

The North Korean Diaspora

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Introduction

The past two decades has witnessed the development of a new phenomenon: a small but growing globally dispersed population of North Koreans, individuals who have left North Korea since the end of the Cold War and whose identity is at least partially distinct from previous generations of emigrants from the Korean peninsula. There is scholarship on the earlier waves of migration that formed the initial Korean diaspora, including the diaspora's historical relevance to Korean state formation and contemporary forms of transnational politics in and around the Korean peninsula. Thus far, however, little attention has focused on contemporary migration from North Korea and its relation to diasporic politics. As yet there is relatively little work on the emerging communities of North Korean émigrés who have taken up residence beyond the Korean peninsula – their destinations, their experiences, their conceptions of identity, and their engagement either in their host countries or in politics surrounding their Korean homeland, whether that homeland is considered to be the entire Korean peninsula or North Korea alone.

This chapter examines these aspects of the North Korean diaspora. It begins by outlining the migration processes and resettlement destinations of individuals who have escaped from the North, and discusses several major factors that shape where these communities have emerged. The chapter then places these developments in a diasporic framework, arguing that the global dispersion of North Korean emigrants, combined with a sense of homeland orientation and developing transnational ties, qualify them as a nascent diaspora. The chapter next discusses

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current trends in both diasporic political engagement and the North Korean regime's policies toward its diaspora population, suggesting that in light of North Korea's repressive domestic environment, the diaspora represents a fragmented and limited – but still significant – source of extraterritorial contention, and one that the North Korean regime appears to take seriously. Even though it is small, the political significance of the North Korean diaspora means that it should be factored into our thinking about North Korea's global presence and role in world politics, now and in the future.

Describing Contemporary North Korean Migration and Resettlement

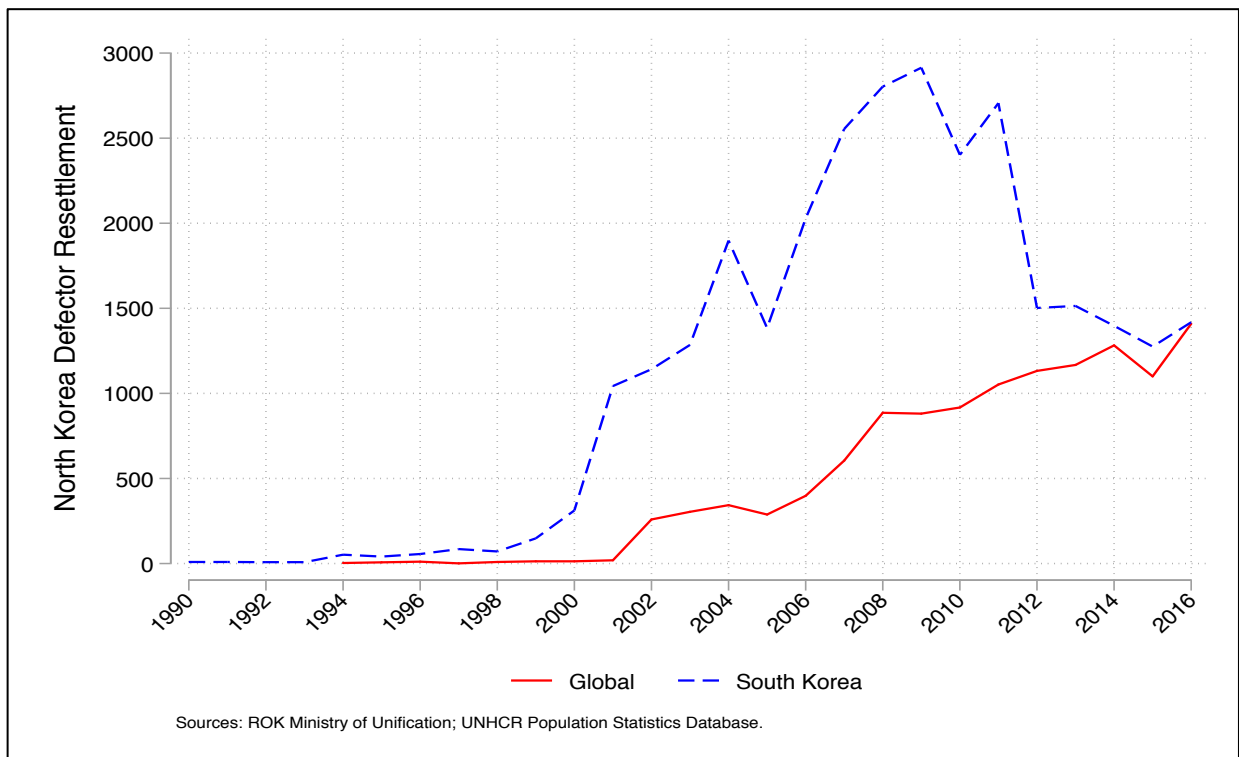
It may be helpful to think of the North Korean diaspora as one of two parallel networks that together comprise the North Korea's global presence. One of these networks is chiefly composed of diplomats and overseas workers; this network of people is projected by the state and remains affiliated with it (Hastings 2016; East-West Center and NCNK 2019). The other is composed of refugees and defectors who have chosen to exit North Korea to seek a life elsewhere, and who have also increasingly become globally dispersed. This chapter focuses primarily on the latter.

Conventional wisdom on emigration from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) usually portrays North Korean defectors and refugees as congregating in the Republic of Korea (ROK).² That perception is still largely accurate. As of June 2019, approximately 33,000 defectors had entered the ROK to resettle (MOU 2019), by far the largest concentration of permanently resettled North Korean exiles outside of the territory of the DPRK. Because South Korea is part of the Korean "homeland," however, it is not clear whether North Korean resettlement to and within the southern half of the peninsula – even a peninsula long-divided into two separate countries – counts as *diasporic* migration. In the narratives of both North and South Korea, these Koreans remain within their peninsular homeland.

² In South Korea, these individuals have been called *talbukja*, *saetomin*, or the official term *Bukhanitaljumin*; in English, *defectors*, *refugees*, *exiles*, *migrants*, *re-settlers*, *immigrants*. Overseas Koreans are referred to either by the homeland-oriented *gyopo*, or the more transnational and ethnically-oriented *dongpo* ("compatriots," but with an added connotation of familial connection). On terminology, see Brubaker and Kim 2010; Chung 2008.

In recent years, however, an increasing number of North Korean emigrants have sought refugee status, claimed asylum, and attempted to resettle in countries other than the ROK. North Korean onward migration from South Korea to other countries has also increased, making the ROK not just a resettlement destination, but a transit point in broader global processes of migration (Song 2015). Today, nearly half of North Koreans who claim asylum or seek resettlement do so in a country other than the Republic of Korea, as shown in Figure 1:

Figure 1: North Korean Resettlement in South Korea and Globally (1990-2016)



UNHCR data suggests that North Koreans had sought refugee or asylee status in 37 different countries as of late 2016.³ In some countries, there were only 1-2 applicants per country in isolated years, suggesting possible cases of diplomatic defection. In other cases, however, such as Canada, the USA and the United Kingdom, the numbers of individuals seeking asylum or

³ These countries were: Angola, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Cambodia, Chile, Costa Rica, Denmark, Egypt, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Japan, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Mexico, Norway, the Philippines, Poland, Russia, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand, Turkey, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, the USA, and Yemen. Note that a North Korean who claimed asylum in one of these countries could have eventually resettled in South Korea, so the two categories are not fully mutually exclusive.

refugee status are much larger and remain relatively consistent over several years, suggesting more sustained patterns of migration and resettlement.

As yet, however, research on this global population is relatively undeveloped and uneven. Some communities, such as the longstanding Korean communities in Japan, have been the subject of ethnographic or anthropological studies, while others have received little to no scholarly attention. The literature on Korean diaspora, meanwhile, has been heavily focused on transnational South Korean migration for economic purposes, and the policies of the ROK government toward migrants of various backgrounds, as well as toward the broader overseas Korean community (Brubaker and Kim 2011; Park and Chang 2005; Yoon 2012; Kim 2013; Lee 2010, 2012; Kim 2016; Lee and Chien 2017). Meanwhile, as noted above, studies of North Korea's global activity have tended to focus on its formal or state-aligned diplomatic and economic activities, and have not emphasized diasporic elements in characterizing the country's global presence. This chapter, therefore, describes patterns of migration and resettlement among the North Korean diaspora more broadly, and considers the implications of viewing this emerging population through a diasporic lens.⁴

Factors That Shape North Korean Migration and Resettlement

North Korean migration and resettlement beyond South Korea can be divided between “direct migration” – refugees or defectors who go straight to countries other than the ROK to resettle – and those who attempt to settle in South Korea first, but then engage in “secondary/onward migration” to other destinations. North Korean migration has also been shaped by both “push” and “pull” factors. So-called “push” factors come in two forms: first, the conditions that impel North Koreans to leave the DPRK in the first place, and second, the conditions of resettlement in South Korea that can then propel resettled North Koreans to migrate out of South Korea to take up residence elsewhere. “Pull” factors, on the other hand, are factors that either draw North Koreans toward South Korea, or that draw resettled North Koreans who have decided to leave the South toward specific locations beyond the ROK.

⁴ A further point worth noting is that the North Korean diaspora has emerged during a period when the DPRK government's global reach is constricted by the UN sanctions regime, although at the time of writing in autumn 2019, the country still maintains a diplomatic presence of some kind in approximately fifty countries.

The first set of factors that has shaped North Korean global migration has to do with both the circumstances that attract refugees toward South Korea and the conditions that face North Koreans after their arrival in the ROK. These circumstances have changed considerably over time as the composition of the defector/refugee population has also evolved. During the Cold War, North Korean defectors were comparatively few in number: often officials of high rank who were perceived to have significant intelligence value and treated as returning anti-communist heroes by the South Korean state (Chung 2008; Lee 2016). In the early to mid-1990s, however, after economic crisis and famine swept North Korea, a larger influx of migrants began to seek resettlement in South Korea. These individuals were predominantly female, of lower socio-economic status, and from provinces such as North and South Hamgyong, which had been hardest hit by the famine (Chung 2008; Choo 2006). Over time, resettled North Koreans also brought family members to join them in the South, meaning that chain migration has played an increasing role in shaping North Korean migration flows.

The changing composition of the North Korean population in South Korea has also affected resettlement outcomes, which in turn affects the impetus for onward or secondary migration. As Yoon (2001) notes, defectors who arrived after 1994 tend to exhibit lower levels of income, higher levels of unemployment, and less satisfaction with life in South Korea (see also Lankov 2006; Go 2014; Lee 2016). Unemployment rates among defectors in the South have declined significantly in recent years, from 13.7% in 2009 to 6.9% in 2018. The percentage of North Korean resettlers who receive livelihood and welfare benefits was 23.8% in 2018, a steady decline from rates that exceeded 50% in 2008-2010, and job security and average monthly wages have also increased (Ministry of Unification 2019; RFA 2019).⁵ Nevertheless, the defector unemployment rate remains significantly higher than that of the general ROK population during the same period (3.5-4%).

⁵ Regularly updated summary statistics are available in English on the Ministry of Unification's webpage, https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/relations/statistics/defectors. The best source of more detailed, systematic data on North Korean experiences in South Korea over time is the survey data published each year by the Hana Foundation, a government-funded organization that assists North Korean resettlers.

Moreover, survey and interview data suggest that beyond issues of income and economic livelihood, North Koreans struggle to feel integrated into South Korean society. Their published writings express a range of simultaneous and contradictory feelings about their experiences: “guilt and appreciation, anger and sorrow, nostalgia and assimilation, hope and disappointment” (Kim 2013: 523). Moreover, as relates specifically to feelings of belonging, South Korea’s response to North Koreans is one of duality: North Koreans are viewed both as part of the community in ethnic terms, but outside it and a potential threat to it in security terms (Sohn and Lee 2012; Son 2016). Interestingly, some studies find that there are few differences in national identity between North and South Koreans (Denney and Green 2019) and that some North Koreans co-identify strongly with South Koreans (Hur 2018), but ethnographic scholarship on North Koreans in South Korea tends to emphasize their experience of “differential exclusion,” in which formal citizenship in the nation-state of the Republic of Korea does not confer full social membership in South Korean society (Bell 2013; Castles 1995). Other scholarship suggests that North Koreans are regarded less favorably compared to more affluent migrants (Seol and Skrenty 2009). These studies also suggest that religious and civic organizations, and pseudo-kinship connections among networks of North Koreans themselves, are only partially successful in filling the gaps left by state resettlement programs (Kim 2010; Bell 2013; Han 2013).

The challenges that North Korean re-settlers face in South Korea came to the fore in summer 2019, when defector Han Sung-ok and her six-year-old son Kim Dong-jin were found dead in their apartment in Seoul, having passed away from apparent starvation (Kim 2019; Kwon 2019). Han, who left North Korea in 2007, had been sold to a Korean-Chinese husband who she eventually divorced. In Seoul, she struggled to care for her epileptic son and to obtain welfare support; bank statements suggested that she had withdrawn the last 3,860KRW (about \$3) from her account in mid-May. Her death and that of her son prompted widespread public outcry and memorializing that resonated throughout North Korean communities in the South. The Ministry of Unification (MOU) apologized and promised to pursue new policies aimed at minimizing “blind spots in welfare” for defectors, but a coalition of activist groups has mounted protests and urged more systematic changes – including increased availability of childcare, which is a major

obstacle to employment and economic success for a population that includes many single mothers.⁶

Although North Korean resettlers generally report satisfaction with their resettlement and lives in South Korea (73% in the latest Hana Foundation survey), data from other surveys indicates that nearly a quarter have considered returning to the North. Ministry of Unification statistics record 28 cases of actual re-defection to the DPRK between 2012 and 2017, though some of these returns may have been coerced rather than voluntary (RFA 2019; Green et al 2015). For those who would not consider re-defection or a return to North Korea, these same conditions can provide the impetus for onward migration. One survey of North Korean migrants who have opted for onward migration to Britain, for example, suggests that secondary migration to the UK is motivated strongly by North Koreans resettlers' perceived inability to find pathways toward social and economic upward mobility in South Korea (Song and Bell 2018). The other important enabling factor shaping pathways of secondary migration is the availability of increasingly globalized broker networks, which promise to help onward migrants find mobility and opportunity elsewhere, and which provide a wealth of practical advice on the relative benefits and challenges of resettlement in different destination countries.

“Pull” factors, and their impact on the globalization of the North Korean diaspora, are less well understood, in part because descriptions of this emerging diaspora have thus far unevenly concentrated on a few communities. Early ethnographic and anthropological literature focused on the Zainichi Korean community in Japan: Japan's estimated 700,000 Koreans are the country's largest ethnic minority. Japan's Korean community is somewhat different than other North Korean diasporic populations in that a substantial fraction of this community maintains close ties to North Korea; the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (*Chongryon* in Korean, *Chosen Soren* in Japanese) functions as North Korea's de facto bridgehead in the country, while another organization, the Korean Residents Union in Japan (Mindan) is composed of Zainichi Koreans who have adopted South Korean nationality (Ryang 1997; Ryang and Lie 2009). Moreover, from 1959 to the mid-1980s, an estimated 90,000 Koreans left Japan to

⁶ The North Korean defector population entering South Korea has been more than 70% female since the mid-2000s. Two-thirds of the respondents to a recent survey done by the Ministry of Unification reported that childcare was a significant obstacle to finding work.

repatriate to North Korea, and several hundred of them have since returned to Japan (Morris-Suzuki 2007).⁷ Such returnees are only accepted if they can prove that they have a link to Japan, and state assistance is limited, meaning that much of the burden for resettlement support and integration falls on civil society groups, especially a small number of groups that specialize in returnee assistance (Kim 2012; Bell 2016). This much smaller group of returnees are often at odds with, and in some previous cases, have filed lawsuits against, the pro-North Korean Chosen Soren.

More recent literature has focused on the community of North Korean re-settlers in the United Kingdom (UK), which is concentrated in New Malden on the southwestern outskirts of London. British statistics in 2015 suggested that approximately one thousand North Koreans were resident in the UK (Office for National Statistics 2015), but anecdotal evidence suggests that this population may in fact be larger. According to survey and interview data, many of New Malden's Korean immigrants had previously resettled in South Korea, but did not disclose their acquisition of ROK citizenship for fear that it would render them ineligible for asylum and resettlement in the UK (Park et al 2013; Bell and Song 2018). In recent years, the UK Home Office has also argued, and British courts have concurred, that because North Koreans seeking asylum have an alternate citizenship available to them (in the Republic of Korea), they are ineligible for asylum, regardless of whether they have settled in the ROK first or not (Wolman 2014). Government policy, therefore, has placed limits on the growth of the North Korean diaspora in the United Kingdom, at least for the time being.

North Koreans who resettle in New Malden, or in the UK more generally, acquire some of the social and educational capital that they often felt unable to access in South Korea. A Western education and English language proficiency, for example, are valuable regardless of whether migrants settle permanently in the UK, or eventually return to South Korea. Moreover, these émigrés, especially young people or children born to parents of North Korean origin and raised in the UK, bring new dimensions to the UK's Korean diaspora, which (like the Korean diaspora in many Western countries) has been oriented traditionally toward the South. On the one hand, the Korean diaspora in the UK partially replicates the peninsula's political divide, a bifurcation

⁷ For an English-language memoir by one such individual, see Ishikawa (2018).

that can lead to intra-diasporic tensions (Fisher 2015; Panagiotidis 2015; Han 2017). On the other hand, younger immigrants of North Korean origin often think of themselves more as “‘foreigners’ from two foreign states living in a diaspora in a multicultural state.” This orientation can reduce attachment to the dominant “homeland” narrative that exists among the diasporic community, lessening the sense of competition over ownership of legitimate Korean identity within the diaspora itself and also facilitating integration into the UK (Watson 2015: 547; Vertovec 2007).

North America has also become home to sizeable communities of North Korean refugees and defectors. At one point, an estimated 1200 individuals of North Korean origin had resettled in Canada, particularly in the greater Toronto area. Many, however, were onward migrants from South Korea who had failed to disclose that fact in their claims for asylum; the Canadian government determined that since South Korean citizenship was available to them, they were not eligible for refugee status or protection in Canada. In 2016, an appeals court ruled that this was true even for North Korean applicants who had not gone to the ROK first (*IRBC* 2016). As such, at the time of writing, the Trudeau government was in the process of vacating the refugee status of individuals who had not disclosed their previous residence in South Korea, and deporting residents of North Korean origin to the ROK. Under these circumstances, some residents have chosen to “self-deport” to South Korea, and some have moved to other countries, such as in Europe. A third group has remained in Canada and appealed to stay on “humanitarian and compassionate” grounds, while also participating in advocacy efforts intended to highlight these cases to the public to create support for policy change (Yoon 2018; Furey 2019). Regardless, Canadian government policy has reduced the size of the North Korean community there.

An estimated 220 North Koreans have entered the United States as refugees since the signing of the 2004 North Korea Human Rights Act (NKHRA), which created a legal framework for North Koreans to resettle in the United States. The NKHRA legally resolves the issue of South Korean citizenship by saying that individuals from North Korea are eligible for refugee resettlement in the U.S. provided that they have not resettled in South Korea (and thereby obtained ROK citizenship). This means that North Koreans who resettle in the US under the NKHRA do not face the same hurdles to permanent residency or citizenship encountered in Canada or the United

Kingdom. The requirement that North Koreans request direct resettlement to the United States while they are still abroad, however, combined with lengthy screening processes required by the U.S. Department of State and Department of Homeland Security, explains why the numbers of North Koreans who have chosen to come to the U.S. under the NKHRA has remained relatively small. The Trump administration's freeze on resettlement process for much of 2017 has limited the growth of these numbers further, though a handful of refugees have entered in 2018 and 2019.

According to statistics from the U.S. Department of State, North Korean refugees have been resettled in at least twenty different states, where they are initially assisted by one of nine private "voluntary agencies."⁸ The George W. Bush Institute, affiliated with former President Bush's presidential library, has conducted a survey of North Korea-based refugees in the United States and identified a number of educational and economic challenges, including English-language proficiency, transportation, and access to health care (George W. Bush Institute 2014). Since 2017, it has also administered a scholarship program to support North Koreans (Lloyd 2019). North Koreans in the United States are relatively geographically dispersed due to the organization of the U.S. resettlement system, but many North Koreans leave their initial resettlement locations relatively quickly – for educational reasons, to join other North Koreans, or to seek out Korean communities in locations such as southern California, Chicago, or northern Virginia.

Relatively little is known, descriptively or otherwise, about the other countries in which North Koreans have sought asylum or refugee status. The UN statistics discussed above suggest that there are small numbers of North Korean exiles residing in Central and Eastern Europe, and a few policy reports have called for clarification of the grounds and process under which these individuals might be eligible to remain permanently (Burt 2015; Levi 2017). There is also a community of onward migrants in Australia (Jung et al 2017).

Finally, there is a comparatively large community of North Koreans living in China, particularly in and around the Yanbian Korean Ethnic Autonomous Prefecture in the northeast, which is also home to an estimated two million people of Korean ethnicity who hold Chinese citizenship

⁸ U.S. State Department data on refugee admissions and resettlement are available at <https://www.wrapsnet.org/>

(*Chaioxianzu* or *Chosonjok*). North Korean nationals in northeastern China may be laborers who have been dispatched to China under DPRK government auspices, or are formally permitted by both states to cross the border for work purposes; North Korean women who have been trafficked into marriages in rural China where gender imbalances are particularly acute; or escapees in hiding or engaged in the illicit labor market (Haggard and Noland 2011; Cathcart 2019; Greitens 2019). These North Koreans exist in a borderlands space where they mix with *Chosonjok* and a smaller community of South Korean expatriates. In northern China in particular, the number of North Koreans who maintain close ties within North Korea, hold North Korean citizenship, and return to North Korea is higher than in other diasporic communities described above.

A North Korean Diaspora?

As noted earlier, discussions of North Korean re-settlers encounter difficulties of nomenclature, as each potential term possesses valences of meaning and emphasis. The term diaspora is similarly contested and multivalent. Some definitions are objective: Gamlen, Cummings, and Vaaler (2019: 511), for example, use the term more or less synonymously with “emigrants and their descendants,” while Brubaker (2005: 12) views diasporas as intrinsically defined by self-perception, as “an idiom, a stance, a claim.” Others combine elements of both definitions: Vertovec (2009: 5) refers to a diaspora as “an imagined community dispersed from a professed homeland” (see also Safran 1991: 83).

Amid these variations, the increasing globalization of the North Korean migrant population community clearly moves it closer to a diaspora. Betts and Jones (2016: 3) define diasporas as “communities that are transnationally dispersed, resist assimilation, and have an ongoing homeland orientation,” while Adamson (2019) similarly views them as “constituted by a narrative of dispersion, attachment to a homeland, and a sense of group identity.” Shain and Barth (2003) describe a diaspora as:

“A people with a common origin who reside, more or less on a permanent basis, outside the borders of their ethnic or religious homeland – whether that homeland is real or symbolic, independent or under foreign control. Diaspora members identify themselves, or are identified by others – inside and outside their homeland – as part of the homeland’s national community.”

North Koreans beyond the Korean peninsula are dispersed from the homeland, whether that homeland is defined as North Korea, or the larger Korean peninsula. Many share a common sense of identity (Green and Denney 2019), and are recognized as North Koreans by others. At the same time, however, there is variation in the degree to which North Koreans in South Korea self-identify with the national community (Hur 2018); no real systematic data exists on the extent to which North Koreans who have resettled *beyond* the Korean peninsula retain an “ongoing homeland orientation” or how they perceive themselves in terms of group identity. One study in the UK found that identity perceptions were stratified by age: younger North Koreans thought of their identity primarily in terms of “foreign immigrants in a multicultural country,” while older North Koreans were more likely to think about themselves in terms of membership in specifically Korean diaspora networks (Watson 2015).

In other cases of North Korean resettlement abroad, ongoing homeland orientation and national identification do clearly help define a diasporic community. In these cases, network ties among individuals from North Korea are typically stronger than ties to those outside that community,⁹ and individuals of North Korean origin form transnational linkages oriented around their common origin. Bell (2016: 265), for example, describes North Korean returnees in Japan who have participated in anti-regime demonstrations with defector groups based in other countries, or who align with defector-oriented organizations in South Korea, the UK, and the US—sometimes as a deliberate alternative to deepening ties with (non-defector) civic organizations in Japan. South-Korea based defector advocacy groups have also visited and collaborated with groups in the United States and United Kingdom. Yeo and Chubb (2018: 4) argue that despite significant normative contestation among those who advocate for North Korean human rights, an international network of such advocates, including several defector-led organizations, successfully pressed the international community to establish the UNHRC Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea in 2014. Thus, while Betts and Jones (2016: 5) remind us that, “not all groups of exiles or migrants that leave a country adopt a diasporic stance as a mode of political representation,” enough North Korean exiles appear to have done so to qualify the group as an emerging or nascent diaspora.

⁹ See Bell (2013) for a description of this phenomena.

At the same time, this transnational network of North Korean exiles is overlaid onto, and embedded within, a much larger Korean diaspora that emerged earlier in Korea's history, and was generated by different processes and factors. Cohen (1997) classifies diasporas into four types: victim/refugee; imperial/colonial; labor/service; and trade/commerce. As noted above, many studies of the Korean diaspora to date have been either colonial or economic in their orientation. By contrast, North Koreans more closely fit the victim/refugee concept, meaning that one can think of North Koreans as threads of a refugee diaspora that is now being overlaid and woven into the existing fabric of a post-colonial and labor/commercial diaspora. This is, of course, an oversimplified narrative,¹⁰ but it may be broadly helpful for understanding both the contemporary nature of Korean diaspora communities, and especially how intra-diasporic dynamics are perceived by their newest North Korean members. The term "diaspora" is itself multivalent enough to allow fluidity: North Koreans are simultaneously members of a transnational network that is specific to North Korea, and members of a broader Korean community that has been dispersed by global forces of violence and development since the beginning of the twentieth century.

Regime Calculations and Diasporic Politics: Implications for North Korea & the World

What are the implications of an emerging North Korean diaspora for world politics, and for the (North) Korean homeland itself? To answer this question, it is useful to think about two primary questions: how diasporas engage with their homelands, and how homelands seek to engage with and manage diaspora populations.

Scholars generally argue that the propensity of diasporas to engage with the homeland is shaped by "motive, opportunity, and means: that is, a diaspora should both want to exert influence and have the capacity to do so" (Shain and Barth 2003: 462). More concretely, the propensity of a diaspora to be actively engaged, including in political activities directed at the homeland, depends on a range of factors: "the demographic size of the diaspora, its cohesion, its

¹⁰ The Korean community in the United States had its origins in during the colonial period of Japanese occupation (1910-1945), additional Koreans then migrated to the United States after 1945, and transnationalism is deeply embedded in the study of Korean identity and membership politics (Park 2005; Kim 2008; Kim 2011; Kim 2016).

institutional ability to generate a sense of communal identity and sustain it over time, migration politics and the foreign policy of host states, and the homeland legal and ideological approach to outside nationals” (Shain 1999: 9-12).

What do these factors tell us about the North Korean diaspora? First, the global North Korean population remains small by comparative standards. Moreover, the fact that many potential “host states” now redirect North Korean migrants and asylees “back” to a South Korean homeland (even if the migrants in question have never set foot in the ROK), limits the future size and geographic dispersion of this diaspora, and is thereby likely to constrain its political impact. Smaller communities may also find it hard to forge a cohesive identity, especially when they are as geographically dispersed as the population in the United States, though social media and technological platforms have the potential to partially offset this disadvantage and facilitate communal identity and mobilization. Finally, the North Korean defector community within most host countries is seldom uniform; communities display internal cleavages and organizational divides that can limit the institutional potential for sustained and collective engagement.

Political engagement by the North Korean diaspora, however, has arguably already had an outsized impact on international policies toward North Korea. Yeo and Chubb (2018) note that the inclusion of defector voices in international campaigns against North Korean human rights violations has been both “transformative and controversial.” In the absence of credible testimony from domestic civil society inside North Korea, refugees and defectors have provided important evidence and bolstered movement legitimacy; by doing so, they have served as a substitute for local actors in the “boomerang pattern” wherein international and domestic actors interact to exert leverage against repressive regimes (Keck and Sikkink 1998). An incident in early 2019, in which a group called Free Joseon (previously Chollima Civil Defense) raided the DPRK embassy in Madrid and subsequently proclaimed a provisional government, also raised speculation that North Korean defector activism could be taking a more militant turn (Hudson

2019; Park 2019; Shorrocks 2019; Smith and Shin 2019)¹¹ – but to date, there appears to be little potential for sustained armed diasporic resistance.

Thus far, the North Korean diaspora's ability to lobby for their own interests in host states abroad also appears to have been relatively limited. North Koreans have had some success in changing resettlement policies in South Korea, but the success of these communities in altering host country domestic policies outside the Korean peninsula – for example, pressuring the Canadian government to create a legal pathway that allows individuals and families of North Korean origin to remain in Canada – remains to be seen.

Beyond the factors that shape or constrain the political engagement of North Korean communities abroad, there are many unanswered questions about the dynamics of their interaction with the North Korean regime. Studies of diasporic influence on the homeland often frame their theories using implicitly democratic logic, as when Shain and Barth (2003: 461) suggest that diasporas can exert influence on homeland politics through civil society projects and political contributions to candidates or parties; alternatively, they can focus on diasporas as a potential source of economic strength through remittances, investment or educational capital (Ye 2014). With the exception of Japan's Chosen Soren population, which has played a financially supportive role, neither of these frameworks is cleanly applicable to North Korea, which is both non-democratic and relatively economically isolated.

North Korea, therefore, falls within a smaller subset of cases where the diaspora engages with a homeland under authoritarian rule. Previous work in comparative politics and international relations has demonstrated that when contentious politics are suppressed at home, diasporas can become an important source of anti-regime activity, and that authoritarian regimes strategically manage both migration and diasporic politics to mitigate these risks and control populations that reside abroad (Ragazzi 2009; Betts and Jones 2016; Glasius 2017; Miller and Peters 2018; Tsourapas 2018; Adamson 2019). North Korea limits out-migration, dispatching workers on tightly supervised temporary assignments to locations where it can control their housing, monitor

¹¹ This group had previously received attention for claiming to have rescued Kim Jong Un's nephew, Kim Han-sol, after his father Kim Jong Nam was murdered in Kuala Lumpur. It claims to be partly composed of North Korean exiles, but its actual membership is unclear.

their movements, and control the financial flows that their work abroad generates. Defector testimony consistently confirms that movement in and out of the DPRK is virtually forbidden unless it is sponsored and controlled by the regime. North Korean defectors do send remittances, but outside formal and direct channels: they use brokers in China to send money to family members, who are then often subject to “informal taxation” via bribes paid to local officials inside the DPRK (Greitens 2019). North Korea, therefore, appears to place tighter controls over migration and limit diasporic contact to a greater extent than a typical “authoritarian” regime.

The DPRK regime also appears to feel a genuine sense of threat from North Korean escapees and defectors—if not to regime security itself, then to the narrative of paternal protection and succor upon which the Kim family bases its legitimacy. The most dramatic evidence of this was the assassination of Kim Jong Nam, Kim Jong Un’s half-brother, at Kuala Lumpur Airport in Malaysia in February 2017, an operation widely believed to have been planned in Pyongyang (Berlinger 2019). Beyond this high-profile case, DPRK officials go to great lengths to denounce human rights campaigns at the UN and other international fora, and state broadcasters produce documentaries that are designed to name, shame, and discredit defectors, especially those who have spoken publicly about their experiences in the DPRK (Fahy 2019: 233-257). Under Kim Jong Un, the North Korean regime has also tightened border policing to reduce the number of defections, and has also publicly emphasized cases of “double-defection” (return migration to North Korea) holding press conferences to demonstrate its warm welcome of returned defectors and using their voices to criticize the South (Gleason 2012; Green et al 2015).

Finally, the present-day relationship between the North Korean regime and its diaspora raises questions about the diaspora’s potential role in future unification scenarios. Although defectors and refugees in third countries have had a considerable impact on the campaign about North Korean human rights, the exile community based in South Korea is likely to carry more weight in unification planning, given their geographic concentration, the diasporic sentiment and support for unification that many of these individuals express toward their northern homeland, and the role that the ROK government accords to North Korea-born individuals in its current vision of the unification process. Indeed, the idea that the integration of North Koreans in South Korea is a “test case” for unification, and that North Korean defectors will play a leading role in

the unification process in the future, are both commonplace in Seoul, which is why onward or return migration due to dissatisfaction in the South are both widely perceived as policy failure on the part of the ROK government (author's interviews; see also Go 2014; Bae 2018; Suh n.d.).

The globalization of the North Korean diaspora therefore raises new and interesting questions for how unification planning, especially in the Republic of Korea, can or should evolve in response to this development. Beyond various policy modifications aimed at improving North Koreans' satisfaction with resettlement in the South, there has been little systematic discussion of the role that a *global* diaspora could or will play in unification. Placed in historical and comparative context, this appears to be an oversight: diaspora communities in post-socialist Europe, even those that had been isolated from their homelands for long periods, did play significant and varied roles in both democratization processes and post-democratization political life (Koinova 2009), and the Korean diaspora itself was deeply involved in homeland struggles for anti-colonial liberation (Kim 2011; Park 2015). It is an open question, therefore, how the global dispersion of North Korean diaspora communities will affect attitudes toward and future engagement in unification scenarios, on the part of both government and diaspora actors.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to describe an emerging North Korean diaspora, shaped by the recent tendency of escapees from the DPRK to migrate to destinations other than South Korea. The global distribution of North Korean emigration and resettlement is shaped by the opportunities and limitations that North Koreans encounter in South Korea; by social networks and brokers that advertise alternatives elsewhere; and by host government policies that have channeled North Koreans into particular third-country locations at particular points in time, while redirecting them back to the Korean peninsula at others. The small communities of emigrants that have emerged from this process are now globally dispersed, and at least some exhibit a shared identity, homeland orientation, and transnational connections. Although small in number, they have exerted a measurable effect on international advocacy vis-à-vis human rights in North Korea, and their extraterritorial contention appears to be taken seriously by the North Korean regime. Looking forward, factors such as host government policies, diaspora size and dispersion, the degree of cohesion versus cleavage within diaspora communities themselves, and the policies of

both the ROK and DPRK governments are all likely to shape diaspora members' lived experiences, as well as their broader impact on global politics. While this trajectory has yet to unfold, North Korean émigrés have already added their voices and identities to Korea's long history of global migration and resettlement, thereby contributing a new and important strand to its diverse and evolving global diaspora.

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