

The Perils of Populist Nationalism

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Relations between Seoul and Tokyo are hurtling toward disaster. Tension and discord in South Korea–Japan relations are nothing new, but this time there is a danger that the conflict may pass the point of no return. As expected, Japan removed South Korea from its “white list” of preferred trading partners. The Moon administration is openly encouraging anti-Japanese efforts, and the Abe cabinet appears to have no intention of backing down. In other words, the two countries are on a collision course in a dangerous game of chicken.

This is a vexing and deeply unfortunate state of affairs. South Korea and Japan share a wide range of common concerns, including a declining birth rate and a rapidly aging population. They also share strategic interests with respect to the rise of China and the North Korean nuclear and missile threats. It is unclear what Seoul or Tokyo stand to gain, if anything, from being at loggerheads with each other.

This is nothing less than the head-on collision of right-wing Japanese nationalism and left-wing South Korean nationalism. Japan is far from blameless, to be sure. It would not be appropriate to defend Tokyo or merely cast blame on both sides. Nevertheless, the path to overcoming antagonisms and moving on to a productive relationship first requires calm, dispassionate self-examination.

The ongoing conflict is reminiscent of tensions between Seoul and Beijing a few years ago due to the deployment of the THAAD missile defense system. China engaged in economic retaliation at the time, but the reaction in South Korea was starkly different. The deployment of THAAD was carried out in accordance with the U.S.–South Korea Status of Forces Agreement. China strongly opposed the measure as a threat to its national security, and South Korea went to great lengths to tamp down the diplomatic discord. However, there was no outpouring of nationalist sentiment of the kind that we are witnessing now. What explains the difference? The answer to this question is essential to understanding the current situation.

CHINA AS THE HISTORIC HEGEMON, JAPAN AS THE NEW LEADER

One possible answer is that China’s retaliation had a greater impact on the South Korean economy. It is true that China is South Korea’s largest trading partner. South Korea enjoys a substantial trade surplus with respect to China, while it has consistently run a trade deficit against Japan. However, as was made clear by recent Japanese actions, trade with Japan plays a substantial role in South Korea’s high-tech sector, including its semiconductor industry. In terms of the overall balance sheet, the economic impact on South Korea is certainly not smaller than that resulting from China’s retaliation. It follows that economic factors are not sufficient to explain the differing domestic reaction in South Korea.

Disputes over historical issues are another candidate. Japan’s colonial rule and its insufficient apologies or compensation for the same are a frequent target of criticism. A careful examination of history, however, reveals that China invaded the Korean Peninsula far more often than Japan. Moreover, the Korean Peninsula may have been unified if China had not intervened in the Korean War. The catastrophic human cost of 3 million casualties could also have been avoided. It is puzzling that South Koreans—who denounce Japan’s past history—do not apply the same standard to China.

This arises from the unique psychological attitude among Koreans toward China and Japan. Simply put, the origins of this attitude can be found in Korean nationalist sentiment, which was formed amidst the rise of modern Japan and Japanese colonial rule over Korea. Korea had recognized Chinese hegemony over Northeast Asia, even adopting an attitude of *sadae* (submission to greater powers) in bilateral relations. By contrast, there was resistance toward recognizing Japan in the same way when it became a regional power in the modern era. This only intensified after Japan, which Koreans had regarded as a lesser power, annexed and colonized Korea. The gap between this perception and reality developed into a psychological complex. It is this factor that underlies the intense reaction toward Japan’s economic retaliation and the

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lack of a similar response in the face of similar actions by China.

Anti-Japanese sentiment was forged during Japan's colonial rule and developed into an exclusionary form of nationalism that emphasized the ethnic purity of the Korean people. This only solidified following the division of the Korean Peninsula. Opposing Japan has been a powerful political weapon for both North and South Korea, which also explains the excesses of nationalism during the era of division on the peninsula.

Nationalism has historically been an ideology of the right. The left criticized nationalism as an invention of the bourgeoisie. On the Korean Peninsula, however, nationalism is deeply ingrained in both Koreas and both the political left and right. One need not look any further than the current wave of anti-Japanese sentiment in South Korea, which is being led by the left. The right, anxious about being branded as traitors or collaborators, is reluctantly joining in the anti-Japanese struggle.

Understanding the unique characteristics of Korean nationalism is critical in discerning the core of the current conflict between South Korea and Japan. In particular, it is vital to recognize the historical origins, development, and political role of Korean nationalism.

There is certainly room for debate regarding the origins and genealogy of Korean nationalism. Nevertheless, there exists a broad academic consensus that it is a product of the modern era. Toward the end of the 19th century, Western powers and Japan forced their way onto the Korean Peninsula. Faced with this crisis, Korean intellectuals of the late Joseon dynasty responded by adopting nationalism. The concept of "nation" as it is used in South Korea was borrowed from Japan, which was in turn translated from the German concept of *Kulturnation*. The genealogy of Korean nationalism can thus be traced to Germany and Japan.

In this regard, Japanese colonial rule on the Korean Peninsula was not only confined to military, political, and economic issues, but also encompassed ideology and discourse. Using the discourse and logic of the colonizing power as a means of resistance is a commonly observed pattern in world history.

Through the experience of Japanese colonial rule, Korean nationalism took on a distinctly ethnic character, with an emphasis on one's ancestry. When nationalism was first introduced to Korea in the late 19th century, there was some discussion of the Anglo-American concept of civic nationalism. Eventually, the German and Japanese idea of the nation as a cultural and ethnic entity took root as the dominant ideology in Korea. This is closely tied to the assimilationist policies pursued by imperial Japan in the 1930s, and it is also related to the emergence of socialism and communism.

Imperial Japan pursued a policy of assimilation under the theory of *Nissen dōsoron*, an interpretation of history that claimed a shared ancestor between the Japanese and Korean peoples. This prompted a response that stressed the pure and unique ancestry of the Korean people. At the same time, the concept of a distinct "nation" was also put forth to counter the socialist emphasis on class as a universal concept. Yi Kwang-su's *Joseon minjokron* ("Theory of the Korean Nation") is perhaps the most prominent example. Yi saw the nation as an "eternal being," a timeless and unalterable entity—a view similar to the fascist ideology that swept across Germany and Italy at the time.

The theory of nationalism proposed by Liah Greenfeld, an American historical and political sociologist, yields important implications. According to Greenfeld, German nationalism emphasized ancestry and culture, in contrast to British and French nationalism, which stressed the nation as a civic and political community. The psychological factor of *ressentiment* played a significant role in giving rise to this distinctive form of German nationalism.

There are two conditions behind this phenomenon. The first is observed inequality, and the second is a complex mixture of envy and hatred that arises from this inequality. This is especially accentuated when the object of this sentiment is regarded as inferior. The United Kingdom spearheaded the Industrial Revolution, while France achieved an unprecedented political revolution. Germany, which lagged behind these two countries, developed a unique national consciousness based on ancestry and culture while steeped in a psychological mixture of envy and hatred. In retrospect, it is anything but surprising that Japan and Korea—both "late starters"—adopted an ethnic form of nationalism modeled on that of Germany, instead of Anglo-American ideas of the nation.

BETWEEN "GREAT POWER" AND "WAENOM"

The concept of *ressentiment* provides valuable insight into the current conflict between South Korea and Japan. Koreans possessed a conscious and subconscious sense of superiority toward Japan, just as Germany did toward the United Kingdom and France. China was accepted as a great power, but the Japanese were belittled with epithets like *waegu* or *waenom*. The object of *sadae* was always China. There are no records to indicate the same for Japan. However, Japan, which Koreans had regarded as inferior, achieved modernization through the Meiji Restoration and then colonized Korea. This was an utterly unacceptable state of affairs for Korea. Moreover, Japan attempted to alter Korea's history and consciousness through policies such as *naisen ittai* ("making Japan and Korea one") and the "Japanization" of education. In this context, there could not have been a more effective way of resisting Japan than to proclaim an ethnic Korean nationalism based

on common descent from *Tangun*, the legendary founder of the Korean nation.

Korean *ressentiment* toward Japan was not extinguished even after the end of Japanese colonial rule. Korea desperately needed to reconcile with and receive assistance from Japan to achieve economic development, but this was difficult to accept at a psychological level. This is why the 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and South Korea is regarded as “a diplomacy of humiliation.” Japan not only provided a model of economic development for South Korea, but also currently has the third largest economy in the world—undeniably higher in rank than South Korea. Nevertheless, this reality remains difficult to accept for Koreans, who regard Japan with a mixture of envy and hatred. Anti-Japanese sentiment is an exceptionally volatile emotional and political issue.

Consider, for example, the dispute over historical issues. Japan’s attitude is clearly problematic. (The unique psychology behind Japan’s attitude toward historical issues is a phenomenon worth analyzing in its own regard.) However, no amount of apology by Japan will be truly regarded as sincere by Koreans. Most Koreans believe that Japan has not apologized for its past actions. Deep down, Koreans wish to deny the fact that Japan has ever apologized because its attitude was never sincere. This will not change until the day that South Korea becomes more powerful than Japan.

On the other hand, this kind of *ressentiment* does not surface against China. This may perhaps be the case because Koreans accept China as a great power at a psychological level, but think that South Korea is still ahead of China—in economic terms, for instance. While it is true that there is anti-Chinese sentiment, it is fundamentally different from anti-Japanese sentiment. Even if the current South Korea–Japan conflict is resolved, this sentiment will not easily fade as long as *ressentiment* toward Japan, which is deeply rooted in Koreans’ consciousness, stays in place.

LEFT-WING NATIONALISM

Unlike socialism or communism, which emphasize universality, nationalism is a particularistic ideology. Left-wing ideology and nationalism are thus incompatible. In communist theory, nationalism is dismissed as an ideology of the bourgeoisie that will eventually disappear. However, it became difficult for the left to ignore nationalism when it emerged as a powerful anti-imperialist, anti-colonial ideology. This explains the rise of the debates at the Communist International in the 1920s about the question of nationalism in societies under colonial rule.

Communism in Asia fused nationalism with left-wing ideology early on. China’s Mao Zedong was quick to grasp the mass appeal of nationalism. Vietnam’s Ho Chi Minh and North Korea’s Kim Il-sung also appealed more to nationalist sentiment than class consciousness. Whereas the radical nationalism of the West—fascism or Nazism—was a

right-wing movement, nationalism in Asia took on a distinctly left-wing character.

Radical nationalism, regardless of its ideological leaning, has resulted in catastrophic consequences. In Europe, extreme right-wing nationalism fused with racism and led to ethnic cleansing, including the genocide of the Jewish population. Extreme left-wing nationalism in Asia brought about poverty and isolation. Following its defeat, Germany achieved prosperity only after extricating itself from the frenzy of radical nationalism. China and Vietnam also escaped poverty only after moving beyond radical nationalism. Only North Korea, which has established the “Kim dynasty” regime and clings to a “Korean people first” ideology, remains mired in this type of nationalism.

There is debate on whether nationalism is a force for good, but nationalism itself is neutral. It can be easily combined with other ideologies because of its versatility. Therefore, it can lead to positive or negative consequences depending on the type of ideology and political regime it is combined with. Nationalism can be the basis for anti-imperialist, anti-colonial movements, and it can also provide the psychological impetus for modernization among developing countries. In Korea, nationalism was the ideological foundation of both the struggle against Japanese colonial rule and economic modernization under Park Chung-hee.

On the other hand, nationalism can also underlie imperialist or fascist ideology in autocratic regimes. Both North and South Korea aggressively used nationalism to build and consolidate authoritarian rule. The regimes created by Park Chung-hee and Kim Il-sung could not have been more different from each other, but both were authoritarian regimes built on nationalism. The retreat from multilateralism in the form of “America First” and the wave of anti-immigrant sentiment that is sweeping the globe can also be understood as a mixture of nationalism and chauvinism or populism.

Both Daniel Bell (*End of Ideology*) and Francis Fukuyama (*End of History*) uniformly predicted the end of nationalism. The reality has been anything but. Nationalism remains a formidable force even in the 21st century, manifesting itself in diverse forms. Two factors created an environment in which nationalism fused with chauvinism and populism: worsening economic inequality due to neoliberal globalization, and efforts to advance the rights and interests of minorities and immigrants.

The former fueled chauvinism on the left, while the latter did so on the right. In South America, where left-wing populism is widespread, governments are stoking public sentiment by blaming the neoliberal economic order for economic collapse. In Europe and the United States, where right-wing chauvinism is on the rise, minorities and immigrants have become the political scapegoat. Such trends, whether on the left or the right, demonstrate the adverse consequences of

nationalism—much like the spread of radical nationalism in the past. Even Fukuyama has acknowledged the resurgence and potential harms of “identity politics” with great concern.

EUROPEAN VS. SOUTH AMERICAN CHAUVINISM

The chauvinistic nationalism that is emerging in South Korea and Japan is not unrelated to these global historical trends. Japan under the Abe cabinet approximates European right-wing chauvinism, whereas South Korea under the Moon administration appears similar to South American left-wing chauvinism. Inciting anti-Japanese sentiment with references to “Admiral Yi Sun-shin’s twelve ships” and the National Debt Repayment Movement of 1907, and by calling for a boycott of Japanese products is the very archetype of nationalistic or chauvinistic populism. By bringing this misguided patriotism to the fore, the Moon administration has avoided taking responsibility for ongoing economic difficulties and its neglect of bilateral relations with Japan.

One can only hear condemnations of Japan’s economic retaliation. There are no efforts to honestly examine the fundamental reason behind the current state of affairs. Instead of formulating a strategy to resolve the crisis, the Moon administration is trapped in the outdated mindset of calling for *uibyeong* (civilian militia) and appealing to the Donghak Peasant Revolution of 1894.

The origins of the current crisis can be traced to last October’s Supreme Court decision on compensation for Korean forced-labor victims by Japanese companies. Japan has argued that it does not have an obligation to compensate individual victims of forced labor under the 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations. However, South Korea’s Supreme Court determined that this was a political interpretation of the treaty, and that the relevant provisions do not apply to individual claims. It thus ruled that the forced-labor victims were each owed 100 million Korean won in damages by the Japanese company in question. In response, Japan warned that it would remove South Korea from its “white list.” Bilateral relations rapidly cooled thereafter, and Japan has followed through on its warning.

There was tension between domestic law and international treaty (the 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations), and there was a clash between public sentiment and diplomatic imperatives. Instead of seeking a diplomatic solution, the Moon administration persisted in ignoring the problem on the grounds that it was a matter for the judiciary branch. Once Tokyo went on the offensive with economic retaliation, the response in Seoul was to appeal to public sentiment. By asserting the binary distinction of “pro- or anti-Japanese” and “patriots or traitors” and thus maximizing anti-Japanese sentiment, the Moon administration avoided taking the blame for its diplomatic misstep. There is no political weapon more effective than anti-Japanese sentiment.

A SOCIETY THAT REJECTS A MONOPOLY ON TRUTH

As expected, approval ratings for President Moon and the ruling party skyrocketed. The think tank affiliated with the ruling party even put together a report on how the South Korea–Japan conflict could be beneficial for next year’s general election. Chauvinistic populism may provide a temporary political advantage, but it does nothing to meaningfully resolve bilateral issues. There will also be lasting consequences from polarizing and dividing the public. It is the South Korean people—and the country as a whole—that will suffer the after-effects. There are no successful examples of chauvinistic populism, whether on the left or right. Nationalism has primarily been used by the right in South Korea after 1945, but it is now being used as a political weapon by the left.

Karl Popper, a philosopher of history, argued in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* that right-wing nationalists and left-wing Marxists were the main enemies of an open society. According to Popper, an open society is one that accepts criticism and rejects a monopoly on truth. No one can claim absolute authority; there is no such thing as the right to be exempt from criticism. In other words, no one can claim to be a judge. At this time, what is the opposing force that is stopping South Korea from becoming an open society? With anti-Japanese sentiment sweeping across the country, we must honestly confront this question if we hope to become one.

The history of colonial rule and division has led to an excess of nationalism and a dearth of liberalism on the Korean Peninsula. Both North and South Korea, as well as the political left and the right, have unduly relied on nationalism instead of looking to liberalism. Anti-Japanese sentiment has always been a potent political weapon. One can perhaps understand why Rhee Syngman, who was directly involved in the Korean independence movement, appealed to this force. However, following South Korea’s democratization, both conservatives and progressives—including Kim Young-sam, Roh Moo-hyun, and Lee Myung-bak—turned to anti-Japanese sentiment in the face of declining approval ratings toward the end of their term in office. The Moon administration is no exception. Its approval ratings have soared, riding on the wave of anti-Japanese sentiment.

What would Popper make of South Korean society today? He might have to revise his typology of the enemies of an open society. In South Korea, the enemy of open society is left-wing chauvinism, not right-wing fascism or left-wing Marxism.

The current ruling elite in South Korea fought against authoritarian rule as student activists in college. Paradoxically, it may be precisely this group of individuals that is standing in the way of South Korea becoming an open society. Even accounting for the fact that it is political rhetoric, it is truly shameful to watch high-level officials dividing the public into “pro- or anti-Japanese” and “patriots or traitors.” This is unbecoming of a country that prides itself on having become

a member of the G20 after achieving both industrialization and democratization.

KOREA AND JAPAN: ONLY 43 YEARS OF ENMITY

It is time for rational liberalism that enables reasonable dialogue, not populist nationalism that provokes public sentiment. In the liberal worldview, individuals are independent beings that possess inherent dignity. Each individual deliberates and decides on a course of action, for which he or she must take responsibility. By contrast, nationalism is a collectivist ideology. The individual has no inherent meaning, and every person must think and act only as the member of a particular nation. Herein lies the danger of nationalism: a slide toward totalitarianism. A discourse that uses the language of “pro-Japanese collaborators” and “traitors” compels individuals into only choosing between being for or against the nation. There is no room for individual autonomy, and the logic of the collective is imposed without exception. This is exactly the enemy of the open society that Popper spoke of.

One could argue that now is the time to temporarily set aside individual preferences and prepare for battle in the anti-Japanese struggle. This argument is not entirely invalid. However, the history of fascism and Bolshevism serves as a stern warning: any society that is dominated by the logic of the collective over the individual will eventually fall to ruin.

The “conscientious intellectuals” of Japan criticize Abe’s right-wing chauvinism, no doubt due to the memory of the disaster that resulted from militaristic fascism. South Korea also needs the courage of prudent, sensible intellectuals who are willing to fight against the enemies of open society. Korea is no longer under authoritarian rule, but it is regrettable to still see divisive rhetoric and glimpses of self-censorship. What does it say about South Korea that there are more “intellectuals of conscience” in Japan? To outshine Japan, there need to be more Korean intellectuals who confront the enemies of open society.

An ethnic nationalism that emphasizes ancestry is now obsolete. It has fulfilled its historical role. The nation must now be redefined as a community of individuals who share political and civic values, instead of a community of individuals who share the same blood. Only then can we prepare for a democratic process of unification. It is possible to become an open society only if foreign brides, ethnic Korean-Chinese,

and North Korean defectors are all treated with equal respect regardless of ancestry.

It is also necessary to move beyond the psychological complex toward Japan. Although Japan is ahead of South Korea in terms of overall national power, there is no need to be envious or feel intimidated. South Korea is gradually accumulating the capability to confidently compete with Japan on the international stage. The painful experience of colonial rule must not be forgotten, but this memory should also not hinder the path forward. If Koreans want to make their nation a stronger one than Japan, they need to overcome the “anti-Japan” mentality.

One is reminded of the Joint Declaration by President Kim Dae-jung and Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo. Under the view that bilateral relations were relatively favorable except for the seven-year invasion of Korea that began in 1592 and the thirty-six years of colonial rule, the Kim administration emphasized the values the two countries shared in common: a commitment to liberal democracy and a market economy, as well as the alliance with the United States. The declaration defined the scope and character of Seoul’s policy toward Tokyo in a way that meaningfully advanced South Korea’s national interest. This statement was issued in 1998, when South Korea was in the midst of a catastrophic economic crisis and bilateral relations were frozen due to the Kim Young-sam administration’s initiative to “rectify” history. Kim Dae-jung chose pragmatism instead of a populism that would provoke nationalist sentiment. The Moon administration sees itself as carrying on the legacy of Kim Dae-jung’s policy toward North Korea. Could it not also carry on the spirit of the Kim-Obuchi declaration?

FINAL THOUGHTS

The current conflict between South Korea and Japan will eventually be resolved in some fashion. After the explosion of nationalist sentiment and a period of cooling, there will be a return to reality. Without a sustained effort to cultivate rational liberalism and prevent the excesses of nationalism, however, the volcano of nationalist sentiment could erupt again at any time. Intellectuals must play a critical role if South Korea is to become an open society. They must protect the Republic of Korea from the ferocious wave of populism and chauvinism that is sweeping the globe.