SEEKING REFUGE IN SOUTH KOREA

A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY OF MIDDLE EASTERN & NORTH KOREAN ASYLUM SEEKERS

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The world is currently experiencing a migration crisis. 'Global migration crisis' is the label given by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 2015. Four years on, things have only got worse. According to UN assessments, there are currently 68 million displaced people and 25 million refugees globally.

The current refugee crisis has impacted on the political landscape of countries from Europe to North America. In this essay I ask what the diverging responses to refugees from the Middle East and from North Korea tell us about belonging, ethnic identity and mobility in contemporary South Korea. I ask three questions related to the emergence of the global refugee crisis: how has the crisis impacted on East Asia? How have East Asia countries, specifically South Korea, received asylum seekers fleeing the Middle East? Why are North Koreans an exceptional case in how asylum seekers are received in South Korea? Although asylum seekers from conflict ravaged Middle Eastern countries legally satisfy UNHCR classifications of who constitutes a refugee, the Korean government relies on a discourse of ethnic nationalism to exclude individuals seeking refuge in South Korea. While social, legal, and ethnic nationalist grounds are presented to exclude asylum seekers from places such as Syria or Yemen, these same ideologies are presented as justification for accepting asylum seekers from North Korea. I suggest that in defining who and who does not constitute an 'acceptable refugee', South Korea is missing an opportunity to address its emergent demographic crisis and to present itself as a moral leader in East Asia.

THE GLOBAL MIGRATION CRISIS

According to the UNHCR, the majority of people fleeing violence in the Middle East have sought refuge within the region.[1] Turkey, for example, has been the prime recipient of asylum seekers for four years running, hosting the largest number of refugees worldwide, with 3.5 million people. Turkey is followed by Pakistan, Uganda, Lebanon, Iran, Germany, Bangladesh and Sudan. Although Germany has led the way in terms of humanitarian outreach, compared to Turkey, Pakistan, and Iran, the number of refugees accepted by European countries has been minimal. Europe's

reticence may come as a surprise to some, and that is because the media and policy makers often frame the global refugee crisis as a distinctly European and North American affair.

The Eurocentric understanding of the crisis has had a huge impact on European politics. The EU response has oscillated between a hard-line refusal to accept asylum seekers, and a German-style open border. This indecisive policymaking has led to the situation where populist, right wing politicians play on nativist, nationalist sentiments to establish a foothold in mainstream politics.

The hardening of fortress Europe has had a knock on effect to destinations geographically more distant, such as Japan and South Korea. How has South Korea, one of the wealthiest liberal democratic states in the region, responded to these emergent humanitarian challenges?

SOUTH KOREAN RESPONSES TO THE GLOBAL MIGRATION CRISIS

South Korea is legally obligated to accept asylum seekers. This obligation comes from its signing of international treaties. Specifically, South Korea acceded to the 1951 United Nations' Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees in 1992, and is a signatory to the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. The Convention laid down the rules for countries regarding the definition of refugee status and the duties of governments to people seeking asylum. The 1967 Protocol made amendments to this contract and expanded the scale of the convention beyond Europe. Although a signatory to these treaties, South Korea has not committed itself to anywhere approaching the same level of assistance and asylum as other wealthy, democratic states in Europe or North America.

South Korea is a donor state, meaning that it provides financial assistance to international organisations working with asylum seekers. In 2018, for example, South Korea contributed more than 25 million USD to the UNHCR[2], while South Korean private donors provided a further 30 million dollars.[3] Although donations appear to be increasing, the government is failing to live up to its obligation to accept asylum seekers. In fact, South Korea is falling far short of countries in Europe. For example, according to the UNHCR, since 1994 South Korea has only accepted 2.5% of non-North Korean asylum applicants. More recently, from January until October 2017, the government accepted just 96 of 7,291 applications for asylum from non-North Korean applicants.[4]

South Korea's approach to supporting non-North Korean asylum seekers—providing money but not refuge— is known as 'checkbook humanitarianism'. In other words, instead of providing shelter and care for people in need, the government provides money to organisations working with refugees.

Although the UN has requested that South Korea accept more applicants, the government has been loath to do so, citing the ostensible ethnic homogeneity of the country as a reason that the country is unable to absorb asylum seekers. This is despite the fact that during and in the years following the Korean War, South Korea was a major source of internally displaced people and refugees.

The recent case of Yemeni asylum seekers and Jeju Island is illustrative of the failure of the country to fulfil its humanitarian obligations. In 2018 around 1000 individuals requested asylum in Jeju, an island off South Korea's south coast. Of that number, just over 500 were Yemenis fleeing the civil war in their home country. Many of the Yemeni asylum seekers had fled Yemen to Malaysia. Once in Malaysia, they made use of the cheap *AirAsia* flights from Kuala Lumpur to Jeju, and the visa-free program that was designed to attract tourists to Jeju island.[5]

The majority of the asylum seekers arriving in Jeju have been young, Muslim men and the response of Jeju Islanders to the new arrivals has ranged from panic to political protest. Public sentiment mobilised against the asylum seekers and a petition with 700,000 signatures was posted on the Korean government's website demanding that all Yemeni refugees be deported back to Yemen.[6] The petition was accompanied by protests in Seoul and in Jeju Island.

Protestors claimed that the refugees' religion makes them a national security threat.[7] The asylum seekers who sought refuge on Jeju Island exhibited a tri-factor of threats to local Korean people in the confluence of race (Arab), religion (Muslim) and gender (men). To voice their fears, Korean protestors drew from the same language of race and religious exclusion as in other wealthy parts of the world where Middle Eastern asylum seekers have applied for refuge. In June 2018, the Korean government responded to public pressure by removing Yemen from its visa waiver list and banning asylum seekers from leaving Jeju Island. The closing of the visa loophole immediately impacted on asylum applications; from June 2018 until September of the same year the number of people applying for asylum in South Korea dropped from 2260 to 839.[8]

The Korean response mirrored that of the EU and the US in that asylum seekers were reduced down to their bare humanity: their religion, their gender, their physical and cultural differences. Once they become merely young, Muslim, and men, they were also securitised, reimagined as a threat to the public and the nation.

What is surprising about this is that South Korea is facing a demographic crisis that threatens to plunge both it into an economic recession. As Korean society ages and the population shrinks, the number of people able to work and contribute to the economy becomes smaller each year. It makes

little sense for South Korea to reject asylum seekers who have skills and are willing to work. Instead, we see the language of ethnic nationalism used to justify the exclusion of people for whom leaving their country was a matter of choosing life over death. This same rhetoric is employed to explain why North Korean asylum seekers are accepted in South Korea.

NORTH KOREANS: ACCEPTABLE REFUGEES

There is an exception to the story of South Korea falling short in its legal and moral duty to help people trying to flee war, famine, and persecution. That exception is how the country relates to North Koreans. Why are North Koreans 'acceptable refugees'? What makes North Koreans special? After all, unlike Yemeni refugees, North Koreans are from an enemy state, so why accept their applications for refuge?

According to the South Korean Ministry of Unification, there are now over 32,000 North Koreans in South Korea.[9] In most cases of outward migration from North Korea, there have been a number of negative push factors at play. Negative push factors refer to challenges or pressures on people that compel them to leave their home. Specifically, in North Korea we see negative push factors like an absence of political freedom and a lack of economic opportunities. In extreme cases, such as during the famine of the 1990s, there may have not been enough resources to sustain human life, and leaving the country may have been the only way to survive.[10]

These negative push factors combine with positive pull factors. A positive pull factor is something that encourages a person to migrant to a certain place. For example, some positive pull factors that encourage North Koreans to leave their country and go to South Korea include political and religious freedoms; the guarantee of improved access to resources; the lure of the symbols of consumer capitalism and the lure of South Korean soft power.[11] South Korean soft power, for example, comes from the hype created by the so-called Korean wave. The Korean wave refers to the growing influence and popularity of Korean music, dramas and film throughout Asia and beyond. But how did North Koreans find out about things like South Korean dramas and music?

During the nationwide famine of the 1990s, the China-North Korean border became more porous, allowing for smuggling to take place. What was smuggled? Food, medicine, DVDs and compact discs. And what did North Koreans watching South Korean dramas see? They saw a society in which everyone seems to own a car, an apartment, and lots of things in that apartment. Consumer capitalism packaged in popular culture contributes to the positive pull factor of South Korea as a destination in

which North Koreans can have things that they cannot have in their own country.

If the pull factor of consumer capitalism fosters a desire in North Koreans to migrate to South Korea, then the legal framework of the South Korean constitution makes resettlement relatively easy to do. The reason that the South Korean government cannot legally reject North Koreans is because of Article 3 of the South Korean Constitution, which states, 'The territory of the Republic of Korea (the ROK/South Korea) shall consist of the Korean peninsula and its adjacent islands.' Simply put, in South Korean law, North Korea is regarded as South Korean territory and all citizens of North Korea are citizens of the South. This means that moving from North to South Korea is actually moving from northern Korea to southern Korea.

A further pull factor is ethnic nationalism. Ethnic nationalism is the idea that the nation is imagined as inseparable from an ethnic group—usually the dominant ethnic group within the sovereign boundaries of a country. In this case, the national community is imagined to comprise of Koreans. Korean ethnic nationalism is entirely inclusive of ethnic Koreans, meaning that if you are Korean, then you belong within the Korean community. The flip side is that ethnic nationalism is exclusionary towards anyone who is not part of the ethnic group. The idea of Korean ethnic nationalism – of a homogenous community in which everyone shares a history, culture, and DNA is prevalent in both North and South Korea. It is perhaps one of the few things both sides agree on: that they are one people tragically, but temporarily, divided.

WHEN PROMISES MEET REALITY

The problem with ethnic nationalism as a uniting ideology is that almost 70 years since the division of the Korean Peninsula into two nation states, North and South Koreans have become very different in terms of economy, politics, and cultural practices. Consequently, the idea of being one people is no longer enough to bridge the gaps between the two Koreas and the reality is that North Koreans arriving in South Korea often feel alienated from mainstream society.

The problem is one of expectations. Specifically, that for a long time North Koreans at least expected their lives to be better in South Korea. In fact, South Korea, with all its modern attraction, is often a disappointment for North Korean refugees. The promises presented through soft focus dramas and action films do not translate into reality for North Koreans arriving in South Korea. Just like asylum seekers from the Middle East, North Koreans arrive in South Korea with little money and belongings.

They arrive with few social networks to support them and they struggle: they struggle with the Korean language as it is spoken in the south, with the challenges of capitalism, and with developing social networks needed to engage with upward social mobility.

It becomes clear to North Koreans that, although they now live South Korea, the shiny cars, the nice apartments, and the job in Samsung are things from another world. These things exist in South Korea, but they exist for the middle and upper classes. North Koreans, lacking education, skills, and social networks are unable to access the markers of middle class success. The result is that many North Koreans feel a sense of disappointment following their arrival in South Korea. They feel like the promises made in the television dramas and films they watched have not been kept. Consequently we are now seeing an increasing number of North Koreans leaving South Korea and migrating to the US, to Australia, or to the UK in search of the life that they feel they were promised.[12]

CONCLUSION

A number of influences compel some North Koreans to leave their country and travel through China and on to South Korea. These pressures are comprised of a balance of negative push factors and positive pull factors. South Korean claims over the DPRK, for example, and a shared ideological understanding of who belongs and who does not contributes to fostering favorable conditions for North Koreans to migrate from one Korea to another.

There are several further socio-political aspects to this relationship. First, although North Korea is an enemy state – South Korea fought a war against the North and Kim Jong-un continues to threaten the existence of South Korea with his nuclear program – it is regarded as redeemable. North Koreans are conceived of as fallen brother and sisters – they are 'family members' that have made poor choices, rather than deadly foes (the Japanese fulfill this role for both Koreas).

Second, the figure of the North Korean is framed not simply as an enemy, but as a victim of a corrupt ideology. As victims, they need the firm hand of a guiding big brother figure to set them on the straight path. Lastly, there is a feeling in South Korean society that, 'There, but for the grace of God, goes I'. In other words, North Koreans could have been us and, however flawed they may be, they are nevertheless Korean. Again, Korean ethnic nationalism trumps both ideological difference and the reality that the two Koreas have become very different during decades of division.

In contrast, asylum seekers from the Middle East are accorded none of these benefits. They are not part of the ethnic community. In fact, they are far worse, because they are regarded as 'too foreign' in every way: appearance, religion, and cultural practices. Compounding their foreignness is the gender bias of asylum seekers from Syria or Yemeni: there are simply too many men and it scares the Korean public. Sadly, it seems that the South Korean response to asylum seekers from anywhere other than North Korea mirrors the worst aspects of European and North American refugee policies. It is a case of the head over the heart, asking not, 'What can I do for you?' But, 'What can you do for me?'

In the end, unless the rhetoric about homogeneity is discarded, both sides will lose: non-Korean asylum seekers fleeing persecution and war will not gain the security they need to start secure, safe, lives. While South Korea will miss both the chance to gain a much needed labor force that could contribute to its economy as it transitions through the current demographic crises, and to have a moral victory that would show them to be a strong middle power, both economically and morally, in a world that so badly needs such leadership.

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[1] For more on the global refugee crisis and possible solutions for resolving this crisis see Betts and Collier (2017).

[2] http://reporting.unhcr.org/donor-profiles?y=2018

[3] https://www.unhcr.org/5baa00b24

[4] https://www.refworld.org/docid/5a61ee294.html

[5] https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2018/12/yemen-refugees-south-korea-jeju-island.html

[6] The petition is available on the Blue House website: https://www1.president.go.kr/petitions/269548

[7] For an analysis of South Korean public opinion towards Middle Eastern asylum seekers arriving in South Korea see: https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/answering-question-should-south-korea-accept-refugees

[8] https://tradingeconomics.com/south-korea/asylum-applications

[9] https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/relations/statistics/defectors/

[10] For more on the North Korean famine see Haggard and Noland (2007).
[11] For more on Koreans leaving the DPRK and resettling in South Korea see Markus Bell (2013a, 2013b, 2014).
[12] For more on North Koreans re-migrating from South Korea see Song and Bell (2018).