



# History, Nationalism and Internationalism

## By Yong-deok Kim

**The month of March is particularly significant for Koreans since it begins with the anniversary of one of the proudest moments in their history – the March First Independence Movement.**

AFTER THE OPENING of its ports in the late 19th century, Korea was forcibly brought into the modern imperialist world order and, as a result, came under Japanese rule in 1910. Nearly ten years later, millions of Koreans joined together for a single cause on March 1, 1919. The March First Movement not only united Koreans regardless of social status, gender, or regional differences, but it also stimulated a sense of national unity. The movement was a crucial milestone in the emergence of a modern nation.

Influenced by Woodrow Wilson's notion of the self-determination of nations, the Korean people, with their traditionally strong sense of pride and superiority about their culture and history, declared their opposition to Japanese rule. While nationalism in the West sometimes developed into imperialism, the nationalist movement in Korea was one of fierce opposition to imperialism. The March First Movement also demonstrated another aspect of the modern nationalist movement in that it called for international cooperation based on the principles of non-violence and mutual respect for national sovereignty.

Having emerged in dramatic fashion in the March First Movement, Korean nationalism has become a unifying force that seems to transcend even the ideological confrontation between left and right and North and South Korea. During the colonial period, nationalism was an ideology of resistance, while during the period of North-South conflict, it provided the justification for reunification. Today, in the developing

post-Cold War and postmodern world order, it has also provided a rationale for Korea's efforts to establish its place within this order. Therefore, it could be said that Korean nationalism has played a positive role. Recently, as conflicts with China and Japan have emerged over historical issues, Korean nationalism has provided a basis for defending Korea's position.

#### A CLAIM TO HISTORICAL SOVEREIGNTY

From the beginning, modern Korean nationalism was concerned with resisting the intrusions of other nations. As Korea confronted the consequences of the port opening and the introduction of foreign powers into the peninsula, the most pressing task facing the country was to find a way to establish equal relations with China and to block the aggression of Japan. Korea sought to unite its people in order to strengthen the country and preserve national sovereignty. The anti-imperial nationalism of the Korean people continued after liberation in 1945.

Korea's national division at the hands of foreign powers and the permanent sense of crisis between South and North, fueled by tensions among the world superpowers, reinforced nationalism's focus on resistance. People in both the North and the South continued to believe that they belonged to the same nation, even though tensions between the two sides developed into civil war. The desire of North and South Korea for national reunification is one factor that continues to sustain Korean nationalism.

What was this resistance trying to preserve, and how was unity maintained? The basic unit of modern nationalism is the nation-state. As the system of nation-states expanded to cover the world during the 20th century, the nation-state came to be recognized as the only legitimate form of sovereignty. As a political form with clear territorial boundaries, it is a form of sovereignty that represents the interests of its people and has continued to expand its power. From long ago, the nation became the main source of a country's collective identity, and as

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nation-states with their own territory and sovereignty expanded, the history of the nation became an integral aspect of nation-state formation. Countries sought unity in unique histories that celebrated their language, culture, and traditions, in addition to the physical territory that defined their communities.

For modern nation-states whose people have shared a long history, territory defines the physical boundaries of sovereignty and is a fundamental part of national identity. The role of history has been to legitimize this territorial sovereignty. In the case of Korea, the nation was the source of a collective strength that enabled its people to overcome adversity. Even though their territory was seized by Japan during the colonial period, Koreans were able to maintain their unity as a single nation and their “historical sovereignty” (i.e., “sovereignty” over the writing of their history) because of pride in their unique history and traditions.

The countries that assert their “historical sovereignty” are ones that can be characterized as historic nations. In East Asia, Korea, China, Japan, and Vietnam all possess “historical sovereignty.” In other words, they existed as political communities with unique histories even before the formation of modern nation-states. Korea has a particularly strong sense of “historical sovereignty” since its history and culture have existed for over two thousand years and the boundaries of its language and way of life coincide with the boundaries of the state. However, it is possible for differences to emerge between the boundaries of territorial sovereignty and those of “historical sovereignty,” and in extreme cases, as when Korea fell under Japanese rule, a country can lose its territorial sovereignty while keeping its historical sovereignty.

Controversies over history emerge when the extent of territorial sovereignty and “historical sovereignty” are different. One example is the so-called “Northeast Project” currently being pursued by China, which is opposed by Korea. The kingdom of Goguryeo (Koguryo) existed in the northern part of the Korean peninsula

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and the northeast region of China. After its fall, the culture of Goguryeo became a part of the history of the Korean peninsula, and the Korean people regard the history of Goguryeo as being within the bounds of Korea’s “historical sovereignty.” Former Goguryeo people were the main force behind the founding of the kingdom of Balhae (Parhae), and the Korean people also regard Balhae as part of their history. One of the main reasons is that after the fall of Balhae, many of its people migrated to the Korean peninsula to preserve their culture. It is difficult for Koreans to understand why China is trying to assert the principle of territorial sovereignty to claim Goguryeo and Balhae as part of the history of China’s frontier regions. They regard the Northeast Project as an intrusion on Korea’s “historical sovereignty,” and this is the source of their anger over this issue.

Controversies with Japan arise over differences in historical interpretation. Japan’s conquest, rule, and exploitation of Korea have left a deep wound in Korean pride. Right-wing historians and politicians in Japan not only believe that Japanese rule contributed to Korea’s modernization, they also try to incorporate their views into school curricula. Koreans have reacted strongly because they feel that Korea’s “historical sovereignty” has been violated by what they regard as distortions of history and have urged Japan to adopt a more accurate view of history.

Conflicts over history can have tremendous destructive potential. There are numerous examples where history has provided the justification for domination and expansion. These con-

flicts can be even more dangerous than material or large-scale forms of destruction; it is necessary to be aware of the danger since national misunderstandings can escalate into war. Conflicts over history must not develop into “wars of history” that culminate with a clear winner and loser. Controversies over historical interpretation must be resolved through a process of accurate analysis, and deliberate distortions must be corrected by demonstrating their inaccuracy through scholarly methods.

Above all, it is important to acknowledge and respect separate national histories. This is the path a country must follow for its history to be respected. Just like territorial sovereignty, “historical sovereignty” must be respected. Rather than resolving conflicts through a “war of history,” it must be done using “historical diplomacy” – that is, through steady efforts at discussion and persuasion based on thorough research.

#### **A NATIONAL INTERNATIONALISM**

The 20th century was the era of nationalism in Korea. Nationalism was the most effective means of mobilizing the independence movement, founding a new country, and pursuing economic development despite the twin challenges of colonization and national division. “Nationalism” is thus the most important word in 20th-century Korean history. As Korea sought to cope with the tumult of world history in the last century, its people drew strength from nationalism. Korea today is the product of the efforts of the Korean people to respond to the many changes thrust upon it. As a result, Korean nationalism contains both universal aspects and uniquely Korean features.

From the beginning, Korean nationalism was a response to the urgent situation caused by the sudden pressure applied on the nation by foreign powers, and it was also the result of an ideology of independence that called for Koreans to drive out external rulers. Another characteristic of Korean nationalism is the fact that pride in tradition, culture, and shared history constitutes an important part of nationalism.

The fact that Korea is a historic nation provides the rationale for all Koreans to live in a single country and thus provides the clearest justification to overcome the division and reunify.

In recent years, Korea, China and Japan have all experienced a surge of nationalism. In the case of Korea, its historical experience has made it particularly sensitive to the rise of nationalism in China and Japan. However, if Korea pursues a path of narrow nationalism, China and Japan may become wary of Korea and strengthen their own nationalism, rather than understand Korea’s position. Korean nationalism should pursue a balanced path that can moderate the nationalist tendencies of China and Japan.

The Korean peninsula also cannot remain in a state of constant military tension because of the North-South division, nor can it remain an area where historical controversies can set off a regional conflict. In order to create peace within today’s international order, it is necessary for Korea to develop its hidden potential. Just as a country can maintain its “historical sovereignty” only by recognizing and respecting the “historical sovereignty” of other countries, nationalism must respect the principles of equality and independence of other countries. Korea must develop its hidden cultural strengths in order to play a mediating role in facilitating peaceful co-existence in East Asia.

When nationalism is characterized by openness and balanced diversity, it can promote balance and peace in a region. It is a nationalism whose goal is to promote internationalism.

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