

1 Introduction: North Korea's Emerging Diaspora

This Element examines the emergence and significance of the North Korean diaspora. Over the past thirty years, a growing number of individuals have left the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and resettled in third countries, forming a new, globally dispersed population. North Korean emigration has been concentrated in South Korea, but not limited to it: while almost all DPRK émigrés initially settled in South Korea, a significant number have since sought asylum and resettlement beyond the Korean peninsula.

This specific form of migration, and the diasporic politics that it has engendered, has received little systematic attention. There is robust scholarship on earlier waves of migration that formed the Korean diaspora, including the diaspora's role in Korean state formation and contemporary transnational politics in and around the peninsula. The contemporary wave of migration from North Korea, however, is empirically distinct from previous waves, either those that preceded the modern Korean states on both halves of the peninsula, or the out-migration of Koreans from the peninsula's southern half since 1948. North Korean émigrés thus form the most recent layer of a broader Korean diaspora – embedded within global Korean communities, but also retaining distinctive identities and patterns of political behavior. As yet, however, there is relatively little scholarship on North Korean émigrés – their destinations, experiences, conceptions of identity, and political engagement, either in host countries or vis-à-vis their homeland. This Element systematically unpacks and addresses those questions.

As it does so, the Element also engages with the question of how homeland regime type shapes diasporic politics – a growing area of research at the intersection of comparative politics and international relations. North Korea falls in a subset of cases wherein the diaspora emerges from and engages with a homeland under authoritarian rule. Recent scholarship highlights that when authoritarian governments suppress opposition and contention at home, citizens can turn to migration and resettlement abroad to evade, organize around, and contest the power and control of homeland regimes. When that happens, diasporas become important sites of anti-regime activity; authoritarian regimes in turn strategically manage migration and diasporic policies to mitigate risks and control populations residing abroad (Ragazzi 2009; Betts and Jones 2016; Glasius 2018; Tsourapas 2018; Adamson 2020; Miller and Peters 2020).

The origins, political dynamics, and impact of these “defector diaspora” groups or subgroups, however, remain incompletely understood. How do waves of migrants fleeing authoritarian rule differ from and layer into preexisting ethnic diaspora populations, and what factors shape the form that these authoritarian diasporas take? When and how do these subgroups engage in political activity,

either in the host countries where they resettle or transnationally vis-à-vis their authoritarian homelands? How do homeland authoritarian regimes view these diaspora populations, and seek to manage them to ensure that they don't become a threat? As one of the most closed nondemocratic regimes in the contemporary world, North Korea provides an important case study by which to examine these larger comparative questions.

Politics of the North Korean Diaspora explains the origins and shape of the North Korean diaspora, examines how North Korean émigrés' participation in democratic host countries intersects with their activism vis-à-vis the DPRK's authoritarian regime, and discusses how this approach to diasporic politics sheds light on comparative developments in authoritarian diasporas worldwide. The division of the Korean peninsula and subsequent contestation over migrant citizenship and asylum eligibility have generated a T-shaped diaspora, deeply concentrated in South Korea but with a thin, global distribution of diaspora members anchored in other countries. Many of these individuals left North Korea for economic as well as political reasons, and not all are politically active, but a significant subset engages in political advocacy in opposition to their homeland's authoritarian regime. They engage both *vertically*, as individuals or advocacy groups within specific host countries, and *horizontally*, as members of a transnational political community focused on a shared homeland; their global distribution has broadened the availability of external support and increased the effectiveness of both transnational and domestically focused advocacy efforts. In these efforts, North Koreans have acted as witnesses to North Korea's authoritarian past, as spokespeople for a people denied voice in the present, and as stakeholders in both their countries of resettlement and North Korea's political future.

Thus, the North Korean diaspora represents a fragmented, limited, but still significant source of transnational and pluralistic contentious politics, of a kind that is suppressed within the DPRK itself. The North Korean regime, for its part, appears to regard this nascent diaspora as a potential threat, and has taken steps to dissuade, discredit, and deter diaspora members from engaging in criticism and oppositional activity abroad. Thus, though it is small, the political significance of the North Korean diaspora affects both North Korea's political system and transnational global politics.

This section provides an overview of the North Korean diaspora, outlining migration processes and resettlement destinations. It argues for conceptualizing these émigrés within a diasporic framework: their global dispersion, distinctive shared identity, and emergent transnational ties qualify as a nascent diaspora. It argues that adding a regime-centered, *North Korea*-focused dimension to traditional primordialist conceptions of the diaspora sheds greater light on North Koreans' political identities, networks, and patterns of political action.

This allows us to assess the often-outsized impact émigrés have had on policy at a host-country and global level, and allows us to place North Korea in comparative dialogue with other diaspora populations from homelands under authoritarian rule.

Describing North Korean Migration and Resettlement

What – or whom – do we mean by “North Korean diaspora”? Empirically, two geographically overlapping but socially distinct networks comprise North Korea’s overseas presence. One is chiefly composed of North Korean diplomats and overseas workers, organized in corporatist fashion and affiliated with the regime while posted abroad on behalf of the DPRK’s economic and political purposes (Hastings 2016). The other network of North Koreans worldwide, however, is a more recent development: migrants, refugees, and defectors who have exited North Korea to seek a life elsewhere. I focus primarily on this second network, which has grown in size and influence even as the regime-affiliated network has come under significant pressure. Although the DPRK maintains a diplomatic presence in approximately fifty countries (East-West Center/NCNK 2019), UN sanctions and other international pressures have constricted and retrenched North Korea’s regime-affiliated presence. As a result, the population of North Koreans around the world has shifted from regime-affiliated to increasingly oppositional.

Conventional wisdom on emigration from the DPRK usually portrays North Korean defectors and refugees as congregating in the Republic of Korea (ROK), with an undocumented, transitory population of unknown size in northeastern China. That perception remains largely accurate, although the population in China may have contracted during the global pandemic due to strict border and mobility controls on both sides of the China–DPRK border and post-pandemic repatriation efforts by the Chinese government (Yoon 2023). As of June 2023, an estimated 33,981 defectors had entered the ROK (MOU 2023) – by far the largest concentration of permanently resettled exiles outside DPRK territory.

Under the ethnic nationalist narrative framework articulated in both north and south, wherein both halves of the peninsula are part of a single Korean nation (Miyoshi-Jager 2003; Shin 2006; Grzelczyk 2014), this resettlement is not quite *diasporic* migration. North Koreans who migrate to South Korea ostensibly remain within a peninsular “homeland” – even though the southern half of this homeland has functioned as a separate country for over seventy years, and North Korean émigrés are separated from home, whether that home is defined as a *physical place* of origin, or in the sense of one’s *family and community*. By contrast, a regime-centered notion of diaspora – focused on the commonality of



Figure 1 North Korean resettlement in South Korea and globally (2000–20)

emigration from territory controlled by the DPRK – captures this dislocation, and also allows us to place migration and resettlement to South Korea in a broader international and comparative context.

This shift matters because of late, an increasing number of North Korean emigrants have claimed asylum, sought refugee status, and attempted resettlement in countries apart from the ROK. North Korean onward migration from South Korea has also increased, making the ROK not just a resettlement destination, but a transit point in global migration chains – chains that originate inside North Korea, but no longer begin and end on the peninsula (Song 2015; Song and Bell 2019). Figure 1 compares resettlers arriving in South Korea to North Koreans applying for asylum worldwide.¹

The UNHCR statistics shown in Figure 1 likely understate the size of the global North Korean diaspora, due to definition and measurement problems. For different reasons, China, Japan, and South Korea all avoid applying the labels “refugee” or “asylee” to North Korean escapees, so Japan and China are excluded from the “global” line. In addition, UNHCR has refused to make formal refugee determinations for North Koreans in Southeast Asia, due to the geopolitical complexities that having “two Koreas” poses for diplomatic relations and the option of simply sending such individuals to South Korea for resettlement (HanVoice 2016:5).

¹ Data on South Korea from ROK Ministry of Unification (www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/relations/statistics/defectors). Global data uses “asylum applications” from UNHCR’s Refugee Data Finder (www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download/?url=5wmdYY). The UNHCR data excludes some countries, and North Koreans who initially claim asylum abroad could eventually resettle in South Korea, so the two categories depicted are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive.

Even where statistics are reported, neither asylum nor refugee numbers completely capture the North Korean émigré population. Not all asylum applications succeed; in Europe, there are years where countries rejected the majority of North Korean asylum claims (Section 3). In some cases, such as the Netherlands, North Korean asylees have resettled under Complementary Protections Status rather than as refugees (Burt 2015). Finally, UNHCR’s “refugee” figure is the total DPRK-origin refugee population in-country, meaning that individuals enter that category each year, while others drop out due to naturalization, death, and onward migration. This makes estimates derived from UNHCR data uncertain, and best treated as a lower bound or baseline; these data showed North Koreans with refugee/asylee status in twenty-five different countries from 1990 to 2020 (Figure 2).²

Some countries (marked yellow on the colored version of Figure 2, or medium gray on the grayscale one) recorded only a handful of applicants in isolated years and none in others, suggesting cases of individual/small-group defection. These included Cambodia (1996/2007), Chile (2015), Finland (2020), Kenya (2019), Kuwait (2015/2016), Spain (2015), and Uzbekistan (1996). Others, like Israel (2013–20) and Kyrgyzstan (2006–10), show low numbers for a single stretch, and nothing afterwards. In other cases (red or darker-shaded in Figure 2), including the United Kingdom, Germany, Canada, and the United States, the numbers of individuals seeking asylum or obtaining refugee status are larger and remain consistent over years, suggesting more sustained patterns of migration and resettlement corroborated by journalistic or academic investigation. Section 3 of this Element assesses the factors that have shaped this global distribution.

There is presently little research on the global dimensions of the North Korean diaspora. A robust literature on the Korean diaspora concentrates primarily on historical processes of migration around and beyond the Korean peninsula (R. Kim 2008; J. Kim 2016; A. Park 2019), or on various forms of transnational Korean politics (N. Kim 2008; Chubb 2014; S. Y. Kim 2014; Lie 2014; H. O. Park 2015). A third strand of scholarship explores South Korean economic migration and ROK policy toward immigrants and the overseas Korean community (Park and Chang 2005; Lee 2010, 2012; Brubaker and

² These were: Australia, Belgium, Canada, Cambodia, Chile, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Israel, Kenya, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Russia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand, Uzbekistan, the United Kingdom, and the USA.

As of 2017, UNHCR recorded refugees/asylees in fourteen additional countries, but removed them later for reasons that are unclear: Angola, Austria, Costa Rica, Egypt, Hungary, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, Philippines, Poland, Singapore, Turkey, Ukraine, and Yemen.

Dark shading (or red, in the color version) denotes refugee populations >25 for at least one year in this period. Medium gray (or yellow, if in color) denotes either a refugee population <25 for all years, or asylum claims without refugee resettlement.



Figure 2 North Korean refugees/asylees worldwide (1990–2020)

Kim 2011; Yoon 2012; Kim 2013; Mylonas 2013; Kim 2016; Lee and Chien 2017; Tsuda and Song 2019). For all its value, this work does not explain the role that members of the North Korean exile community have played in contemporary domestic and global politics. These outcomes become more apparent when we conceptualize a specific “wave” of migration, motivated by a desire to leave North Korea, that layers onto the preexisting diaspora, and that is embedded in larger patterns of Korean diasporic politics without being subsumed completely by them.

Research on North Korean émigré communities is unevenly distributed and almost exclusively composed of single host-country cases. There is extensive academic and policy work on North Korean resettlement in South Korea, including how North Koreans perceive and engage in the ROK’s capitalist democratic system and on the challenges of effective resettlement and integration (Choo 2006; Lee 2016; S. Kim et al. 2017; Hur 2018, 2020; Denney, Green, and Ward 2019; Park 2023). Korean communities in Japan have also received in-depth ethnographic and anthropological attention. Other North Korean émigré communities, however, have been reported on solely by journalists (Canada) or largely overlooked (the Netherlands, etc.). This Element builds on existing work by drawing these case studies into comparative conversation, filling in empirical gaps, and treating North Korean émigrés as a network defined by shared homeland orientation – a significant, emergent form of transnational Korean mobility, identity, and political engagement.

A North Korean Diaspora? Regime Type in Diasporic Politics

Discussions of North Koreans who’ve left the DPRK immediately encounter difficulties of nomenclature, which shape political meaning, both in Korea and more generally (Chung 2008; Brubaker and Kim 2011). In South Korea, these individuals are *talbukja*, *saetomin*, or, officially, *bukhanitaljumin*;³ English terms include *defectors*, *refugees*, *exiles*, *migrants*, *resettlers*, and *immigrants*. There debates over nomenclature reflect broader comparative conversations: Hamlin, for example, argues against reifying binary distinctions between migrants and refugees because such a choice implies, misleadingly, that motivations for border crossing are distinct, that refugees are needier, and that “true” refugees are rare (2021:6–18).

As an alternative, the use of “diaspora” can avoid some false binaries, treating North Koreans worldwide as a conceptual category organized by homeland of

³ Overseas Koreans are referred to either by the homeland-oriented *gyopo*, or the more transnational and ethnically-oriented *dongpo* (“compatriots,” but with a familial connotation). A North Korean defector’s analysis of terminology appears in Lim and Zulawnik (2021:73–77).

origin, but composed of individuals and families with multiple motivations, levels of need, and types of engagement in political life.

A diasporic framework, however, does not resolve all definitional problems; the term remains contested and multivalent. The use of “diaspora” in this Element parallels Gamlen et al. (2017:511), who use the term to mean simply, “emigrants and their descendants.” In contrast, Brubaker (2005:12) defines diasporas by subjective self-perception: “an idiom, a stance, a claim.” Others combine objective and perceptual elements: Vertovec (2009:5) describes “an imagined community dispersed from a professed homeland” (see also Safran 1991:83). Betts and Jones define diasporas as “communities that are transnationally dispersed, resist assimilation, and have an ongoing homeland orientation,” while reminding us that not all groups of exiles adopt a diasporic stance (2016:3–5). Adamson (2019) describes them as “constituted by a narrative of dispersion, attachment to a homeland, and a sense of group identity.” Shain and Barth (2003:452) describe a diaspora as:

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

In this sense, North Koreans beyond the Korean peninsula are a diaspora, at least an emergent one. They are dispersed from the homeland, whether that homeland is conceptualized as the Korean peninsula; as the country of North Korea; or as a specific local community of familial ancestry and origin. Many North Korean émigrés share a common sense of identity and even pride in their group, if not the regime that governs it (see Section 4 of this Element; Green and Denney 2021); they are recognized as North Koreans by others. They speak a dialect clearly distinguishable from South Korean, a difference that can condition migrants’ network structure and patterns of political incorporation (Liu 2021). Many North Koreans share stronger within-network (bonding) ties than (bridging) ties to those outside; many have also formed transnational linkages based on their shared country of origin – particularly on anti-regime advocacy, and sometimes as a deliberate alternative to deepening ties with non-North Korean civic organizations in host countries (Bell 2013, 2016:265; Yeo and Chubb 2018:4). Indeed, the broader “North Korean diaspora” has within it a sizable “defector diaspora” engaged in political activism – though in North Korea’s case, the activist subset is a comparatively large fraction of the whole (see Section 5).

At the same time, this transnational network of North Korean exiles is overlaid onto, and nested within, a larger Korean diaspora that emerged earlier,

generated by different circumstances, timing, and processes. Cohen (1997) classifies diasporas into four types: victim/refugee; imperial/colonial; labor/service; and trade/commerce. Much previous scholarship on the broader Korean diaspora has emphasized its colonial/postcolonial and economic dimensions.⁴ North Koreans, however, hew closer to the victim/refugee type, meaning that specifically northern refugee diaspora threads are overlaid and woven into a broader, existing Korean postcolonial and labor-based/commercial diaspora.

This narrative is highly stylized; the North Korean diaspora itself is not monolithic, nor is the broader diaspora in which it is embedded. North Koreans in South Korea self-identify with the national community to varying degrees, and define that national community in a range of ways (Hur 2018). In the United Kingdom, identity perceptions stratify by age: younger North Koreans identify primarily as “foreign immigrants in a multicultural country,” while older North Koreans are more likely to think in terms of membership in specifically Korean diaspora networks (Watson 2015). As Sections 4–5 show, however, this stylized narrative is useful for understanding how North Korean emigration and resettlement in areas where there is a preexisting Korean diaspora can *both* produce a separate diasporic layer with distinctive dynamics, *and* also generate new intra-diasporic cleavages along regime, language, and other lines for those who continue to define the diaspora with reference mostly to shared ethnicity. “Diaspora” is multivalent enough to allow fluidity: North Koreans are simultaneously members of a transnational network specific to North Korea, and members of a broader Korean community that has been dispersed by global forces of violence and development since the beginning of the twentieth century.

What, then, is the value of focusing more narrowly on the *North* Korean diaspora, and centering the authoritarian nature of the DPRK regime in that analysis? Omitting the nondemocratic nature of the homeland – in North Korea or generally – overlooks a significant factor that conditions emigration and resettlement processes; systematically alters the nature of political engagement with the homeland but also with host countries; and also alters the homeland government’s calculations about diasporic policy. Ashwini Vasanthakumar (2022:22) notes that normatively, “exile is associated with unjust and undemocratic political orders.” Empirically, recent scholarship has documented that authoritarianism differs from democracy systematically in terms of patterns of emigration permitted (Miller and Peters 2020); the diasporic management

⁴ Transnationalism is deeply embedded in study of Korean identity and membership politics (Park 2005; Kim 2008; Kim 2011; Kim 2016).

policies that nondemocratic homeland regimes adopt (Delano and Gamlen 2014; Tsourapas 2018); the ways that citizens who grow up under authoritarianism perceive and engage in subsequent democratic politics (Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2017); and the strategies of political contention employed with respect to the homeland (Betts and Jones 2016). North Korean exiles, like exiles from other homelands, possess a kind of political and moral agency that challenges traditional notions of political community, membership, and obligation (Vasanthakumar 2022); they are not just witnesses to North Korea's authoritarian past and present, but representatives of its people in a world where the regime limits external voice and aspirant stakeholders in its political future.

In short, although authoritarian diasporas⁵ share some features in common with diasporas from democracies, the opportunity structure and patterns of diasporic political action also differ in systematic and important ways.⁶ This Element seeks to foreground these in its narrative, without losing sight of where and how diasporic activism might occur in the absence of homeland authoritarian rule.

Roadmap for the Element

The rest of the Element proceeds as follows. Section 2 begins with an overview of how the authoritarian regime in North Korea has attempted to control and manage its diaspora, historically and in the present. The regime's approach to diaspora management has shifted as state-sponsored, pro-regime groups no longer comprise the majority of North Koreans abroad, and oppositional voices have increasingly influenced the international community's policies toward the DPRK. Pyongyang dissuades emigration; discredits those who leave to domestic and international audiences; and attempts to deter and disrupt diasporic ability to engage in opposition and criticism. It employs domestic and international propaganda narratives about defection/re-defection; attempts to prevent linkages between defectors abroad and homeland residents; and threatens political violence, including assassination, to stop diaspora members from engaging in anti-regime political speech and action. Through these activities, the regime seeks to monopolize representation of the North Korean people abroad, countering and suppressing a "defector diaspora" that has increasingly contested the legitimacy of that monopolization (Ragazzi 2012). Extraterritorial discreditation and repressive violence also seek to confront emergent contention

⁵ Here "authoritarian diaspora" means "a diaspora dispersed from a homeland presently governed by a non-democratic regime." This is distinct from Loxton and Power (2021; 465), who use the term to mean dispersion of former authoritarian regime officials within a country's political system.

⁶ This was also true of South Korea under military-authoritarian rule, a point revisited in Section 6.