

OPINION

Winter Olympics present new challenges for South Korean nationalism

Ethnic nationalism in South Korea has been giving room to a more liberal form of nationalism, writes Changzoo Song. (Photo: Ajay Ravindran)

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As the PyeongChang 2018 Winter Olympic Games begins, University of Auckland senior lecturer Changzoo Song looks at the history of South Korean nationalism - and discusses how the changing international security environment might affect it.

The changing security and political environment in East Asia has presented new challenges for South Korean nationalism.

South Korean society is deeply divided between the conservatives and progressives (or “rightists” and “left-nationalists”) political camps. Since the inauguration of the progressive president Moon Jae-in in May last year, the two camps have clashed over the implementation of the THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defence) missile defence system, as well as South Korea’s relationship with North Korea, China, Japan and the United States.

Declining ethnic nationalism and increasing acceptance of multiculturalism have also created a younger generation that is less invested in the nationalist aims of their parents. Now, North Korea’s participation in the PyeongChang Winter Olympics has presented a

new challenge in terms of how the two camps address issues of nationalism and national identity.



Children looking across the demilitarised zone to North Korea.

Modern nationalism and national identity in Korea started to emerge in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when Joseon Korea and ruling yangban elite faced encroachments to traditional notions of Sino-centric world order from Western and Japanese powers. Japan formally colonised Korea in 1910. Colonial-era Korean nationalists focused on regaining independence from the Japanese and strengthening the nation through industrialisation. Yet Korean nationalists were divided in which strategies and ideologies would best achieve those goals.

Nationalist divisions became particularly severe after the 1920s, when leftist nationalism arose as a powerful ideology and strategy for the twin goals of anti-colonialism and national development. After Korea was liberated from Japan's rule in 1945, internal divisions among Koreans combined with super power politics between the US and USSR resulted in the division of the nation. Initially, nationalist zeal, based on a strong belief in the ethnic homogeneity of the Korean nation, pushed Koreans to struggle for national unification. But as power consolidated both in South and North after the Korean War (1950-53), the two developed into separate "nations" with different ideologies and systems.

By the 1990s, South Korea became economically prosperous and politically democratic. The country gained recognisable status in the global stage, making South Koreans more confident about their country. They became assertive in their relationships with neighbouring countries, as well as with the US. As the country become increasingly

globalised, South Koreans came to accept more liberal ideas about their nation. At the same time, the changing security environment in East Asia, especially the rise of China and conservative swing in Japan's politics, keep the South Korean nationalism alert.

Until recently South Korea has been one of the most ethnically homogeneous countries in the world. But from the early 1990s, the country attracted large numbers of foreigners (especially foreign migrant workers and brides). Today, the number of foreign settlers in South Korea exceeds two million, comprising nearly four percent of the country's population.

There are signs that an increasing number of South Koreans, especially in the younger generation, accept the new multicultural realities. Ethnic homogeneity is less important in the national identity.

They are also better travelled and more accepting of global values than older generations.

Younger South Koreans are also less interested in reunification. They are deeply concerned about the enormous costs of reunification. Many are unhappy about the concessions given to the North by the current progressive government's effort to engage the North to the upcoming Winter Olympic Games in Pyeongchang. Discontent over the Olympics is yet more evidence that younger generation South Koreans are imagining a "South Korea-only"

nation. Despite ethnic links, they are disenchanted with North Korea's totalitarianism, poverty and the Kim family-rule.

At the same time, South Koreans worry over the current security and political environment in East Asia. First, they are concerned over the conservative swing in Japanese politics. Memories of the colonial rule by Japan mean Koreans tend to be sensitive about historical issues such as the WWII comfort women, the Dokdo Island (known by the Japanese as Takeshima) territorial dispute, and revisionist history education in Japan. These matters easily provoke nationalist sentiments among Koreans. Yet younger generation South Koreans are much less anti-Japan than older generations, and many of them are eager consumers of Japanese culture.

The second concerning issue in the regional environment is China's increasing assertiveness toward South Korea. South Korea has benefitted greatly from China's rapid economic growth in the last few decades. Huge trade surpluses and the popularity of South Korean popular culture among Chinese ("Korean wave") gave South Koreans a great sense of pride. But the positivity of the bilateral relationship of the two countries diminished in late 2016 when South Korea began implementation of the THAAD missile defence system. China's economic revenge on South Korea - restricting Chinese tourist visits, punishing South Korean business in China, and curbing the Korean Wave - caused serious damage to the country's economy, provoking strong nationalist sentiments among South Koreans.

Amid these changing domestic and international environment, South Korean nationalism is evolving. Ethnic nationalism has been giving room to a more liberal form of nationalism. On the other hand, the changing international security environment could instigate a more hostile form of nationalism.

Views expressed are personal to the author.

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EXPERT

Changzoo Song (/experts/changzoo-song/)



**Senior Lecturer in Korean Studies, University of
Auckland**

Changzoo Song's research interests include Korean politics and nationalism, Korean and Asian diasporic communities, and globalisation.

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