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Korean Identity, as a Middle Power in IR: International Relations Theory of Identity and its Critique

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Abstract

Since the 1990s, "identity" has become integral to international relations research, exploring subjects' self-definition and sense of belonging, alongside the attributes of collectives like nations and ethnicities. Originally theorized by Erik H. Erikson to describe self-constancy and unity, "identity" expanded in sociology and social psychology to include self-definition and group affiliation. This paper investigates the incorporation of identity into international relations, driven by critiques of the field's narrow scope amid the evolving global landscape since the late 1980s. It clarifies the complex concept of "identity" and its integration into international relations, highlighting oversights in current theories. The study proposes new analytical perspectives to enhance the concept's relevance in international relations, supported by empirical examples.

Keywords: Korea, Middle Power, Identity, Theory of Identity, Identity Politics

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Introduction

Since the 1990s, research utilizing the concept of "identity" has been actively conducted in the field of international relations. Although the concept of "identity" carries various meanings, its core is composed of two interrelated elements: self-definition of a subject—recognizing what one is—and the sense of belonging of a subject—recognizing to what one belongs. Additionally, "identity" is used as an abstract concept to denote the attributes of collectives, such as nations, ethnicities, and cultural groups, to which a subject belongs. Originally, "identity" was a concept theorized by the psychologist Erik H. Erikson to denote the constancy, continuity, and unity of the self. Subsequently, the concept of identity was adopted in sociology and social psychology to encompass the assurance or sense of "what one is," as well as the sense of belonging to a particular group or category that is closely tied to one's self-definition (Erikson et al., 1959). In the field of political science, issues of identity have been actively discussed in conjunction with topics such as nationalism and ethnicity. The concept of identity was introduced into international relations, particularly from the 1990s onwards. This shift was influenced by criticisms of the closed nature of international relations theory, which had failed to adequately capture the increasingly fluid international situation that had been evolving since the late 1980s.

In this paper, I will first clarify the concept of "identity" and then provide an overview of its introduction into international relations and the subsequent development of discussions. After highlighting the aspects overlooked or omitted by most identity theories in international relations, I will discuss which analytical perspectives need to be adopted to render the concept of "identity" beneficial within the discipline of international relations, supported by empirical examples.

1. What is Identity?

The concept of "identity" is highly ambiguous, and its meaning can vary significantly depending on the context or perspective of the study. Often translated as "sameness," "identity" is frequently used alongside the concept of "identification." Let us delineate what "identity" entails.

The first and fundamental meaning refers to "an individual's internal unity and continuity over time, along with the stability that one acquires during the process of growing up in society." This concept was systematized by Erik H. Erikson, who was heavily influenced by Freud. Erikson described the sense of "ego identity" as the conviction that the ego is learning effective steps toward the future within a secure group, and that the ego is developing as defined within the framework of a particular social reality (Erikson, 1994; Erikson, 1979). Conscious feelings of personal sameness are defined as "the simultaneous perception of one's temporal self-sameness and continuity, and the fact that others recognize one's sameness and continuity" (Erikson et al., 1959: 10). In this primary sense, identity refers to the assurance of "what one is" acquired (or to be acquired) in relation to one's surroundings (society), and the assurance of continuity and unity between one's present self and past or future self.

Identity does not merely refer to an individual's perception or assurance of "what one is," but rather, it is crucial to understand the content of such perception or assurance in terms of its position within the entire society and how it is socially recognized. Therefore, while identity refers to a subject's self-definition or sense of belonging, it can be a mere "illusion" without social acknowledgment.

The second meaning involves presenting one's self-definition—"what one is"—in a form understandable to others. This is the context in which terms like "ID card" are used. Names, physical characteristics, relationships with parents or relatives, and affiliations with groups or organizations serve as markers. However, it is essential that these markers are socially recognized. Without presenting a marker—an identity—that others can understand, one cannot effectively convey who they are (Bauman, 2013).

The third meaning refers to the use of identity as an abstract concept indicating collective attributes used to position oneself within society. This usage also pertains to the components of the "markers" mentioned in the second meaning. In other words, it can be understood as a collection of commonalities within a group (used as markers). People who believe they share such commonalities are often referred to as "those who share an identity." This "commonality" tends to be strongly perceived when distinguishing "us" from "them" or "others." Sometimes, differences with "others" are excessively emphasized to highlight the commonality within "us" (Dhamoon, 2010; Bernstein, 2005). Like "commonality," "difference" is not an objective criterion but is often defined by people's situational needs.

These three meanings focus on different aspects of the concept of "identity." It is crucial to emphasize that while identity centers on a subject's self-definition or sense of belonging, it is formed in relation to others. Identity is established in the context of one's environment, society, and relationships with others. For instance, if a five-year-old child claims "I am an adult," no one would accept it. Similarly, revealing one's name as "x" will confuse others if "x" is not a well-known figure. Moreover, defining "us" and "them" arbitrarily will not succeed if those presumed as "us" do not agree, rendering the "us" meaningless. From any perspective, the important factor in identity is that it is always established in relation to others, i.e., society.

When considering identity, the presence of "others" is significant. As previously noted, defining "us" concurrently involves defining "others." The logic of identity inherently accompanies the logic of difference, as noted by political theorist William Connolly, who was influenced by the structuralist and post-structuralist thought of Nietzsche and Foucault (Connolly, 2002; Giddens, 2013; Dunn, 1998). He argues that modern subjects can exist by distinguishing differences that appear to threaten the purity or certainty of identity, defining them as "others," and sometimes excluding them as "evil" through violent means. The exclusion of "others" or "evil" from "us" significantly reflects power relations.

Another critical point when considering identity is that it is not an objective entity but rather intersubjective, created by people's perceptions. Thus, identity is defined and redefined by people in response to circumstances. Some of these defined or redefined identities can be acknowledged by others, while some cannot. An established identity is not permanent and can change over time. Post-Marxist theorist Ernesto Laclau views identity not as an outcome but as a process, constantly being defined and redefined (constructed and reconstructed) (Laclau, 1994).

As previously mentioned, the concept of identity has been applied in sociology and political science, particularly in studies of nationalism and ethnicity. Nationalism research focuses on modes or processes of people's identification with a nation—which can be translated as nation or ethnic group depending on the context—and modes or processes of mobilization in nation-state formation. The central research topics have been how and why people identified with a nation and how this connected to nation-state formation. However, alongside examining the mechanisms of people's affiliation with nations and state formation, questions arose about what constitutes a "nation," what a nation is, and how a nation as a place of belonging (as "us") can be defined. "National identity" refers to the consciousness of belonging to a nation and the assurance of sharing commonalities with other members of that nation. However, discussions about how the content of that "nation" can be defined are complex and ongoing (Deutsch, 1966; Smith, 1992; Hobsbawm, 2012; Anderson, 2020; Gellner, 2008).¹

¹ Deutsch viewed the possibility of social communication as the essence of a community. He described a nation as a type of community that becomes politicized in pursuit of autonomy, thereby forming a polity (state). Furthermore, when this polity achieves self-governance, it becomes a "nation." Unlike Deutsch, who centered his concept of the nation around politicization and the acquisition of a self-governing "state," Smith defined a nation as "a named human population sharing a historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy, and common legal rights and duties for all members." Smith emphasized the existence of historical and cultural commonalities within the logic of distinguishing between "inside and outside." In contrast, Hobsbawm and Anderson argued that the "sense of us" that forms and establishes a nation within the "inside and outside" logic was artificially, politically, and socially constructed in modern times as well.

Meanwhile, the issue of ethnicity began to be actively discussed in response to inter-ethnic conflicts and minority issues within states worldwide during the 1960s and 1970s. The definition of "ethnic group" is not uniformly established, but it often refers to ethnic groups that do not form a nation or people, coexist with other ethnic groups within a state's territory, and, particularly, are oppressed and not assimilated into the "nation" as minorities. Here, how an ethnic group, as "us" with which individuals identify, can be defined becomes a significant issue.

Whether it is a nation or an ethnic group, an individual's sense of identifying with and belonging to it means having a consciousness of "us" and self-defining as a person with such common attributes. This inherently involves defining "others" as "them," a logic of difference that accompanies identity. When groups sharing an identity emphasize "us," they often excessively highlight differences with "them" more than commonalities within "us." This frequently occurs in combination with economic, political, or real-life inequalities, leading to ethnic conflicts. Thus, when people define "us," such as "nation" or "ethnic group," the logic of distinguishing "us" and "others" strongly operates.

As an extension of distinguishing "inside and outside," the influence of unilateral labeling—markers—imposed from outside on a subject's identity cannot be ignored. This issue becomes particularly acute when considering the identity of minorities or those in weaker positions in society. Minorities or the weak must establish their identity on stages dominated by the majority or overwhelmingly powerful others. Often, minorities or the weak cannot escape the markers imposed by the majority or the powerful and establish their identity within the permissible range of externally imposed markers. Thus, it can be assumed that identity, regardless of a subject's intentions, may have to "accept what is imposed." Even if an identity deviating from this is established, if the majority or the powerful do not recognize it, it cannot function as a true identity, as it cannot position itself within society or reduce ambiguity in relationships with others. In this way, while "identity" initially dealt with an individual's self-definition or sense of belonging within the social context, it was introduced into sociology and psychology as a concept to analyze the formation and integration of human groups and the various aspects of intergroup conflicts and fusions. Although such a concept of "identity" would have been useful in analyzing various aspects of international society centered on collective entities like states and inter-state relations, it was rarely introduced into international relations theory. Recently, however, discussions about "identity" have become active in international relations. The next section will consider the background of why identity theory has become actively discussed in international relations and provide an overview of such discussions. ²

2. Identity in International Relations

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, discussions on identity in international relations became prominent in the 1990s. The direct impetus for this trend was the turbulent international situation from the late 1980s through the 1990s, marked by the end of the Cold War, rapid globalization, and the concurrent eruption of ethnic issues. The Cold War ended in 1989, dismantling the Cold War structure that

² In the field of international relations, K. Deutsch was an exception, as he had already been addressing the issue of identity since the 1950s. Additionally, in the 1980s, Bhabha conducted research on identity in international relations, but his analytical perspective differs from the current discourse on identity. Bhabha, Jacqueline (1998) "' Get Back to Where You Once Belonged': Identity, Citizenship, and Exclusion in Europe", *Human Rights Quarterly*, 20(3), pp. 592-627.

had significantly defined international relations for nearly half a century, ushering in the 1990s. Initially, optimistic visions of the future, such as "the end of history" and "the victory of democracy," were presented.³ However, with the outbreak of so-called ethnic conflicts, such as the Yugoslav Wars, "nations" emerged as significant actors disrupting international relations beyond sovereign states (Huntington, 1993). Meanwhile, the rapid wave of globalization that had been underway since the mid-1980s began to be widely recognized. The 1990s were a decade of turbulence characterized by the opacity and fluidity of the international society, challenging and shaking the foundational premises of international relations theory. The popularity of identity discussions is deeply linked to this reality and theoretical trends.

So, what is being discussed under the term "identity" in international relations? Given that various scholars employ "identity" from their unique perspectives, it is crucial to pay close attention to what meaning content "identity" refers to in each study.

Discussions on identity in international relations can be broadly categorized into three types. The first type involves research that treats identity as an individual's affiliation or sense of belonging to a higher group (such as a state, nation, ethnicity, or other transnational or subnational groups). The second type uses "identity" to refer to the attributes or self-definition of a state as a unit within the international system. The third type focuses on the mechanisms by which a subject or group forms identity within international society, emphasizing the "inside and outside logic" that divides "self" and "other" underlying such formations. This research is influenced by the new trends in political science, which draw from structuralist and postmodern discussions, aiming to approach the subjective or intersubjective aspects of "identity" more comprehensively.

The first type of research, which deals with identity as an individual's affiliation or sense of belonging to a higher-level group, primarily discusses the formation of nation-states, ethnic issues, and ethnic conflicts in the context of international relations. Here, "identity" is used to refer to an individual's sense of belonging to a particular ethnic or other group, or the commonality among those who identify with a particular ethnic or other group. However, it is often unclear whether this commonality objectively exists or is based on intersubjectivity in analysis. This type of research overlaps significantly with studies on nationalism and ethnicity in political science (Bloom, 1990).⁴

As previously mentioned, the end of the Cold War brought ethnic conflicts and issues to the forefront globally, highlighting the importance of the impact of nations, ethnic groups, and religions on international relations. Consequently, in the 1990s, discussions on the impact of individual identification with nations, ethnic groups, or religious groups on international relations became active (Davies, 1996).⁵ Moreover, the relationship between the rapid globalization since the mid-1980s and changes in individual identity has

³ The background that invigorates the discourse on identity is undeniable. Katzenstein points out that the end of the Cold War resulted in an increased importance of identity issues.

⁴ For example, Bloom analyzed the issue of nationalism by examining why and how individuals identify with the state, and why mass mobilization occurs under the symbol of the state. He used the state formation of the United Kingdom and France as case studies for his analysis.

⁵ Davis, in re-examining the discourse on identity within ethnicity and nationalism, seeks to explore its position in the international society. He ultimately points out that ethnic issues cannot be reduced to domestic matters alone. Furthermore, in today's context where the multi-ethnicity and multiculturalism of nation-states are recognized, issues of ethnicity and national identity are intertwined with human rights concerns, gaining new significance in international relations.

also garnered attention. On one hand, discussions have emerged about how globalization enables the formation of new transnational identities that transcend borders (Farrands, 1996; Scholte, 1996; Smith, 1996).⁶ On the other hand, discussions have also focused on the coexistence and tension between cultural and social homogenization and Westernization resulting from globalization and the decentralization trends evident in ethnic issues and conflicts, addressing individual identity issues in such contexts (Geschiere and Meyer, 1998).

The second type of research deals with "identity" as it connects the international system with "states" as units within it. In this context, "identity" can be summarized as the content of a state's self-definition or self-defined attributes that influence the setting of national interests. For instance, even when "a state self-defines," it is the people within the state (such as policymakers) who actually "self-define," but this aspect is theoretically ambiguous at best. The concept of identity in this sense is used in the context of discussions about how changes in state identity lead to changes in national interests, which in turn change the international system, or conversely, how changes in the international system lead to changes in state identity and national interests.

Such discussions emerged as part of attempts by some researchers to propose new international relations theories, moving away from the neo-realist/neo-liberalist dogma that dominated North American international relations in the 1980s.⁷ The attempt to move beyond the neo-realist discourse represented by Waltz and the neo-liberalist discourse, initially positioned in opposition but sharing various premises with neo-realists and mainly represented by Keohane, is referred to by Wendt as constructivism. This movement was initiated by some researchers, such as Ashley and others, from the mid-1980s, but remained a minority in the 1980s (Alker, 1996).⁸ However, in the 1990s, stimulated by the tides of real international relations, "reconstructing international relations theory" emerged as one of the central themes in international relations theory.

The "reconstruction of new international relations theory" primarily involves questioning the neo-realist emphasis on (1) all states moving by the same motivation to "rationally" pursue national interests,⁹ and (2) the inevitability of an anarchic international system due to units within the system acting according to

⁶ Ferrand, Scholte, and R. Smith focus on how the ways individuals identify with nations are changing as globalization progresses and the authority and functions of states are eroded. They explore whether such changes are occurring, what types of changes are happening, and the potential impact on international society. In terms of future prospects, they discuss the possibility that individuals may have alternatives to the state as objects of identification. For example, Scholte suggests new identification targets such as religion, class, race, cross-border gender bonds, youth culture, lesbian and gay communities, and transnational nationalism (like immigrant societies).

⁷ Additionally, the scope of "constructivism" remains unclear, and researchers generally categorized as "constructivists" do not necessarily engage in consistent discussions based on a common foundation substantial enough to be called a "school." Furthermore, the correlation between constructivism and research from critical theory or postmodern perspectives is not clearly defined. Additionally, not all researchers who discuss identity are included within constructivism. A survey on constructivism itself will be deferred to another occasion.

⁸ In addition to the previously mentioned Laggie and Ashley, for example, H. Alker had been independently conducting research in international relations since the 1970s. His research drew on theories from sociology, semiotics, and philosophy, avoiding reliance on the externally given metric of "rationality." However, this approach did not occupy a central position in North American international relations theory. Notably, his work, which had been ongoing since the 1970s, was only published in the form of a collected volume in 1996.

⁹ Wendt and Katzenstein emphasize that neo-realists and neo-liberalists have traditionally overlooked or downplayed the concept of "identity." Wendt argues that this disregard stems from the fact that both neo-realists and neo-liberalists have traditionally considered the "identity" and "interests" of actors (i.e., states) as being given "externally," independent of the various situations surrounding the actors or the attributes of the states.

the same principle as (1). It focuses on revisiting the content of "national interests" and "rationality," questioning why the current international system is anarchic, whether systems with different attributes can exist, and whether they existed in the past (Katzenstein, 1996a).¹⁰ When explaining the mechanism of change in the international system, after acknowledging that it can change, "identity" was positioned as a key concept influencing the change in the content of "rationality" that defines national interests. ¹¹

Neo-realists and neo-liberalists assumed that any actor fundamentally pursues interests according to "rationality" and that while actors (states) may change their behavior according to circumstances, they do not change their identity or national interests. In contrast, researchers emphasizing the importance of identity argue that a state's benefit table for judging national interests can change, meaning that the content of "rationality" can change, and they positioned state identity and its changes as bringing about that change. For example, argued that even if inter-state relations started from self-interested rationality, expectations created by past actions change state identity and interests. Additionally, Katzenstein argued that cultural-institutional contexts (norms) and political identity influence national interests, shaping national security policy formation (Katzenstein, 1996b; Katzenstein et al., 1996).

Moreover, it was emphasized that the nature/structure of the international system changes along with changes in state identity. Wendt argued that the international system's structure and the units (states) within it are mutually constituted, with identity serving as the link between them (Wendt, 1996). Whether changes in the international system alter state identity or changes in state identity alter the international system remains a point of contention among scholars. Wendt contended that significant parts of state identity are constructed within the inter-state system rather than domestic politics or human nature (Wendt, June 1994). Conversely, Koslowski and Kratochwil, who discussed the transformation of the Soviet bloc, emphasized domestic political changes as factors driving identity changes, viewing changes in identity as leading to changes in the international system, such as the transformation of the Soviet bloc (Koslowski and Kratochwil, 1994). Katzenstein also emphasizes the importance of domestic political movements.

Additionally, there are cases where structural changes in the international system (changes in the system's norms or principles) over a longer historical span are explained by changes in the identity of "states" as units within the international system. In this context, "identity" refers to general norms about the principles of state behavior that hold significant influence within a particular international system and can affect state actions, rather than the self-definition or sense of belonging held by individual states. Hall pointed out that the patterns of "identity" as a state differ across eras, arguing that these changes in state identity, along

¹⁰Additionally, in discussing neo-liberals, Krasner is often mentioned. In the early 1980s, he pointed out that the institutions created by various states themselves have the potential to change state behavior, indicating a possible shift towards a sociological approach. However, by the mid-1980s, he adopted an economic approach, primarily basing his discussions on "rationality," and thereby aligning more closely with neo-realists.

¹¹Wendt observed that while neo-realists and neo-liberalists differ on whether states prioritize relative gains or absolute gains, they agree on the theoretical starting point concerning actors: ① states are the dominant actors within the system, and ② various states define security in "self-interested" terms. This is discussed in Wendt's article, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics" (*International Organization*, 46(2), May 1992, pp. 391-425). Additionally, there is research emphasizing the need to introduce the previously neglected (or assumed to be neglected) concepts of culture and identity into international relations theory, as seen in Lapid and Kratochwil's "The Return of Culture and Identity in IR Theory" (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1995).

with changes in the content of national interests, change the structure of the international system (Hall, 1999).¹²

The third type of research to be mentioned focuses on the content of the logic involved in "identity" itself. It investigates the content of a subject's or group's self-definition of "self" or "us," the inevitable definition of "them" or "other" that accompanies it, the content or components of the "inside and outside logic" that distinguishes "self" and "other," how it has evolved, the background and mechanisms by which the "inside and outside" logic emerged, how it has changed, and how these changes impact the subjects who espouse the logic. This research approaches the more fundamental issues of identity.

"Identity" as the content of self-definition refers to the bundle of attributes commonly assumed to be possessed when defining "us." An example of this usage is "European identity," where "European" attributes, i.e., certain attributes assumed to be held in common among those considered part of Europe, are referred to. Neumann revealed through textual analysis that the region known as "Europe" is intersubjective, and the criteria for defining "Europe" or what is included in "us" as "Europe" have significantly varied across eras (Neumann, 1999; Renwick, 1996). Additionally, Campbell, employing Foucault's archaeological method, depicted the historical transformation of American identity (Campbell, 1992). These examples refer to "identity" as denoting the attributes assumed based on the "inside and outside logic."

Furthermore, the inevitable accompaniment of "self" definition is the establishment of "others," and how "others" are defined and how "self" is defined are in a reciprocal relationship with strong influences, a crucial point emphasized in several studies. Campbell emphasized the significant impact that the establishment of "enemy/other" had on the formation of American identity, which strongly influenced American security throughout different eras. Neumann also pointed out that the definition of "Europe" was accompanied by the definition of "others" such as Russia and the Islamic world. Keyman, discussing identity in international relations from a critical theory perspective, also addressed the existence of the "logic of inclusion/exclusion" accompanying identity and the importance of the definition of "others" that accompanies identity formation (Keyman, 1997). Moreover, focusing on the logic of nationalism in places like South Africa, England, and Australia, Manzo discussed how the "boundaries" between "us" and "them" are "created" by the political, social, and economic circumstances of the time (Manzo, 1996).

Thus, international relations theory has adopted the concept of identity to address intrinsic issues in international relations, such as sovereignty, statehood, and the nature of the international system, as well as issues newly recognized as important due to the demands of the times, such as nationalism, ethnicity, and ethnicity. Particularly noteworthy are the third type of studies that reveal the logic or mechanisms by which "us" and "others" are defined through rich empirical research.

¹² Additionally, from a similar perspective, Reus-Smit's research analyzes the interrelationship between changes in the norms or principles of the international system and changes in the identities of states as its constituent units, using examples from ancient Greece, Renaissance Italy, absolutist Europe, and the modern international society. However, research on the constituent units, norms, and principles of international systems other than those of the modern era was already conducted by Bozeman, and the reprinting of Bozeman's work in the 1990s (1994) holds significant importance. *Reus-Smit, Christian (1999) The Moral Purpose of the State: Culture, Social Identity, and Institutional Rationality in International Relations. Princeton: Princeton University Press, Bozeman, Adda B (2017) Politics and Culture in International History: From the Ancient near East to the Opening of the Modern Age. London: Routledge.*

However, there is an overlooked point in much of the existing identity discourse. As reiterated, identity in its original sense is insufficient as mere self-definition or illusion; it is established only in relation to one's surroundings, particularly society. Simply asserting "I am X" is not enough; unless others around one acknowledge it, identity cannot be said to have been expressed. Discussions on identity in international relations focus on self-definition or sense of belonging as defined by a subject, as well as the definition of "inside and outside logic" by a subject. However, there is little mention of the possibility that such self-definition or sense of belonging, or the definitions of "us" and "others," may actually be denied by other individuals or states (members) who are "others."

In the first type of research, identity is treated as referring to an individual's sense of belonging to a higher group, the content of commonality assumed to be held by members of that group, and the attributes proving an individual's belonging to that group. However, there is often insensitivity to how these senses of belonging, commonalities, and attributes are perceived by "others." The second type of research treats the content of a state's self-definition as "identity," with little attention to the acknowledgment of this by "others" (other countries). In many cases of the third type of research, while the logic of dividing "us" and "others" assumed by a subject is analyzed in detail, there is no analysis of how "others" perceive this logic. If the term "identity" is to be used deliberately, it should not merely refer to the content of self-definition or sense of belonging. The perception of self-definition or sense of belonging by "others," the absence of perceptual differences between self and others, and the problem consciousness of these issues are essential for a genuine understanding of identity. In the next section, theoretical analysis will be conducted on these so-called "differences" entangled with identity.

3. Double Contingency and Identity Crisis

As noted in the previous section, the establishment of identity is not solely a matter of self-definition or a sense of belonging. Crucially, it also involves how this identity is perceived by others and how the subject acknowledges this perception. This is the essence of the so-called double contingency issue.

Double contingency¹³ refers to a situation where the actions of one party in an interaction depend on the reactions of the other party. For instance, when one actor issues a command, the outcome—whether the other party complies—is uncertain. Each party recognizes the uncertainty regarding the outcomes of their actions. To proceed, each actor must anticipate the other's response, but initially, they can only predict each other's actions or intentions, which may or may not align (Luhmann, 2013).¹⁴

¹³ A familiar example of double contingency can be illustrated through the scenario of K and R, who both believe they are in unrequited love with each other. From K's perspective, the possibility of them becoming a couple depends on whether R reciprocates his feelings. Similarly, from R's standpoint, their potential relationship hinges on whether K responds to her feelings. K must rely on predicting R's intentions to decide whether to confess his love, but he cannot know if his prediction is correct until he actually confesses. The same uncertainty applies to R. Even though they both have mutual feelings and could become a couple if one confesses, the initial conditions leave K unaware of R's feelings and vice versa. Regardless of their mutual interest, the realization of either's desire to become a couple depends on the other's response—whether they accept or reject the confession.

¹⁴ Parsons highlighted the concept of contingency, emphasizing that an individual's actions depend on their predictions of another's actions. Specifically, Actor A's action (a) is contingent upon their expectations of how Actor B will behave, and

This concept was not overlooked in Erikson's original identity theory, which emphasized that identity is established through relations with others. However, many identity theories, including those in international relations, assume that the problem of double contingency is resolved. To make identity theories truly meaningful, it is crucial to consider the presence of double contingency, questioning whether a common understanding of identity exists and if perceptions of identity align among different subjects.

Thus, let's reconsider the concept of identity through the lens of double contingency. Suppose subject A defines itself or claims affiliation with a category, but surrounding subjects do not recognize this self-definition or the category's legitimacy. Subject A might merely be mistaken. Similarly, if subject B arbitrarily attributes characteristics or categories to subject A that differ from A's self-definition, significant disparities arise. Even if both subjects consider themselves part of a "we," a failure to recognize this mutual identification results in a mere illusion of shared identity.

If subject A's self-definition of identity coincidentally matches subject B's perception of A's identity, does this eliminate perceptual discrepancies? Not necessarily; both may still be independently mistaken. True alignment requires mutual awareness of each other's perceptions. If both subjects understand and agree on the contents of A's identity, then A's identity is validated in relation to others, resolving the issue of double contingency. Conversely, if their perceptions differ, the discrepancy becomes apparent, highlighting an identity crisis.

For instance, if subject A believes they share a category X with subject B, and both recognize this mutual belief, they share an identity as members of X, resolving double contingency. However, if subject B does not reciprocate this belief, confusion ensues. Recognition of these mismatches often leads to identity crises.

The essence of double contingency theory lies in the possibility of concordance or discordance in perceptions among the parties involved, not from an observer's viewpoint.¹⁵ Researchers, often taking an external observer's perspective, focus on self-identity and category affiliation without considering how these are perceived by others. This oversight can lead to analyses that miss perceptual gaps among subjects, implicitly accepting identity establishment without considering challenges to legitimacy from others.

Such assumptions render identity as an analytical concept somewhat trivial. For example, Berger notes that post-war Japan and Germany crafted new identities as "normal states" or "members of the Western community," influencing their security policies. However, this overlooks potential perceptual differences,

similarly, Actor B's action (b) relies on their expectations of Actor A's behavior. This mutual dependency on uncertain expectations leads to double contingency, involving a dual layer of uncertainty regarding each other's actions.

Luhmann expanded on Parsons' idea, proposing a more complex theory of double contingency. He suggested that interactions between self and other involve not just predicting the other's actions, but also anticipating what the other will predict. This involves layers of "prediction of predictions," extending to "prediction of prediction of predictions," and so on, adding complexity to the notion of double contingency. For more detailed insights into double contingency, please refer to the subsequent sections. *Parsons, Talcott (2010) Social Structure & Person. New York: Simon and Schuster.*

¹⁵To succinctly illustrate the relationship between perceptual differences among subjects and identity crises, the diagram assumes no power differential between Subject A and Subject B. However, it is realistic to consider that there may indeed be power imbalances between them, such as one being a majority and the other a minority. This power dynamic can significantly influence the perception and recognition of identities, potentially exacerbating identity crises when one subject's identity is marginalized or invalidated by the more dominant subject.

such as Asian countries viewing Japan as imperialistic or U.S. defense officials seeing it as a potential nuclear threat (Berger, 2011). Disputes often stem from such perceptual gaps (Klineberg, 1991).¹⁶

In reality, consider the Chechen conflict, where Chechen Muslims self-identify as "Chechens" seeking independence, while the Russian Federation denies this identity, labeling them as "citizens of the Russian Federation." For Chechens, the ongoing conflict is an independence war against "Russians," but for Russia, it's merely a domestic rebellion.

Similarly, Turkey's claim to EU membership faces implicit resistance from EU nations due to differing definitions of "Europe," illustrating a mismatch in self- and external perceptions.

Sensitivity to double contingency reveals the complex landscape of identity-related differences, often leading to identity crises. Such crises are less likely in superpowers like the United States, where external acceptance is often inevitable, and actions are less constrained by dissent. Small states also face fewer crises due to limited choices imposed by external circumstances. Identity crises predominantly affect states that lack the capability to ensure their security or economic stability independently, yet possess significant enough influence to be acknowledged by others, thus finding themselves concerned with external perceptions.

4. Overcoming Identity Crises and International Relations

Beyond the Korean Peninsula, the challenge of designing a regional order in the anarchic context of East Asia has emerged as a critical diplomatic issue for middle-power South Korea. The prolonged North Korea-U.S. nuclear conflict has hindered the end of the "old" Cold War in East Asia for over a quarter-century. Concurrently, the intensifying U.S.-China rivalry exacerbates regional security dilemmas, suggesting a "new" Cold War atmosphere. Notably, East Asia's unique historical complexities grant it a degree of autonomy in its competitive logic and security issues, distinct from global conflict lines. As Lee (2006) explains, historical animosities between China and Japan, rooted in colonialism, combined with the Cold War, have created the "Great Division System" in East Asia. This division, including the Korean Peninsula and Taiwan-China separations, persists into the 21st century, continually reproducing regional tensions. The absence of a multilateral security order akin to Europe characterizes modern East Asia as a collection of mutually antagonistic identities, hindering the formation of shared or hybrid identities that facilitate European integration (Seo, 2019). The "Asia Paradox" during Park Geun-hye's administration—a situation of persistent security conflicts despite high economic interdependence—stems from this historical foundation (Lee, 2015).

¹⁶ Klineberg discusses the impact of stereotypical understandings of racial or national groups on international relations. For instance, he notes that the Germans' image of the Polish, Russians, and British as people who would "soon succumb" significantly influenced Hitler's decisions to invade Poland and Russia, as well as to declare war on Britain, thereby accepting the risks of a two-front operation. These stereotypical perceptions contributed to strategic miscalculations and aggressive military actions during World War II. Klineberg, Otto (1951) 'National Characteristics and International Relations', *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 107(9), pp. 661-666, Klineberg, Otto (1991) 'The Contributions of Psychology to International Understanding: Problems and Possibilities', *The Psychology of War and Peace: The Image of the Enemy*: Springer, pp. 71-83.

In this context, the Roh Moo-hyun administration's "Northeast Asia Peace and Prosperity Initiative" marked a significant attempt to leverage South Korea's agency to transform the region's hostile anarchic culture (Lee, 2009). The Six-Party Talks, convened to address North Korea's nuclear issue, partially aligned with South Korea's vision for Northeast Asian cooperation, culminating in the September 19 Joint Statement. The parties (South Korea, North Korea, the U.S., Japan, Russia, and China) committed to efforts for "permanent peace and stability in Northeast Asia" and agreed to explore measures for enhancing regional security cooperation (MOFA, 2018).

A noteworthy aspect is the invocation of European history as a model for identity co-evolution and integration in Northeast Asia. In an article for *Global Asia*, Roh highlighted the transformative journey of Europe from a history of conflict to one of peace and prosperity, citing leaders like Monnet, Schuman, Adenauer, de Gaulle, and Brandt as exemplars. Roh argued for transcending national interests to build a new history based on common understanding, emphasizing the expansion of post-national identities.¹⁷

This grand narrative of constructing a transnational peace system, viewing Europe as a civilizational standard, continues under the Moon Jae-in administration. Initiatives like the "Northeast Asia Railroad Community" and the "New Korean Peninsula Regime" draw historical precedent from European integration models. President Moon, in his 2018 Liberation Day speech, referenced the European Coal and Steel Community as a basis for proposing an "East Asian Railroad Community," envisioning it as a step towards an energy, economic, and multilateral peace security community (MOFA, 2018). During a 2019 visit to Nordic countries, Moon directly linked European peace models like the Helsinki Process and the 1972 East and West Germany Basic Treaty to the Korean Peninsula.¹⁸

However, South Korea, as a middle power encircled by major powers and pressured by division, faces worsening structural conditions for identity transformation politics. Compared to West Germany's Ostpolitik during the Cold War, South Korea lacks the favorable détente environment and broader global integration trends that supported Germany's diplomatic initiatives. In contrast, the early 21st-century landscape features intensifying U.S.-China rivalry, countering past structural opportunities.

The key to reshaping East Asia's order lies in resolving the persistent abnormality of North Korea-U.S. relations and the nuclear issue. Despite efforts, the 2018 détente momentum has not yielded tangible denuclearization or peace regime achievements. This challenge is compounded by the rise of "reactionary international politics"—the resurgence of nationalism and geopolitics due to populism—reversing post-Cold War trends and fostering hostile identity politics, de-globalization, and disintegration (MacKay and LaRoche, 2018).

These developments signal the reemergence of competitive anarchy, narrowing South Korea's diplomatic and strategic space. However, this gravity underscores the urgency of crafting a middle-power diplomatic strategy and identity transformation politics for South Korea today.

¹⁷ Korea Policy Briefing, 'Northeast Asia's Future Must Learn from the EU,' <http://www.korea.kr/news/policyNewsView.do?newsId=148622651>

¹⁸ Moon Jae-in, 'Oslo Forum Keynote Address "Peace for the People,"' <https://www1.president.go.kr/articles/6495>

Conclusion

To make discussions on identity truly meaningful, it is essential to empirically assess how identities are perceived by others, whether they are accepted, or if various actors are merely operating under misconceptions. While this paper has focused on perceptual differences between actors, issues of consistency or inconsistency among multiple identities within the same actor can also arise. For instance, the compatibility of identities such as being a "member of Asia" and a "member of the Western world" must be scrutinized. Although some optimistically discuss the coexistence of multiple identities, they are not always consistent. If inconsistencies exist, an identity crisis may ensue. This issue has been explored using the concept of liminality, yet further examination of cases where inconsistency leads to political tension is required.

The concept of "identity" is highly significant as it addresses aspects of international relations that cannot be captured by traditional concepts like power, national interest, or rationality. However, if identity merely denotes self-definition or affiliation—essentially self-perception—then using the term "identity" is unnecessary. Identity becomes socially meaningful only when acknowledged by others, making intersubjectivity a crucial element. Ignoring potential perceptual mismatches among parties renders the discussion trivial. For example, when South Korea self-identifies as part of "Asia" or as a "middle power," it is vital to question whether other nations recognize these identities. To prevent "identity" from being reduced to mere delusion or dogma, attention must be paid to the existence of double contingency, considering both societal acceptance and rejection in identity examinations.

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