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**Examining the Motivation Behind the Republic of Korea's Pursuit of Hard Power-
Oriented Diplomacy**

Gabriel Exposito

Abstract

Various age groups feel differently about how much funding should be allocated to the military of the Republic of Korea. The motivations for higher support tend to favor a strong perception of Japanese aggression in the East Sea (Sea of Japan). However, the Cold War legacy of Chinese-sponsored communist guerrillas and Chinese backing of communist states remain key motivating factors among older Koreans to support the allocation of more funds to the military of the Republic of Korea.

Keywords: THAAD, Hard Power, Communism, Japan, China, Korea

Introduction

The Republic of Korea has been shaped by war since its inception. For most of the twentieth century, the attitude of the Korean authorities exclusively relied on hard power. It was not until the democratization of the country in 1988 and the presidency of Kim Dae-Jung in 1998 that the leadership of the country began to take a less militaristic approach to foreign affairs. However, after a decade of détente, the conservative leadership of Korea made heavy gains in the mid-2000s and once again steered the country toward a more confrontational approach, particularly with the North. Furthermore, the foreign policy of presidents Kim Dae-Jung and Roh Moo-Hyeon has been avidly criticized by the Korean public for its softer approach to Korean-Japanese disputes and is often blamed for allowing the North to develop nuclear weapons.^{1:2} While the confrontation with the North has been softened once again under the presidency of Moon Jae-In, the Republic of Korea remains in a deteriorating relationship with both the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Japan, in part, due to rising nationalism. Nationalism in

Korea is considerably based on the Japanese colonial legacy and confrontations over disputed territory since independence in 1945.^{3;4} Presently, the same sentiments spawning from more recent confrontations with Japan may be giving rise to unwanted frictions with China. In essence, the Korean public is sleepwalking into a conflict in which they are rearming for a showdown with Japan and are consequently provoking a Chinese response.⁵ The question therefore remains: What is motivating the Korean public to pursue this change in the foreign relations of the country?

Background

The relationship between the People's Republic of China, the Republic of Korea, and Japan is one of mutual distrust rooted in the Japanese colonial legacy and the foreign policy of Chinese communists after 1949.



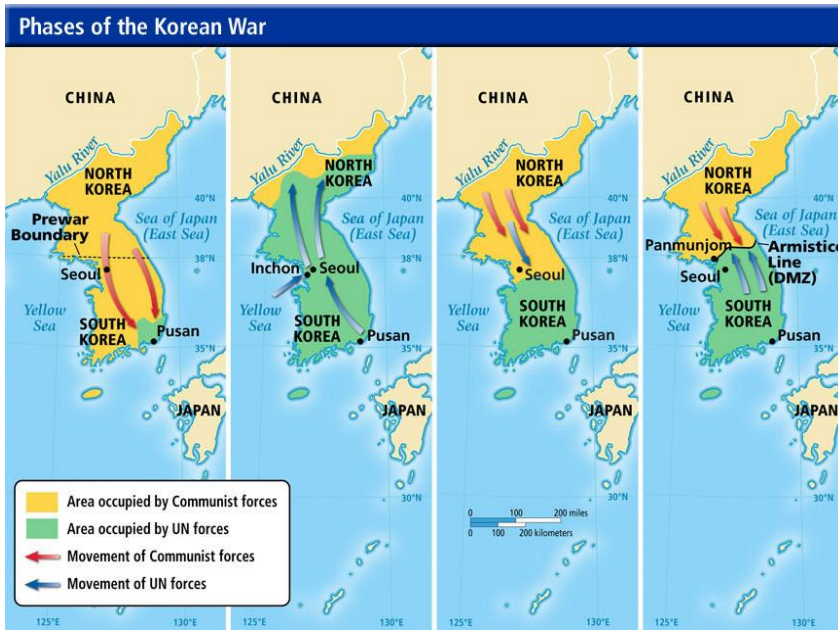
Figure 1

Both Koreas have poor relations with Japan, primarily due to the Japanese annexation of Korea in 1910. Imperial Japan attempted to erase the Korean language and drafted thousands of Koreans into the Imperial military and forced labor.⁶ Imperial Japan also systematically assigned Korean women to serve as “comfort women” so that the Japanese soldiers would “maintain their morale.”^{7;8} As many as 200,000 Korean women were forced into sexual slavery by

Imperial Japan between 1910 and 1945.⁹ To this day, Japan actively minimizes the crimes of the Imperial military. Japanese lawmakers have removed sections of school textbooks that detailed said crimes to whitewash the history of colonization in East Asia.¹⁰ In addition, Japanese newspapers such as the Japan Times, often self-censor to avoid public backlash when reporting on events related to Japanese wartime mass-rapes.¹¹

After the defeat of Japan in the second World War, several territorial disputes erupted between China, Japan, and Korea. While the larger, high-profile islands like Jeju and Formosa were returned to Korea and China respectively, smaller islands in the Sea of Japan remain contested. A set of islands known as “Dokdo” to Koreans and “Takeshima” to the Japanese is a major source of friction.¹² The Republic of Korea often displays anti-Japanese propaganda stemming from the territorial dispute while Japan actively downplays its role in causing it.^{13;14} The friction between the two nations has worsened since the military of the Republic of Korea began intensifying exercises over the island in August 2019.¹⁵

The uneasy relations between the Republic of Korea and Japan may come as a surprise to many Americans. Both nations are strong U.S. allies who often conduct joint military exercises with U.S. troops and currently host a total of 23,468 American troops in Korea and 39,800 in Japan.¹⁶ The close relationship the Republic of Korea and Japan maintain with the United States may give the impression that there are amicable relations between the East Asian nations, but with the United States out of the equation, Korea and Japan have many issues to settle.



The relationship between the Republic of Korea and the People’s Republic of China has been, and remains, a strenuous one. After Chinese communists seized control of the Chinese mainland, they actively encouraged Kim Il-Sung of the

Figure 2

Democratic People’s Republic

of Korea (DPRK) to invade the newly formed Republic of Korea in the south of the peninsula.¹⁷ The events that followed are known in the United States as the Korean War, where North Korean troops advanced as far south as Busan. The armed forces of the Republic of Korea entrenched themselves in the Busan perimeter for a last-ditch defense. Soon thereafter, a United Nations armed intervention, mostly composed of American servicemen, landed in the coastal city of Incheon, cutting off the North Koreans in the South. After the successful capture of the South Korean capital of Seoul, the combined forces of the Republic of Korea and the United States went on the offensive and mounted an attack against the DPRK to unite the Korean peninsula under the Republic of Korea. The Chinese communists had hoped that by attacking the Republic of Korea they would be able to remove American military presence from the East Asian mainland. Their plan had the opposite consequences as American forces raced towards the Chinese border with the DPRK. Determined to halt the American-South Korean advance, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) opted to take matters into their own hands and invaded the

Korean peninsula with over three million ground troops under the People's Volunteer Army (PVA) against the 178,000 American servicemen present.^{18;19} The PVA managed to push back UN troops to the 38th parallel and briefly recaptured the southern capital. The Korean War culminated in an armistice but was never formally ended. The uneasy peace between the United States, China, and both Koreas lies in the ruins of the Korean War.

The bitterness between the belligerents of the Korean War remains high to this day. In 2006, North Korean leader, Kim Jong-Il announced to the world that the DPRK had developed its nuclear weapon. Thus, the relations between the Koreas began to sour after more than a decade of re-engagement, eventually prompting former president Park Geun-Hye to permit U.S. deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense batteries (THAAD). THAAD is a defensive set of weapons capable of intercepting a missile before it reaches its target. To do so, however, it must scan a considerable amount of air and land with potent radar technology. Chinese authorities have argued that the real reason the United States deployed THAAD in the Republic of Korea was to gather intelligence on Chinese military technology since THAAD's radar could allegedly reach Chinese territory. As a result of allowing THAAD to operate in Korea, Korean enterprises have suffered years of economic warfare at the hands of the CCP as a means to pressure the government of the Republic of Korea into removing THAAD batteries from the country.²⁰

Research Question and Literature on the Topic

Understanding the motivations of the citizenry of the Republic of Korea for the pursuit of a hard-power- oriented foreign policy may be the key to predicting and avoiding future conflicts in the region. Particularly, Sino-Korean relations because they have serious global implications, should the countries find themselves at irreparable odds while the Republic of Korea escalates its

military presence in the Sea of Japan and tries to gain favor with the United States by allowing the deployment of THAAD batteries in the country.

Scholars around the world have widely studied the trend of foreign policy escalation. Robert C. Watts IV's "Rocket's Red Glare" builds on core principles elaborated upon by foreign policy experts such as Henry Kissinger and Robert S. McNamara.²¹ The role of the hard-power-driven foreign policy of the Republic of Korea is part of a larger American-backed plan to "contain" the PRC.²² Viewing the expansion of the THAAD through the lenses of what Kissinger referred to as "great power diplomacy" offers a perspective that fits the situation accurately.²³ For Korea, driving a hard bargain in their foreign policy means isolating the balancing coalition formed by the United States to contain China. The underlying question of the research goal to identify the motivations behind THAAD deployment would, therefore, ask what motivates states to pursue political goals through non-diplomatic channels: Why was the Korean public this inclined to accept THAAD with all its repercussions into Korean territory? Is their support of this escalation at all correlated with the increased tensions with Japan?

Scholars in the International Relations field, such as John Mearsheimer, argue that state power in the context of relative gains is the primary motivator behind state's foreign policy.²⁴ The political goals and the very survival of states depends on how much power they accumulate. While in the international affairs field a distinction is made between hard and soft power, scholars like Mearsheimer stress the fact that ultimately, states will accumulate power based on their military and how their militaries compare to rival states.²⁵ In the case of the Republic of Korea, there is a strong argument to be made that the foreign objectives of the Republic of Korea are being pursued through this realist lens.

On the contrary, it may be argued that the Republic of Korea actually benefits from its soft-power diplomacy, such as the rise of K-Pop and the exporting of the Korean language. However, the execution of soft-power by the Republic of Korea has only been executed at a time when the country achieved a favorable position of power when compared to its main rivals of the PRC and Japan.²⁶

In turn, both the PRC and Japan have invested in upgrading their arsenals to close the gap between the Korean military power and their own²⁷.

In the case of Japan, the pacifist constitution of the country drafted by the United States at the end of the second World War prohibits the use of an offensive military.²⁸ In the face of a richer, more authoritarian China that has been rapidly expanding its aerial and naval capabilities through the String of Pearls and the Belt and Road Initiative, the Japanese government under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has repeatedly tried to revise the constitution to amend the pacifist limitations it forces upon Japan.^{29;30} A course of action occurs despite the overwhelming amount of soft power Japan projects. For example, Japanese pop-music, cartoons, comics, video games, and toys are ubiquitous wherever they are sold.³¹ Japan has been the darling of the West for decades, allowing it to undermine war crimes of the scale of Nazi Germany committed in China and Korea.³² All the soft power in the world could not buy Japan the security from Chinese expansion it sees necessary.

To Korea, both North and South, the expansion of the Japanese military into an offensive force is nothing short of a direct threat to the sovereignty of the two states. Korea was a colonial possession of Japan from 1905 to 1945 and the Japanese are known to have grossly mistreated the Korean public during the colonial period. Forced labor, mass rapes, and the attempt to destroy the Korean language altogether makes Koreans on both sides of the Peninsula weary of

Japanese foreign policy objectives.³³ When Koreans see the perceived balance of power as tilting in favor of the Japanese, it stands to reason that further Korean military expansions must counter relative power changes. This cycle is known to scholars of International Relations as the *security dilemma*. In Korea, a specific name exists for the security dilemma between the three East Asian powers, aptly named the “East Asian Paradox.”³⁴ The East Asian Paradox is a microcosm for the neorealist theory of international relations: Korea, China, and Japan all hold an adversarial position with one another, yet their economies remain largely intertwined and travel between the states is frequent. Each increment of increased hard-power diplomacy is another straw added to the fragile back that is regional peace.

The interdependency of modern-day East Asia would prompt any faithful neoliberal to stress the following assumptions:

First, international economic interdependence decreases the likelihood of war. With the high level of economic interdependence that is present in East Asia, the likelihood of war is low. Second, democratic peace holds true thus far, thus, war between China, Korea, and/or Japan is unlikely. The motivations behind this study rest upon the arguments that exist to disprove the two previously stated schools of thought.

There is ample literature that disproves that interdependency prevents war between states. Interconnectivity of world economies in the present day is thorough, and it is true that war has become a rare occasion between two economically interconnected states.³⁵ But as every political scientist must learn, correlation does not equal causation. In the case of the interdependency of the East Asian economies, it is true that today they are more connected than at any other time in history.³⁶ However, this does not mean that the nations are exempt from conflict. For instance, the German and British economies were at their most interconnected point just before the

outbreak of the first World War.³⁷ A leading factor to the outbreak of war in the European theater had to do almost exclusively with Germany's rise in industrial and naval capabilities – something the United Kingdom considered an unacceptable shift in the balance of power in Europe.³⁸ It did not matter that the United Kingdom still possessed the largest, most powerful navy in the world. What mattered was that the German Empire was closing the gap, reinforcing Mearsheimer's claim that relative gains are responsible for motivating states to engage in hard-power diplomacy.

The claim that democratic peace would act as a safety brake in East Asia ignores two key factors: China is not a democracy, and democracies also have security concerns – as is the case of Japan and Korea. Furthermore, democratic peace specifically refers to relations between democracies, not between a democracy and an autocracy. Conflict between democracies and non-democracies has become common in the post-Cold War era. Examples of democracies fighting non-democratic states include: the Gulf War in 1991 where the United States formed an international coalition to repel Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait; the Bosnia-Herzegovina War from 1992 to 1996 where NATO established no-fly zones in the aforementioned Balkan countries; the Kosovo-Montenegro-Serbia War from 1998 to 1999 where NATO actively bombed Serbian Yugoslav forces; the invasion of Afghanistan by the United States and NATO in 2001 where the Taliban was deposed; the United States invasion of Iraq in 2003 which saw the defeat of Saddam Hussein and a purge of the Ba'athist party of Iraq; and the NATO bombing campaign in Libya which oversaw the overthrow of the dictator Muammar Gaddafi in 2011.³⁹ Flashpoints that have not escalated into full-scale war also include the Third Taiwan Straits Crisis of 1996 where the government of the PRC attempted to intimidate the Taiwanese electorate by firing missiles over the island of Taiwan only to be blocked by an American carrier

fleet, as well as the “red line” in Syria where the United States nearly begun military operations against Bashar al-Assad’s government in 2012.^{40;41}

Examining the motivation behind the Republic of Korea’s foreign relations trajectory can help understand the likelihood of conflict and help prevent conflict altogether. The literature on the topic is vast and emphasizes the importance for understanding why states behave the way they do. Public opinion in democratic states, such as the Republic of Korea, is easy to measure and can be considered relatively accurate since anyone polled can also vote. This study aims to identify some of the reasons why Koreans feel compelled to embark on a hard power-centered strategy.

Methods

This experiment was conducted by gathering data from three variations of a closed-ended opinion survey with a sample size of 53 respondents. The survey asks the respondents whether they think U.S. troop presence in the Republic of Korea made the country safer, whether the Republic of Korea should spend more money on its military, and whether the deployment of THAAD has made the Republic of Korea safer. The survey, which was administered via Qualtrics software, was programmed to randomly show the subjects one of three variations of the aforementioned questions:

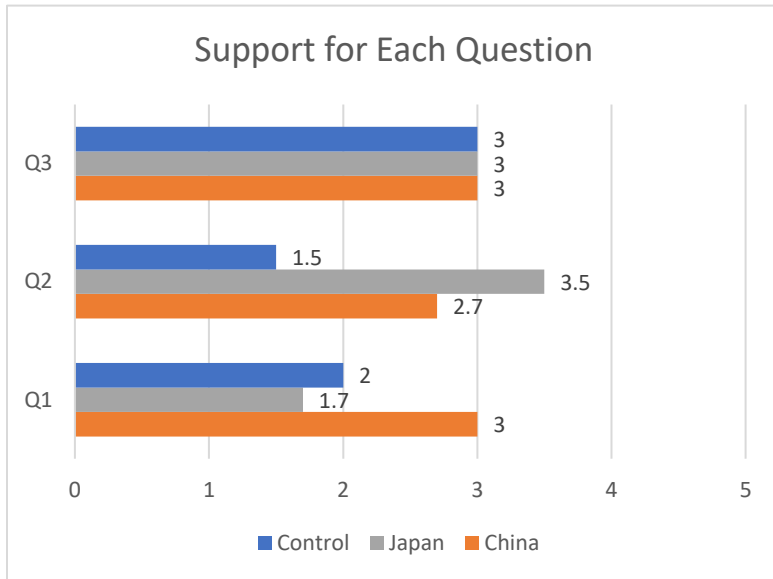
The first group, or the control group, was shown the questions above without any context.⁴² This group will be used to compare how the treatments affect the Korean public’s attitude towards the subjects discussed in the questions.

The second group, given the first treatment, was shown a variation of the questions above that explicitly reminded them about Japanese claims over the disputed Dokdo Islands and the denial of the Japanese authorities over their violent aggression.

The third group, given the second treatment, was shown another variation of the questions above. This time, the subjects were reminded of the Chinese intervention in the Korean War as well as the general hostility of Chinese foreign policy pursuits.

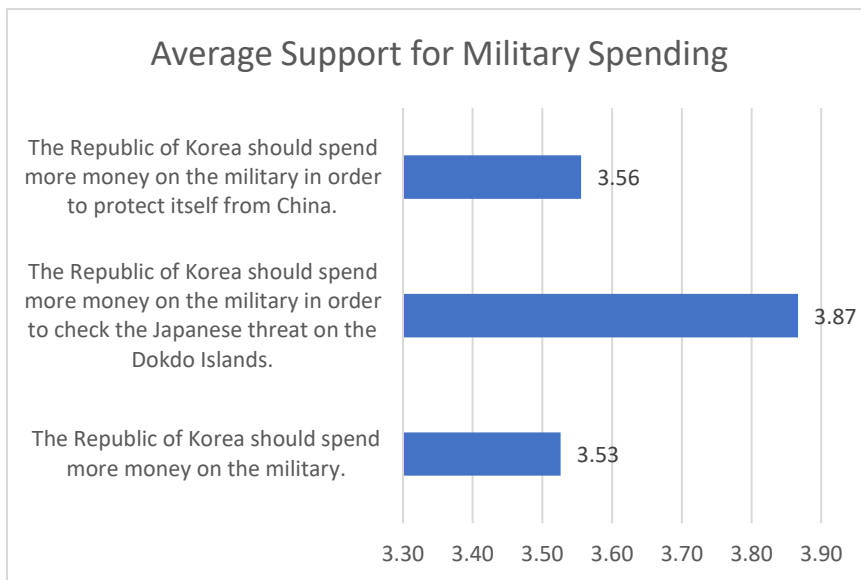
In order to yield a sample size that is as representative of Korean society as possible, responses were collected from Korean citizens that belong to different socio-economic groups. Respondents who participated in the surveyed were university students, minimum wage workers in cyber cafes, young professionals, and experienced salaried professionals. The subjects' major in school and overall knowledge about international relations did not play a role in the selection of respondents in order to avoid polling a biased sample. The locations where the subjects were selected also varied but were confined to the city of Seoul. These locations included cyber cafes, metro stops, universities, coffee shops, restaurants, and the streets of various neighborhoods in Seoul. The neighborhoods represented include wealthy as well as working-class neighborhoods, both of which tend to be more prosperous than neighborhoods located in the countryside. Because there is no single correct way to gauge public opinion, the goal of this experiment was not to report on the popularity of the policies being presented to the subjects. Instead, it was structured in such a way that one could conclude, for example, that treatment two is a greater motivator of support for aggressive foreign policy measures than the control group, but not a greater motivator than treatment one. The respondents answered with a number between one and five, "five" is the strongest indicator of agreement with the given prompt and "one" is the weakest indicator.

Findings



The data collected points to an increase in support for a more militaristic foreign policy when Japan is mentioned. However, when China was mentioned, the overall trend was of less support for a similar foreign policy. This trend ends with the age group of

51 years or older for reasons that are beyond the scope of this study. Most young people, both male and female, overwhelmingly see Japan as a foe and seem likely to support a foreign policy that is geared towards confronting Japan, particularly over the Dokdo Islands dispute.

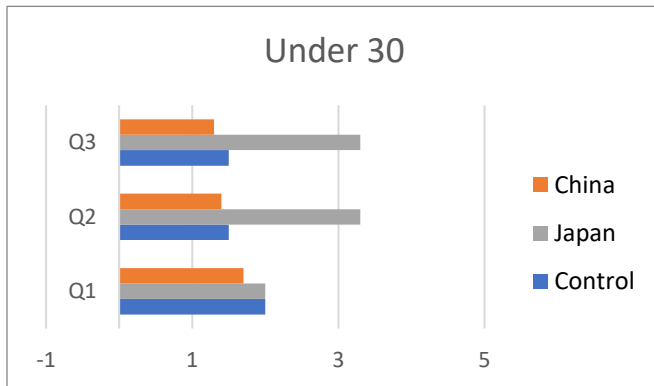


Although there was a general agreement that the Republic of Korea should invest more into its military, in comparison to China and the control versions of the survey, participants responded the

most favorably to increasing military spending when given the Japan version of the survey.

Support for a higher military budget increased by 9% in comparison to the China and Control versions of the survey.

Analysis

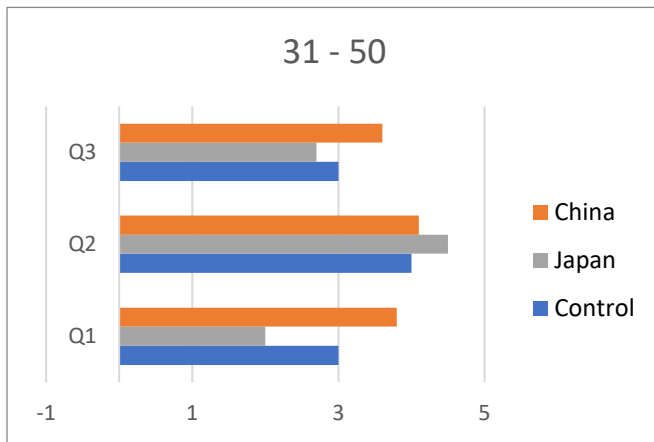


When responding to each question, the respondents were given five options to choose from, with “Option 1” being the lowest indicator of support for the question and “Option 5” being the highest. The population of subjects has a visible presence

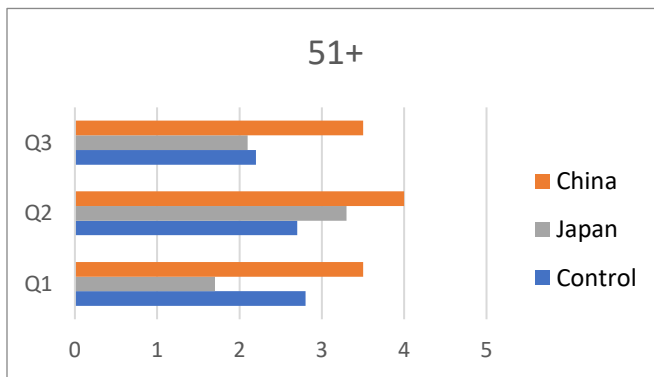
in support for “higher military spending” so long as Japan is mentioned. When broken down by age groups, this pattern is still observed until the 51 or older demographic. People under 30 were born after the democratization of the Republic of Korea in 1988. By most measures, they have known the best life Korea has had to offer in its history. They have grown up with the right to freely express their disapproval of the government. This generation grew up hearing about President Kim Dae-jung and the détente with the DPRK. The only major external military issue they have encountered is the Japanese claims to the Dokdo Islands and the subsequent Korean occupation of said islands. Their history reflects on their answers both in the way they feel about higher military spending (Question 2) and their support for THAAD (Question 3). The similarity of scores provided by the age group in both the China and Control versions of the survey may point to a feeling of indifference. The “people under 30” age group seems indifferent towards China through military lenses, especially if invoking the Chinese intervention in the Korean War.

The support for THAAD remained relatively stable regardless of a variable. However, the “Under 30” age group was the most likely to see THAAD negatively; this generation has grown up with an increasingly intertwined economy with China and may, therefore, see some of its future job prospects dependent on the success of China.

Subjects from the 31 to 50 demographic are overall the most supportive of “higher military spending”. This age group was born in the dictatorial state led by general-turned-



president Park Chung-Hee. They grew up with a level of militarism comparable to today’s DPRK. While generally accepting of the democratic peace, as indicated by their indifference in question one, military spending was universally agreed upon to be



an issue of high importance, particularly when Japan was mentioned. In this way, the 31 to 50 age group is reminiscent of the age group under 30. However, they show an overall higher appreciation of a strong military. This age group saw its parents

fight communist forces in Vietnam. Mao’s China was instrumental in arming the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) during the Vietnam War. The Korean combatants who fought alongside American and ARVN forces in South Vietnam drew a parallel to their own history of national division as a result of foreign communist interference.

Subjects belonging to the 51 and above age group also show strong favorability for more military spending; however, their main concern is not Japan, but instead China. This age group fought in the Vietnam War, saw its parents fight in the Korean War, saw the nearly successful assassination of President Park Chung-hee, and a decade later, another attempt to take the life of President Chun Doo-hwan by North Korean commandos. These events were all orchestrated by foreign communist forces. This age group sees communism as the natural enemy of Korea, and China, arguably no longer a conventional communist state, still carries the same party that led it into Korea in 1950, into Vietnam in 1979, and fiscally and militarily aided various communist factions such as Kim Il-Sung in the DPRK, Ho Chi Minh North Vietnam, Pol Pot in Kampuchea (now Cambodia) and Robert Mugabe in Rhodesia (now part of Zimbabwe). Communist China further aided communist insurgencies in Thailand, Malaysia, Burma, Indonesia, and the Philippines.⁴³ To the 51 or older age demographic, Chinese-backed communism remains a threat to the Republic of Korea. Their ideological struggle was still reflected in the way they ranked foreign threats and regarding how much money they believe that the Republic of Korea should allocate in its budget.

Conclusion

The Republic of Korea has withstood the test of battle, dictatorship, and countless hardships. However, it has managed to democratize and propel itself to become an economic, cultural, and military powerhouse. The Korean public currently finds itself in one of the most favorable times in all of Korean history. The scars of the creation of the modern Korean state are still visible in various ways, and they are especially reflected in generational gaps. Those Koreans who lived through the dictatorships of Chun Doo-Hwan and Park Chung-Hee

experienced a level of militarism more comparable to the DPRK than the modern Republic of Korea. Their support for higher military spending is visible, especially when foreign threats are in question. People under 30 have experienced a life of democracy and relative prosperity. In their eyes, the most serious foreign threat the Republic of Korea faces today is the Japanese claims to the Dokdo Islands in the East Sea, and they reflect their support for higher military spending only when Japan is in question. People under 30 feel mostly indifferent about China regarding national security and are thus not likely to support higher military spending even if reminded of the role that communist China has had in advancing communism in East and Southeast Asia. While people in the 31-50 demographic largely agree with the “Under 30s”, Koreans in the “51+” demographic continue to view China as a greater threat than Japan. While recognizing the limitations of this study due to the small sample size, the findings point to a generational shift in attitudes towards Korea’s neighbors where Cold War era attitudes prevail in the older population, while the growing ever-more-prosperous China has been eroding resistance against China in the younger segment of the population in the Republic of Korea.

Understanding the motivations of the citizenry of the Republic of Korea for the pursuit of a hard-power oriented foreign policy may be the key to predicting and avoiding future conflicts in the region. Unaddressed colonial grievances in Korea have been exacerbated by recent land disputes with Japan. American policymakers who are looking for counter China’s rise must consider the sensitivities of the Korean public, otherwise they risk pushing the Korean public closer to China.

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²⁷ See Comparative Military Spending Graph 1

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³⁸ Allison, Graham T. 2017. *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* Scribe Publications Pty Limited.

³⁹ Sawe, Benjamin Elisha. 2015. "World Atlas." Major NATO Military Interventions. April 25.
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⁴⁰ Rhodes, Ben. 2018. "The Atlantic." *Inside the White House During the Syrian 'Red Line' Crisis* . June 3. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/06/inside-the-white-house-during-the-syrian-red-line-crisis/561887/>.

⁴¹ Cole, Michael J. 2017. "National Interest." *The Third Taiwan Strait Crisis: The Forgotten Showdown Between China and America*. March 10.

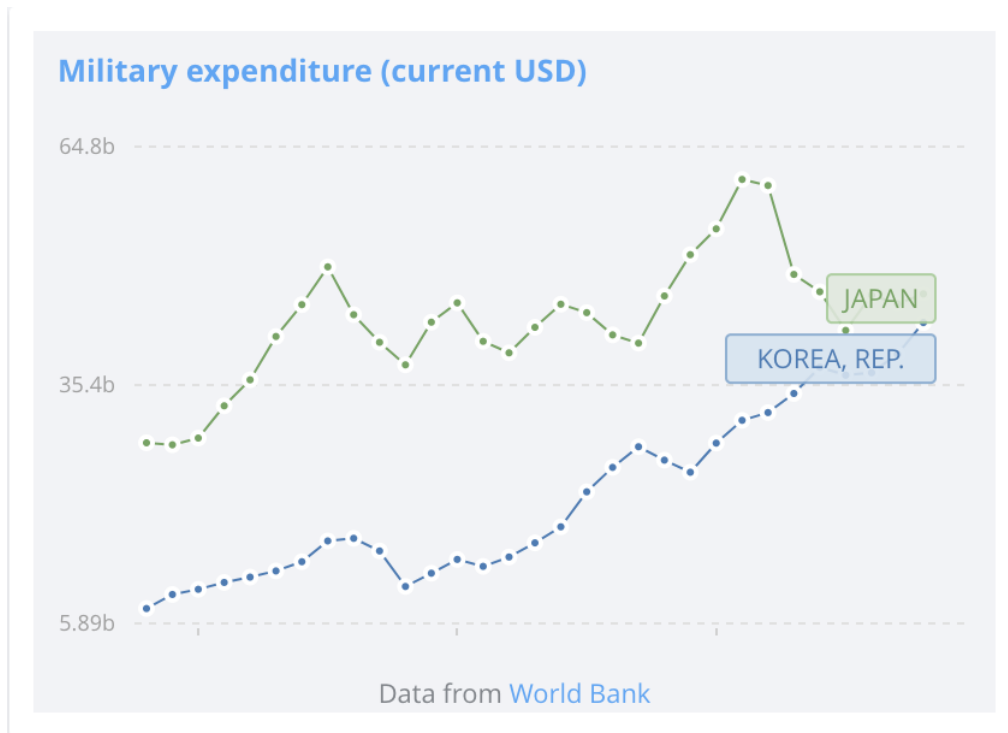
⁴² Refer to the "Survey Questions" section for the list of questions. Being used in the experiment.

⁴³ William, Heaton R. 1982. "China and Southeast Asian Communist Movements: The Decline of Dual Track Diplomacy." *Asian Survey* 779-800.

Graphs

Military Spending Graph 1:

(World Bank 1988-2018)

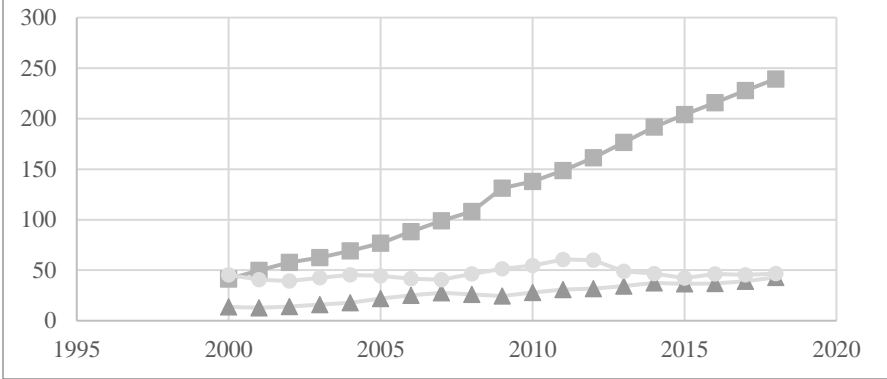


Military Spending Graph 2:

(World Bank 2000-2018)

(Center for Strategic And International Studies 2000-2018)

China, Japan, and Korea Nominal Spending
in \$ Billions



Survey Questions

Control

- 1) The Republic of Korea benefits from American troop presence.
- 2) The Republic of Korea should spend more money on the military.
- 3) The deployment of THAAD has made the Republic of Korea safer

Treatment 1 (Japan)

- 1) The Republic of Korea benefits from American troop presence so that it can focus on checking Japanese aggression in the East Sea.
- 2) The Republic of Korea should spend more money on the military in order to check the Japanese threat on the Dokdo Islands.
- 3) The deployment of THAAD has made the Republic of Korea safer.

Treatment 2 (China)

- 1) The Republic of Korea benefits from American troop presence because it deters China from taking aggressive actions as it did during the Korean War.
- 2) The Republic of Korea should spend more money on the military in order to counterbalance Chinese influence in the Korean Peninsula.
- 3) The deployment of THAAD has made the Republic of Korea safer.

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