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My, Our, and Others' Views on North Korea

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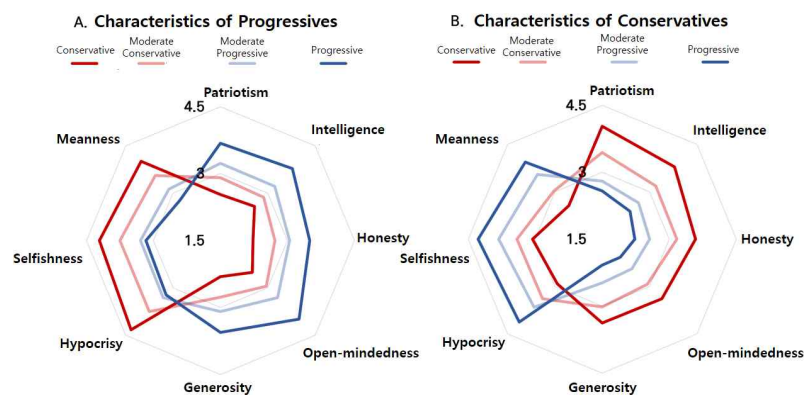
North Korea is an important keyword that divides conservatives and progressives in South Korea.¹⁾ The South–South divide is both a disagreement over North Korea policy as well as a dispute between conservatives and progressives. However, not many would dispute that this South–South divide has grown beyond discord over North Korea policy and has become the predominant conflict in South Korean society. The resolution of conflict requires an accurate understanding of the conflicting group. Therefore, it is crucial for progressives to understand how conservatives think, and likewise for conservatives to understand how progressives think. But interest in South Korean society and research on the topic has so far focused on how each of these ideological groups views North Korea and policies on North Korea. Meanwhile, there are not many studies that analyze how conservatives and progressives perceive each other and think of the other side's views on issues on the Korean Peninsula. It appears to be assumed that progressives believe that conservatives think in the ways that have been confirmed through either public opinion polls or existing studies, and similarly that conservatives presume progressives' beliefs as commonly thought. In other words, findings from public opinion polls and existing studies are assumed to be the perceptions of the other side held by both progressives and conservatives. This study seeks to empirically verify this hypothesis. Specifically, this study presents an empirical analysis of the stereotypes of conservatives and progressives, the attitudes towards issues on the Korean Peninsula of each side, and which attitudes are thought to be held by both conservatives and progressives on issues on the Korean Peninsula, and also discusses the policy implications of these findings.²⁾

1) For example, see, Kap-Sik Kim, "The South–South Conflict in Korea: Origin, Development and Characteristics," *Korea and World Politics*, Vol 23, No. 2 (2007).

Attitude towards Others

First, the study explored how the characteristics of both conservative and progressive groups are perceived. Participants were asked to evaluate each ideological group on the traits of 'patriotism,' 'intelligence,' 'honesty,' 'open-mindedness,' 'generosity,' 'hypocrisy,' 'selfishness,' and 'meanness' on a six-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree (1)" to "strongly agree (6)".³⁾ The results are summarized in <Figure 1> below.

<Figure 1> Characteristics of Conservatives and Progressives⁴⁾



2) The survey for the study was conducted as part of a larger project by the Korean Institute for National Unification (KINU) titled, "Comprehensive Research Project on Peace on the Korean Peninsula and Inter-Korean Cooperation: Short-Term Strategies and Methods of Pursing Major Projects to Expand a Consensus on Peace." The survey was administered online in May 2021, and population of the survey was adult male and females over the age of 19 residing in 17 cities and provinces of South Korea. The size of the sample is 1,600 respondents and was created through quota sampling based on gender, age, and region. The confidence level is 95% with a margin of error of $\pm 1.12\%P$.

3) These 8 traits are characteristics often used to measure affective polarization. James N. Druckman and Matthew S. Levendusky, "What Do We Measure When We Measure Affective Polarization?," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 83, No. 1 (2019), p. 115.

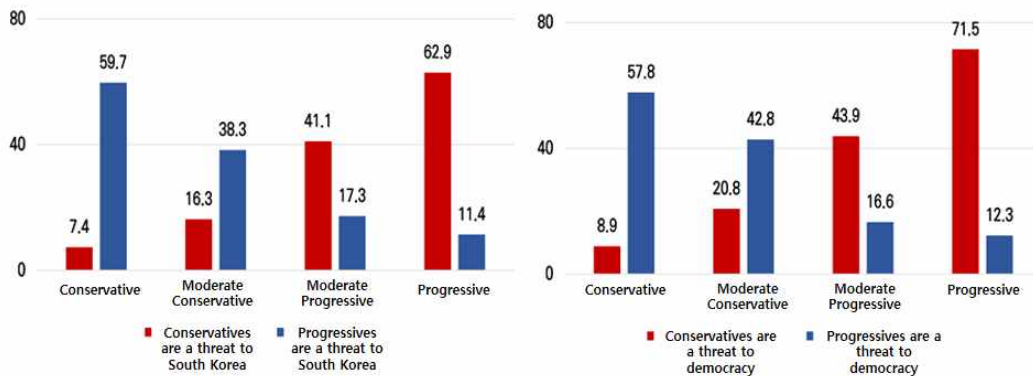
4) Ideology was measured on a seven-point scale ranging from extremely conservative (1) to extremely progressive (7), with moderates in the middle (4). Respondents that replied from 1 to 3 were coded as conservatives, whereas respondents from 5 to 7 were coded as progressives. Moderate respondents (4) were additionally asked with which of the two ideological groups they were closer to and distinguished between moderate conservatives and moderate progressive based on their answers.

The results shown in <Figure 1> are clear enough that they are almost self-explanatory. Both conservatives and progressives were extremely hostile towards the other side. Conservatives assessed the conservative group which they were a member of as strongly having positive characteristics such as patriotism and intelligence while unrelated to negative characteristics such as meanness and selfishness (depicted by the red lines in B in <Figure 1>). But conservatives evaluated the progressive group as high on negative characteristics and low on positive traits (depicted by the red lines in A in <Figure 1>). Likewise, progressives assessed their own group as strong on positive attributes while unrelated to negative characteristics (depicted by the blue lines in A in <Figure 1>), but perceived the conservative group as low on positive characteristics and high on negative traits (depicted by the blue lines in B in <Figure 1>). Ingroup bias, which projects positive attributes to the ingroup, as well as outgroup dislike, which projects negative traits to the outgroup, is a common phenomenon. But the problem is that both ideological groups project "only" positive characteristics on their ingroup and "only" negative ones on the outgroup. This shows that the ideological divide between conservatives and progressives is no longer a question of different perceptions of North Korea and disagreements over North Korea policy but is now devolving into distrust of the other side itself.

The more severe problem is that both progressives and conservatives each view the other side as a threat to the South Korean society and democracy. <Figure 2> illustrates the degree to which participants agreed with the statement, 'conservatives/progressives are a threat to South Korean society and democracy.'⁵⁾

5) Responses were measured based on six-point scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6).

<Figure 2> Threat Perceptions of Progressive and Conservatives per Ideological Group



Among progressives, 62.9% responded that the conservative group constituted a threat to South Korea while 71.5% replied that it threatened democracy. On the other hand, 59.7% of conservatives responded that the progressive group was a threat to South Korea and 57.8% of conservatives viewed it as a threat to democracy. Only about 10% of both conservative and progressive respondents viewed their own ideological group to be a threat to South Korean society and democracy.

Another common feature clearly observed in <Figure 1> and <Figure 2> is that both ingroup bias and outgroup dislike becomes stronger, the more extreme the ideological beliefs are. Compared to conservatives and progressives, moderate conservatives and moderate progressives considered the opposing ideological group as less of a threat, exhibited less ingroup bias and outgroup dislike, and had higher threat perceptions regarding their own groups.

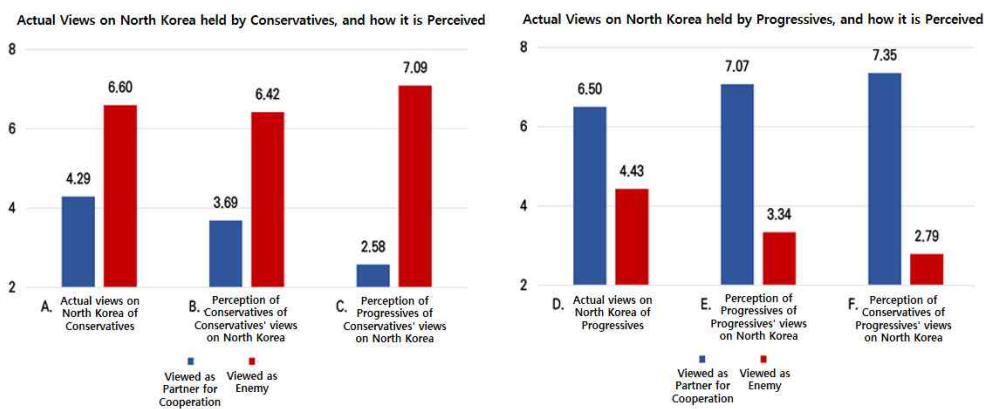
These findings clearly show that negative perceptions of the other side held by both progressives and conservatives are severe, so much so that it exceeds dislike of others to the extent that the opposing side is viewed as a national threat. Moreover, this trend was stronger, the more extreme ideological beliefs were. In other words, it seems probable that both the conservative and the progressive groups view the other side as an entity to be defeated for the sake of the nation rather than a partner to debate and deliberate with.

Views on the Other Side's Thoughts

From the perspective of societal conversations on issues related to the Korean Peninsula such as the National Contract for Peace and Unification, the question of how each side views the other side's beliefs is directly related to differences between

conservative and progressive groups and, more specifically, tied to the gap between these two ideological groups that needs to be narrowed through debate and deliberation. This will be discussed by analyzing <Figure 3> below.

<Figure 3> Perceptions of North Korea of Each Ideological Group and How It Is Perceived by the Other Group



<Figure 3> shows whether the conservative and progressive groups view North Korea as either a partner for cooperation or as an enemy, as well as the South Korean society's perceptions on how the conservative and progressive groups view North Korea.⁶⁾ First, regarding the actual views of each group, the conservative group considers North Korea more as an enemy (6.60) than as a partner for cooperation (4.29), with a difference of 2.31. Meanwhile, the progressive group views North Korea more as a partner for cooperation (6.50) than an enemy (4.43), with a difference of 2.07.

Then, how does the progressive group perceive the conservative group, and how does the conservative group perceive the progressive group with regards to their respective views on North Korea? Progressives think that the conservative group

6) Responses were measured on an eleven-point scale, ranging from completely disagree (0) to strongly agree (10). Regarding the perceptions of the conservative and progressive groups views on North Korea, the answers were rephrased as follows; 'conservatives/progressives will completely disagree' (0), and 'progressives/conservatives will strongly agree' (10).

views North Korea only as an enemy, with expectations that the conservative group will view North Korea as a partner for cooperation or enemy at 2.58 and 7.09, respectively, with a difference of 4.51. Meanwhile, conservatives think that the progressive group only views North Korea as a partner for cooperation, with expectations that the progressive group will view North Korea as a partner for cooperation or enemy at 7.35 and 2.79, respectively, with a difference of 4.56. Such discrepancies were also observed in assessments of their own ideological groups. Conservatives believe that the conservative group only views North Korea as the enemy, while progressives perceive the progressive group as only considering North Korea as a partner for cooperation. Misperception about the perceptions of the ingroup was more acute among the progressive group.

This survey demonstrates that the South Korean society holds misperceptions about the views on North Korea held by both progressives and conservatives. The progressive group is not as cooperative towards North Korea as we generally think and considers North Korea more of a threat than we tend to believe. Likewise, the conservative group is not as hostile towards North Korea as we generally think and perceives North Korea as a partner for cooperation than is generally perceived.

The Destructive Impact of Misperceptions

Such misperceptions obstruct the process of dialogue between progressives and conservatives in three ways. First, it increases social costs by overestimating the gap between the two ideological groups. Misperceptions not only compel unnecessary explanations to resolve misunderstandings but also forces individuals to explain to their own group that their views are being misinterpreted. The difference in the processes, outcomes, and the social costs associated with societal conversations between a conservative group that believe that 'progressives are more positive on security issues than perceived' and a progressive group that understands that 'conservatives are more cooperative on North Korea' are obviously different from dialogue between a conservative group that believes 'progressives will only view North Korea through the prism of cooperation' and a progressive group that contends that 'conservatives will only be hostile towards North Korea.'

Second, societal conversations that occur in the context of such misperceptions can actually exacerbate tensions. This is because it accurately matches the conditions under which group polarization can occur. When the norms of the group

are more extreme than the thoughts and norms of individuals, individuals tend to alter their views so that it better conforms with the norms of the group. In particular, even individuals that more or less accurately understand the views on North Korea held by both conservative and progressive groups become likely to follow the norms of their ingroup rather than their own thoughts during debates and conversations, especially public ones. As a result, conversation and debate can paradoxically operate as a mechanism that exacerbates disputes.

Lastly, misperceptions regarding both the other side as well as one's own can precipitate prejudice towards, and inflated threat perceptions of, the opposite side. As a matter of fact, this study demonstrated that negative perceptions of the other side and threat perceptions were higher when misperceptions of the other side, defined as the difference between perceived and actual views on North Korea, were greater. For example, conservatives tended to view the progressive group more negatively and consider them a threat to the South Korean society the more they believed that the progressive group only perceived North Korea as a partner for cooperation. Similarly, progressives held negative views of the conservative group and considered them a threat the more they believed that the conservative group only conceived of North Korea as an enemy. This finding offers clues on where to begin to resolve political and affective polarization.

Policy Implications

The most urgent task is increasing the level of mutual understanding between the two groups. In order to do so, individuals must be persuaded that they might be misunderstanding the other side. Moreover, the stated purpose of societal conversations between conservatives and progressives needs to be limited to mutual understanding. One may counter this by claiming that hearing the other side's arguments during the process of societal conversations intended to reach a society-wide agreement on unification and North Korea policy achieves this goal. However, it is probable that the process of each side advocating their respective positions while misperceptions are acute will result in more losses than gains. The difference between mutual understanding to achieve the forced goal of agreement on the one hand and societal conversations for the sake of mutual understanding itself on the other is abundantly clear. It must also be considered that the sustainability of an agreement, even when reached, will be difficult to preserve if

there remains a high level of distrust towards the other side and misperceptions among the people of South Korea.

There also need to be internal discussions within each ideological group. The fact that there exists a strong sense of superiority over the other side within each in-group, which has been found by this study, must be recognized and fixed. In addition, misperceptions not only of the other side but also of the ingroup must be resolved. In a situation where conservatives and progressives both think that their own respective groups have more extreme views on North Korea, the space for agreements will inevitably shrink. Such misunderstandings will cause more severe problems the more severe it is. Diversity within the ideological groups needs to be respected. Among progressives, voices within the group that emphasize responses to the North Korean threat need to be respected while voices that highlight the limitations of cooperation with North Korea also need to be heard. Likewise, conservatives must listen to calls that stress cooperation with North Korea and caution against securitization. This is not on a politicized approach but rather because it represents how both the progressives and conservatives actually view North Korea, as shown in <Figure 3>

Lastly, though not introduced here due to word limitations, this study also examined the preferences of progressives and conservatives on the economy, welfare, and education policy in addition to their views on North Korea and North Korea policy. The findings were not that different. Conservatives and progressives hold misperceptions of the other side in almost every issue area. Efforts must be made to understand and appreciate my, our, and others' views in all aspects of society.

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