

CHANGES IN THREAT PERCEPTION IN KOREA: WHY?

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Introduction

On the 4th of July 2006, during the United States' Independence Day celebration, North Korea held a missile test—some would say a missile demonstration to prove its ability to launch the Taepodong-2 (*CNN*, 2006) and apparently upgraded short-range missiles as well. Pyongyang pursued its plan to conduct the missile drill in spite of all the requests and the threats made by the regional states. The Taepodong-2 missile test failed 50 seconds after its launch (Wright, 2006). The failure prevented the need to disclose the missile's destination and test if the United States' missile defence system could identify and intercept the North Korean missile. After the test, due to their failure to gain the support of China, Russia and South Korea—all members of the Six-Party Talks mechanism—Japan and the United States unsuccessfully tried to convince the regional states to impose sanctions on North Korea (*China Daily*, 2006).

China and Russia did not support the Japanese and US initiative due to bilateral and global interests. Seoul did not support the sanctions because of internal and regional interests. One would have expected South Korea, an important US ally in the region threatened by North Korea, to support the US initiative and classify the DPRK as a threat to the region, just as the US and Japan had done. From Washington's point of view the missile test was not a threat in the East Asian region alone, but to other regions as well. This was not the first time that Seoul disagreed with Washington on its policy towards the DPRK. The most prominent example is South Korea's attempt to convince the White House that North Korea should not be included in the 'Axis of Evil' (Kim, 2002; Miles, 2002; Rozman and Rozman, 2003). These are just two examples of how Seoul, an important US ally in Asia threatened by the DPRK, does not agree with the United States. The two states should have shared the same threat perception towards the DPRK, but in some cases they do not agree on this issue.

This paper will examine this conceptual and actual change in South Korea's perceptions of the DPRK threat and will attempt to discover if the reason behind it

lies within the political arena or rather stems from generational or economic changes. The first part of the paper will discuss the changes that occurred in the region over the last few decades and their relevance to the South Korean threat perception. The second part will briefly outline the theories of threat perception. The third part of the paper will discuss the changes within Korea, and the last part will examine the implications these changes would have on United States-Korea relations.

The changes in the regional arena and their implication on threat perception

Over the last three decades the North-East Asian arena has changed its balance of power and even the regional balance of threat. Old enemies became allies and threatening states became trade partners. For many years China and the Soviet Union were North Korea's allies. These three adversary states played an important role in Seoul and Washington's defence policies and decisions regarding the structure and number of Korean and US forces in the Korean peninsula and the US forces in the region. From the mid 1980s, the Soviet Union, China and South Korea began an incremental process of normalization after many years of tension and hostility between these states, which was part of the Cold War conflict (Blank, 1995; Hao and Zhuang, 1992; Kim, 1997). The slow incremental process that began in the 1980s continued with President Roh Tae-woo's Nordpolitik Policy, which improved relations between South Korea and China and the Soviet Union.¹

The end of the Cold War, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and the normalization of relations between Pyongyang's allies were the most important changes in the regional threats from Seoul's point of view. The decline of tension in the region left the DPRK as the last remaining main threat to South Korea. Its conventional capabilities and even its potential nuclear capabilities were and still are a source of concern in Seoul and Washington (Cha, 2002a). The assessment of the North Korean threat has changed throughout the years, depending on its capabilities and the intelligence evaluations. Since its establishment, the DPRK's pattern of engagement with the ROK was based on Pyongyang's use of force, for example the Korean War and terrorist attacks against the South and the US forces in Korea, which led Seoul to perceive the North as a permanent existential threat (Lerner, 2002).

For many years Seoul saw North Korea as an imminent threat. An illustration of this was Seoul's objection to each of Washington's initiatives to decrease or withdraw US forces stationed in Korea (Bandow, 1996; Han, 1980; Kusano, 1987; Lee, 2006; Wood and Zelikow, 1996:3). The fear of abandonment by the US was extremely high during those years (Cha, 1999:42; Liska, 1962:75–6). The first withdrawal of US forces from Korea was before the Korean War and later instances occurred

during Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter and others' presidencies. The South Korean government rejected each of these initiatives since they feared it would severely affect the deterrence of the DPRK and eliminate the US's security commitment to South Korea. President Park Chung-hee, for example, repeatedly stated that the DPRK was an imminent threat to South Korea's security and had disagreements with Presidents Nixon and Carter on their initiatives to withdraw a portion (Nixon) and the majority (Carter) of the US military forces stationed in Korea (Kim, 1978:374; Soh, 1989:29–30; Yang, 1981:269).

The tension between the two Koreas rose several times because of the Cold War, tensions between the superpowers, and internal politics within the two Koreas. The major potential crisis occurred at the beginning of the 1990s with the fear that the nuclear build-up might lead the Korean peninsula to a second Korean War (Wit, Poneman and Gallucci, 2004). While South Korea focused on the Korean peninsula parameter, the US had a broader interest in the region and in other regions as well. The differences between Seoul and Washington in their analysis of the North Korean threat were caused by their different points of view, where both countries analysed the DPRK's capabilities and intentions and the implications that any policy towards Pyongyang would have on other regions. Washington's prism would in most cases be a global prism, which might occasionally conflict with Seoul's prism. The US's global interests did not always correlate with South Korean interests. An example of this can be seen by analysing the US policy towards the DPRK regarding the nuclear issue. South Korea perceived the main issue to be the implications for the Korean peninsula of any nuclear escalation by the DPRK or of the US policy towards the DPRK. For example, Seoul focused on the US's 'Axis of Evil' policy and its implications on North-South Korea, while from the US point of view the 'Axis of Evil' included other states that should be taken into consideration when assessing Washington's policy decisions towards the DPRK. The US believed that a tough policy towards the North would have positive implications on other states that were the US's 'states of concern' or 'rogue states' (Jentleson, 2005; Lennon, 2004; Litwak, 2000).

The main change in the South Korean threat perception began during President Kim Dae-jung's era and has continued ever since. The disparity between the US and South Korean threat perception towards the DPRK has increased since that era. The change in the threat perception was not just on a political level but began to change on the nation level—among the citizens of the South. The gap between survey polls conducted in the US and South Korea at critical times, such as during the missile tests and even before, revealed a disparity between how South Korea perceived the DPRK threat, which (prior to 2006) was lower than one might expect in a state bordering a potential nuclear state, while US citizens perceived the DPRK as an imminent threat, albeit a lower threat to the US than to South Korea.²

What are the reasons for the increased threat perception in Seoul and Washington?

Why is there no correlation between the threat perception of American and South Korean citizens? And why does South Korea, which is potentially more threatened by North Korea than the US, have a lower perception of the North Korean threat than the US?

What is threat perception?

What is threat perception? Who and what influences threat perception? Could threat perception be changed or manipulated by state leaders, for example to increase the defence budget or to find a scapegoat for internal crisis? Could the government change the public's threat perception? What are factors that influence the changes in the public's threat perceptions? What do International Relations theories state about threat perception?

There are many factors that influence the state's threat perception. We can roughly divide these into: the capabilities of the threatening state, its intentions, and the interpretations of these elements by state leaders and citizens. According to the Balance of Power theory, states will be influenced by the distribution of power regardless of the state's intentions (Buzan, 2000:43–6; Geller, 1998:ch.4; Waltz, 1979). In an anarchic structure (Milner, 1991; Wendt, 1992) of the international system, the state must assume that other states might harm it (Waltz, 1979:116–20). The power distribution within the international system will influence the state's threat perception and the alliances that the state might decide to join in order to obtain assistance in handling the threats it faces (Cossa, 1997; Mochizuki, 1995; Pollack and Cha, 1995; Snyder, 1990:105). Changes in the international system's distribution of power since the establishment of the Koreas should have changed South Korea's threat perception according to the changes within the system. One can see that the changes of the South Korean regime's threat perception were not always correlated with the balance of power.

The Balance of Threat theory (Walt, 1987) suggests that in order to understand the balance of threat one should look at four indicators: the aggregate power of the state, its geographic proximity, its offensive power, and its aggressive intentions. According to this theory, the DPRK is an imminent threat to South Korea. North Korea has demonstrated its willingness to use its military capabilities in the Korean War (Millett, 1997; Lee, 2001; Stueck, 2002). Its actions have shown that Pyongyang has revisionist intentions and does not accept the current status quo of a divided Korean peninsula. This is one of the main reasons why South Korea insisted on signing a security alliance with the US after the Korean War (Baek, 1988; Boose, 2003). Since the Korean War, the DPRK has worked on increasing its military capabilities in order to deter any attempt by South Korea or the United States to attack its soil and to prepare itself for pursuing a militarized unification if circumstances allow it

(Bermudez, 2001). Due to Pyongyang's failure to fulfil its goal of unifying Korea in the Korean War and Kim Il-sung's understanding that China and the Soviet Union would not support another military operation to unify the Korean peninsula, Kim Il-sung decided to strengthen North Korea's military force. The logic of Kim's decision was to acquire enough military capabilities to allow the DPRK, if conditions would allow, to pursue a military operation without the assistance of its allies. Pyongyang invested an immense amount of money in the military industry for this purpose. The capacity of the North Korean People's Army to win a war is questionable (Minnich, 2005; O'Hanlon, 1998), but its potential to damage the infrastructure and lead to casualties in South Korea and even to harm the forces and infrastructures of other states in the East Asian arena with its missile and artillery capabilities is unquestionable (Bermudez, 2001). North Korea has been a potential threat to South Korea and to US forces in the region since the 1950s. It has aggregate power, for example its artillery capabilities can cause immense damage to the capital Seoul, and its offensive power is very impressive, although as previously stated, it cannot win a war. These indicators show that the DPRK is a potential threat to the ROK. The disputed issue between Seoul and Washington has been North Korea's intentions. Throughout the years there were few disagreements between Seoul and Washington over the level of threat that North Korea posed to the South and to the US forces stationed in Korea, and even on US soil. In the 1950s and '60s there was a correlation between the US and South Korea over North Korea's potential threat. When President Richard Nixon decided to decrease the number of US soldiers stationed in Korea (Greene, 1970), and later President Jimmy Carter pursued his initiative to withdraw the majority of US forces from the Korean peninsula (Han, 1980:1079; Wood and Zelikow, 1996:3), the South Korean government did not accept Washington's assessments of the DPRK's military capabilities (Park, 1978:154). Since the elections of President Kim Dae-jung and President Roh Moo-hyun, the gap between the Seoul and Washington perceptions of the North Korean threat, specifically Pyongyang's intentions, is increasing.

The change of threat perception was not unique to the leaders of South Korea. The changes occurred at the nation (citizen) level as well. When one looks at the survey polls conducted in South Korea throughout the years a change in the threat perception of North Korea can be traced. What are the reasons behind the transformation in the threat perception of the Korean people? Is it influenced by the state or are there changes within the society that influence this modification? The answers to these questions are complicated. We can state that the public is influenced by the reality that the government is attempting to create, and the public also influences the government in turn.

The Economy

One of President Clinton's slogans in 1992 when he ran for President was: "It is the Economy, Stupid". Well, it is the economy in South Korea as well. The economy plays an important role in designing the security policy and even in the threat perception of the state and the people (Fordham, 1998; Gates and Katsuaki, 1992). For many years the idea of having a unified Korea has been the dream and the reality for many Koreans. Mending the mistakes made by the superpowers at the end of the Second World War that led to the division of the Korean peninsula was one of the main official goals of every South Korean president.

The economic factor became an important one in a few cases. The unification of Germany, the first case of a nation divided as a result of the Cold War to be reunited, became an empirical case study to reveal the costs involved (Wolf, 2005). Until the German unification the issue of Korean unification was only a theoretical case study. German unification allowed the experts and Korean citizens to closely observe the social, political and the economic costs and implications. At that time the possibility of a Korean unification was very slim, which is why the implications for the Korean public were not crucial. The economic factor became more significant after the 1997 economic crisis, or as the Koreans call it the 'IMF crisis'. The IMF crisis allowed the Korean public to get a first hand feeling and understanding of the economic implications of a Korean unification.

As a result of the economic crisis, the Korean public became more aware of the costs of Korean unification. This raised fears among the South Korean public that a military escalation in the Korean peninsula could lead to a war or to the collapse of the DPRK, which might lead to a quick, uncontrolled and very expensive unification (Pollack and Lee, 1999). This could be one of the reasons why the survey polls conducted in Korea revealed that citizens were afraid that a harsh policy towards the North, as Washington proposes, might lead to the collapse of the Northern regime. Since the 1997 economic crisis, the economic factor has become more vital in the threat perception of the South Korean public. From their point of view, the North Korean threat is not just a military threat; it is an economic threat as well. Any policy towards the DPRK is analysed by its implications of how much it will cost and to what extent it will affect the standard of living.

Politics—The Sunshine Policy and the June 2000 summit

The June 2000 summit between South Korean leader Kim Dae-jung and the North Korean leader Kim Jung-il (Bleiker, 2001; Koh, 2002; O'Neil, 2001) is an important event that influenced the threat perception of South Korea. North Korea, which had been the South's enemy for many decades (Yang, 1999), began to be treated

differently by the Kim Dae-jung regime. South Korean President Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy began to change the DPRK's image, subsequently changing the threat perception. North Korea's capabilities were unquestionable (Kaufmann, 2004) but the major disagreement between Seoul and Washington was and still is the DPRK's intentions.

In the joint declaration made by the South and North Korean leaders, we can read between the lines that on 15 June 2000 they declared that North Korea is not an enemy of the South (*Korea Times*, 2001), stating that the issue would be solved by the Koreans themselves and not by the superpowers. However, everyone silently agrees that the US has an important role in solving the Korean peninsula crisis issue. In a press conference held by the South Korean Ministry of Defence on 31 March 2001, the spokesman stated that North Korea was a threat to South Korea:

'The North holds a quantitative advantage over South Korea in military might. It has long- and medium-range missiles, which can attack the rear and front lines in the South.'

The major change in the press conference was the decision not to declare North Korea as an 'Enemy State' (*ibid.*). President Kim Dae-jung stated that he did not perceive the DPRK as an enemy state with the intention of attacking South Korea, although it had the capabilities to do so. Even though North Korea was not declared an enemy state, President Kim did not change the South Korean military structure to exhibit a change in defence policy as a result of the DPRK's threat perception.

The Clinton administration supported Kim Dae-jung's initiative as long as it did not contradict the US policy towards the DPRK, but it did not change its threat perception of North Korea prior to the June 2000 summit (*FNS*, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c; US Department of Defense, 2000).

President Kim Dae-jung's election stimulated a debate in South Korea regarding his Sunshine Policy (Levin and Han, 2002). Should South Korea view the DPRK as the enemy or should it change its perception of Pyongyang? The main point of contention between Washington and Seoul surrounded (and still does) North Korea's intentions. While Seoul perceived North Korean intentions as defensive and stable, Washington tilted towards the offensive and saw Pyongyang as a revisionist state.³

During the Clinton administration's era there was an informal agreement between Seoul and Washington over Seoul's Sunshine Policy towards the DPRK. Once the Bush administration was elected the winds in Washington began to change. The 9/11 events and later the definition of the DPRK as part of the 'Axis of Evil' changed the policy towards the DPRK (Landau and Erez, 2003). President Kim tried to convince the Bush administration to change its policy towards the DPRK. President Kim Dae-jung was the first foreign President to visit Washington after President George W. Bush's election. He expected President Bush to support his Sunshine Policy to the

same degree as President Clinton. To his surprise President Bush gave him the cold shoulder. President Bush's 'Axis of Evil' policy created a new problem for the South Korean President when President Bush included North Korea as part of the Axis. President Kim tried to convince the American President not to include the DPRK as part of the Axis with Iran and Iraq. The 'Axis of Evil' policy highlighted the difference between Washington and Seoul over the threat perception and the focus of each capital. Washington perceived the global threat that all three states posed to the international system on different levels, while South Korea saw this policy as threatening to the Korean peninsula. From Seoul's point of view, pursuing a tough policy towards the DPRK would cause Pyongyang to follow a more extreme policy that might result in an escalation of tension on the peninsula.

President Kim tried to increase dialogue with the DPRK by changing the rules of engagement with it. He was also able to change the way the DPRK was perceived in the South. Nevertheless, a byproduct of the Sunshine Policy was increased tension between the US and South Korea over the US policy towards the North and increased anti-Americanism in Korea, as is evident in the survey polls (Chang and Arrington, 2007).

US Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly's visit to Pyongyang in 2002 (Harrison, 2005; Pinkston, 2006) created an increase in the US and South Korea's threat perception. The outcome of Kelly's visit was that, according to US sources, the DPRK breached the 1994 Agreed Framework (IAEA, 1994) by developing an enriched uranium programme. The suspicion that Pyongyang was developing military nuclear capabilities increased the fear that the DPRK was not obeying its agreements and should not be trusted, leading to the conclusion that the US policy was justified. However, even after the North Korean nuclear test of October 2006, Seoul's threat perception of the DPRK did not correlate with Washington's. One of the reasons for the change was the Sunshine Policy. One of the important changes that Kim's Sunshine Policy made was to change the terminology that was used when the North Korean issue was raised. This began to influence the political dialogue in Korea. The idea that North Korea could no longer be seen just as an enemy state began to appear in the public sphere.

The public sphere is not the only place where the attitude towards North Korea has changed. The South Korean cinema has begun to change its sentiments towards North Korea over the last decade. While North Korea was previously portrayed on the Korean screen as the evil enemy, North Korea, particularly the ordinary citizens of the DPRK and the low ranking North Korean forces' soldiers, began to be portrayed in a more positive light in South Korean films throughout the last decade. Some movies may still portray North Korea and the leadership as the enemy but the North Korean people are not. Not all Korean movies demonstrate this change, but four popular South

Korean movies do: *Swiri* (1999), *Joint Security Area (Gongdong Gyeongbiguyeok)* (2000), *Heaven's Soldiers (Cheongun)* (2005), *Welcome to Dongmakol* (2005).

Generation Change

The Sunshine Policy and the economy are not the only reasons for the change in South Korea's threat perception. The generational change in Korea is another factor that has influenced it (Fairclough, 2004; Lee, 2000; Ward, 2003). Korean society has gone through a generation change since its establishment. The number of people in the 'Founding Generation', those who fought against the Japanese soldiers and occupation, and against the North Korean forces in the Korean War, is declining. The number of people who can remember the Korean War and who felt the threat of the DPRK 1950–1953 is decreasing. One of the factors that influence people's threat perception is memory. Although some researchers would argue that memory is composed of personal and collective memory (Greenberg, 2005; Han, 2005; Soh, 2003; Yoon, 2005), collective memory can be influenced by the state, which can decide how the public should remember history.⁴ An example of this can be seen in the demonstration against the statue of General Douglas MacArthur in Korea (Lee, 2005; Ryu, 2005; Yoon, 2005). The demonstrators perceived the statue to symbolise the US occupation of Korea. Another group, mainly Korean War veterans, demonstrated in support of the statue. Although the anti-statue demonstrators were only a minority they symbolize the change in Korean society.

Survey polls in Korea show a disparity between the older and younger generations towards issues such as Japan, North Korea and the United States. The biggest difference is in their attitudes towards the US. While the older generation tends to be more supportive of US policy and its presence in Korea, the younger generation is more critical of the US, mainly against its policy towards the DPRK. Polls of Koreans' threat perception of the DPRK reveal a process of an increasing gap between the younger and older generations. The older generation perceives the North Korean threat as higher than the younger generation. When one speaks of the generational change in Korea and the survey polls on threat perception, one should also mention anti-Americanism (Bong, 2004; Kim, 1989; Kim, 2003; Shin, 1996) as another relevant, if unmeasurable, factor.

Conclusion

South Korea is changing very rapidly. The Korean War, which influenced Korea's modern history, is now being perceived by the young generation as part of 'ancient history'. The changes in the political arena, the economy and the generational change

have influenced South Korea's threat perception towards the DPRK. The North is no longer perceived through the prism of the Cold War. North Korea is being seen as a potential ally and a state with future potential for unification. This change might lead to an increase in friction with Washington, which does not see eye to eye with Seoul on the DPRK issue. The changes in threat perception in South Korea are an important process of healing the tension between the two Koreas and preparing the nation for future unification.

Notes

1. Additional factors that allowed this process were the change of guard in China and the USSR.
2. The North Korean missiles can target US forces that are stationed in the East Asian theatre. Their ability to target the US mainland with the Taepodong-2 missile has not been fully tested yet.
3. The same question was raised about China: see Cha, 2002b; Johnston, 2003.
4. The Japanese textbook crisis is an example of the way the state decides to create the collective memory of its citizens (Jeans, 2005).

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