tradition and values (Myers, 2010). With a long history of foreign interference[2] on the Korean Peninsula, succumbing to foreign practices is viewed as very un-

[2] During the dynastic period in China, Korea was a tributary state to the Chinese emperor. After China's loss to Japan in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95, China forfeited the tributary status of Korea to Japan. Japan occupied Korea until its loss in WWII at which point Korea experienced a few years without foreign interference only to be partitioned by the Great Powers—the Soviet Union occupied the northern territory and the U.S. in the south. Today, the U.S. maintains a strong presence in South Korea.