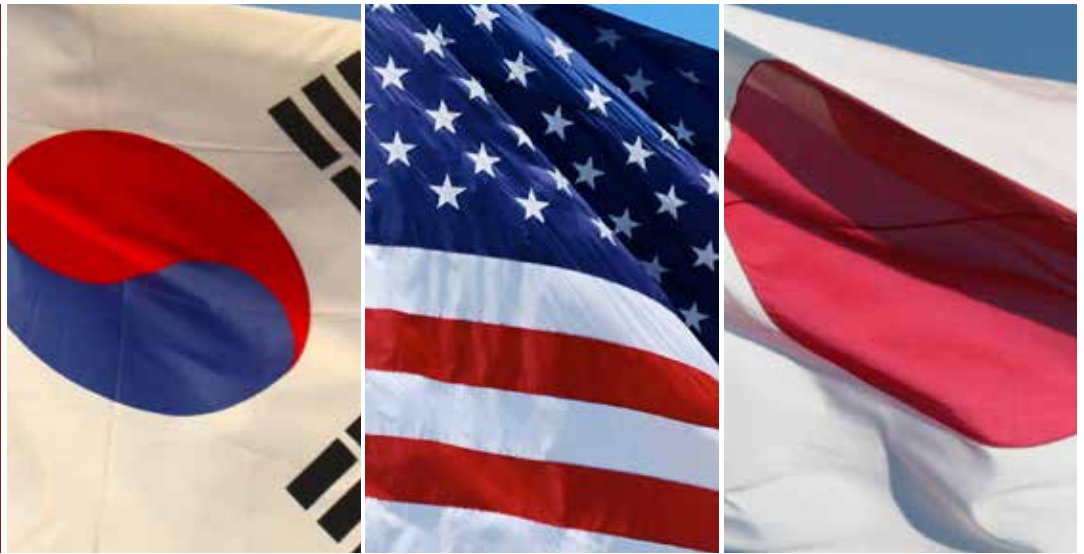




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Out of Tune

Japan-ROK Tension and U.S. Interests in Northeast Asia

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This brief explains the current state of the U.S.–Japan–South Korea trilateral relationship, why the relationship is the most important trilateral in the world, and how it came to be in such a state of disrepair. Finally, the brief offers suggestions on how Washington can shore up the relationship.

State of Play

At present, the U.S.-led trilateral alliance network with Japan and South Korea (the Republic of Korea, or ROK) is badly out of tune. A mix of the following three issues is causing disruption:

1. *History questions*, including not only the “comfort women” issue of sexual slavery but also forced labor and human rights abuses during Japan’s colonial rule and wartime administration of the Korean Peninsula. These issues resurfaced after a controversial ROK Supreme Court ruling in 2018 established anew Japan’s responsibility for forced labor during the war. The court case reopened issues that Tokyo had thought were resolved by the 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea and its accompanying protocols.

2. *Export control procedures*, including how Japan and the ROK treat each other with respect to the export of sensitive dual-use goods. Japan removed the ROK from its “white list” of preferred export destinations in August 2019, and the ROK retaliated by removing Japan from its similar list three weeks later.
3. *Intelligence sharing and military cooperation impediments*, specifically, the ROK’s decision in late August 2019 not to renew the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) painstakingly negotiated by President Barack Obama in 2016 to ensure that Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington could all share sensitive intelligence information related to North Korea (the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, or DPRK), the North Korean nuclear weapons program, and other issues. The suspension of that agreement has now also imperiled joint naval exercises—a training regime vitally important to sustaining the United States’ ability to deter North Korean aggression and to respond appropriately in the event of an outbreak of hostilities.

These three distinct themes—history, economic and trade links, and security cooperation—are deeply interwoven. When well-balanced, they define a positive triangle of relations between the United States, South Korea, and Japan, with leaderships that are attentive to each other, even as the countries have different interests. Today, however, ROK president Moon Jae-in and Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe are responding more to their domestic audiences than to global ones, and U.S. president Donald Trump is neglecting the U.S. role in the trilateral altogether.

Why Trilateralism Matters for the United States

First, the rise of China as a global economic power with significant power projection throughout its near abroad challenges the dominant position the United States has long enjoyed in East Asia. The United States cannot manage the many dimensions of China’s rise alone; alliances are vital if the United States is to prevent the emergence of a “peer competitor” in the Indo-Pacific. Even President Trump has acknowledged that his “America first” approach does not mean “America alone.” Washington must rely upon allies with common interests and shared values to keep the peace and sustain the existing economic order.

Second, the DPRK, in defiance of numerous United Nations Security Council Resolutions, continues to build nuclear weapons and perfect the means to deliver them. Thirteen years after it first detonated a nuclear bomb and twenty-five years since it signed the 1994 Agreed Framework, North Korea clings stubbornly to its nuclear ambitions. Successfully convincing Pyongyang to change course will require a multinational effort—one that addresses its key security concerns as well as those of the United States, China, Russia, and Japan, even as it lays a foundation for peace and reconciliation between the two Koreas. To secure such an outcome acceptable to the United States, close U.S. coordination with the ROK and Japan is essential. Absent this trilateral policy synchronization, the final outcome of peace and denuclearization talks will likely favor the DPRK, China, and Russia, at the expense of the United States and its allies.

Finally, the United States confronts myriad transnational challenges in the Indo-Pacific. The network comprising the U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral

alliance, first built by the United States to contain the Soviet Union, now spans the entire range of human endeavor: from protecting the freedom of navigation to preserving the peaceful use of space for all humankind; from promoting trade and investment to advancing good governance. Its strength derives not only from the existence of common threats but also from shared values, including respect for human rights. Uniting the resources and efforts of the United States, Japan, and the ROK has proven an effective formula for promoting creative solutions to tough problems. The network relies on the aggregated resources of its members but even more importantly it depends on the synergies created when they work in concert. Working in harmony is a force multiplier. Discord between the partners leaves the network weaker than the sum of its parts.

Complicating Factors: Nationalism Fueling Hard Lines

South Korea and Japan have every reason to resolve their differences. Even now, with relations badly strained, lawmakers from both countries have expressed hope that the two nations might practice truth and reconciliation on history issues, seek mutual economic benefit, and integrate their security and intelligence establishments. The only nations that profit from tension between the ROK and Japan are actual or potential adversaries.

But for mainly domestic reasons, neither President Moon nor Prime Minister Abe and their respective governments have been able to find a way forward. Both sides blame the other for starting the tension, and attempting to assign responsibility is a hopeless task, as every perceived provocation—visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, textbook controversies, comfort women memorials, Tokdo/Takeshima island visits,

radar locks, map names, court cases, affronts to the honor of the emperor, etc.—all have an antecedent if one goes back far enough. The current discord has been exacerbated by President Moon's progressive government, which is eager to dismantle, or at least revisit, the policies of its conservative predecessor, including the November 2015 agreement (arranged by President Obama) to resolve the comfort women issue once and for all. Relations have also been complicated by Prime Minister Abe's reliance on a nationalist political base and efforts to remove the constraints of Japan's peace constitution, thus restoring Japan to a position of "normalcy" in the international community. The Japanese public is also suffering from "Korea fatigue," and Prime Minister Abe cannot expect any political reward at home for accommodating South Korean concerns.

The domestic audiences and power bases for Moon and Abe seem mostly pleased by the tough rhetoric emanating from the Blue House and Kantei. According to 2018 Pew survey data, more than 60% of South Koreans have an "unfavorable" view of Japan—in stark contrast to the overwhelmingly favorable ratings Japan enjoys elsewhere in East Asia.¹ And after years of gradually warming ROK-Japan relations, opinions of South Korea in Japan have also soured in recent months. Only 20% of Japanese reported having a "favorable" view of the ROK in a poll from last June—a record low.²

A Possible Way Forward and the U.S. Role

The Trump Administration's Approach

Untangling the issues at the core of the current

¹ "Positive Reviews for Japan in Many Countries except South Korea," Pew Research Center, November 9, 2018, https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2018/11/12/countries-views-of-japan-abe-japanese-views-of-china/pg_2018-11-12_japanese-public-opinion_4-01.

² "Japanese View of South Korea Falls to Record Low," *Straits Times*, June 12, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/japanese-view-of-south-korea-falls-to-record-low>.

crisis in ROK-Japan relations requires a comprehensive approach. As much as Seoul and Tokyo might prefer to handle their historical, economic, and security issues independently, progress is unlikely without the restoration of an essential ingredient to cooperation: trust. With mutual confidence so badly damaged, the intervention of a third party—the United States—is imperative if the two estranged neighbors are to restore harmony. Traditionally, both the ROK and Japan have trusted the United States more than they have trusted each other. That confidence has allowed them to work together in ways that would not otherwise have been possible. Whether that trust in the United States remains sufficient at present to allow Seoul and Tokyo to bridge their differences is an open question, but there is no doubt that the United States must try.

For most of its first two years in office, the Trump administration took a hands off approach to rising tensions between the ROK and Japan. It may have hoped that Japan and South Korea would find a way out of the escalation of tension, and it may have also understood, correctly, that intervening could compromise Washington's ability to remain neutral on the sensitive historical and territorial issues. In hindsight, however, Trump's aloof posture was a mistake. While Washington cannot impose solutions, it can, as President Obama proved in November 2015, bring the two allies together, remind them of the United States' interest that they get along, and facilitate dialogue.

With the confirmation of Assistant Secretary of State for Indo-Pacific Affairs David Stilwell in the summer of 2019, the State Department began to take a more active role in the dispute through shuttle diplomacy, but by that time relations were already dangerously compromised. As many U.S. experts have noted, the relationship cannot at this juncture be repaired at

the assistant secretary level.³ Only a summit meeting orchestrated by President Trump could provide sufficient political cover for President Moon and Prime Minister Abe to change course, and that seems increasingly unlikely in the current environment.

Working level meetings facilitated by the United States could result in some progress. Two of the issues needing adjustment are essentially technical in nature—export controls and intelligence sharing. These challenges could be resolved if the parties were able to muster sufficient political will, with working level officials arranging face-saving gestures sufficient to allow both the ROK and Japanese administrations to declare that their concerns had been addressed. Specifically, the ROK could announce some minor adjustments to its export controls processes to ensure strict compliance with UN sanctions on the DPRK (ostensibly the reason for Japan's delisting). Once Japan restored the ROK to its "white list," South Korea could do the same (as its delisting of Japan was clearly retaliatory). Large firms in both nations would applaud the resumption of streamlined trading procedures, as the current restrictions only serve to depress economic performance in both countries.

As for the security relationship, the recent DPRK submarine-launched ballistic missile test provides an excuse for the United States to convene an emergency working group and underscore the importance of effective coordination and intelligence sharing. This is a moment for high-level U.S. intervention on behalf of Washington's own vital national security interests. GSOMIA allowed for more seamless intelligence sharing regarding North Korean activities, and once terminated, it will be hard to reconstitute. The face-saving move is for the ROK to suspend, rather than cancel, its

³ Scott Snyder, "Why the Japan-South Korea Dispute Just Got Worse," Council on Foreign Affairs, August 27, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/why-japan-south-korea-dispute-just-got-worse>.

withdrawal from GSOMIA. President Moon could address any domestic unhappiness with such a retreat by blaming it on the imperative of staying close to Washington as talks with North Korea reach a vital stage.

The third issue—history—cannot so easily be re-tuned, nor can it reliably be muted. The only way for Japan and Korea to resolve the history question is to move beyond it—building new relations and areas of cooperation that gradually reduce the prominence of legacy grievances. If the current difficulties are allowed to persist, an entire generation of young Koreans and Japanese will grow up with sour view of each other, a generational taint that could have lasting tragic consequences. Geography dictates that Japan and South Korea must forge closer ties if they are to sustain their sovereignty in the face of their large and nuclear-armed neighbors.

The Role of Congress

Congress has been more attentive to the growing crisis than the White House, and has expressed bipartisan support for the importance and vitality of the U.S. trilateral relationship with Japan and South Korea. The House passed [House Resolution 127](#) and the Senate passed [Senate Resolution 67](#), both of which affirm the need for trilateral cooperation in the pursuit of shared interests. As chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee Eliot Engel said in connection with the House Resolution, “When Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul work together in partnership, it strengthens security for all three countries, the Asia-Pacific region, and the world.” Ranking member of House Foreign Affairs Committee Michael McCaul similarly said, “Our longstanding shared [trilateral] relationship is essential to ensuring regional stability in the Indo-Pacific, and was a key component in making possible the current diplomatic opening with

North Korea.” And in the Senate, Cory Gardner, chairman of the Subcommittee on East Asia, the Pacific, and International Cybersecurity Policy, noted, “The relationship between the United States, the Republic of Korea, and Japan forms the cornerstone of peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.”⁴

Congress could do even more to minimize the damage to U.S. interests caused by the ROK-Japan rift.

- Congress could convene hearings to exercise greater oversight of the State Department and the Pentagon in their efforts to strengthen the trilateral relationship.
- Congress could conduct oversight over relevant sections of the 2018 [Asia Reassurance Initiative Act \(ARIA\)](#). Possible areas include ARIA section 206, which addresses the need for trilateral cooperation with Japan and the ROK, especially on security issues, and also endorses functional multilateralism as a means of advancing U.S. core interests. Congress also could encourage the administration to amplify this message.
- Congress could adopt a resolution urging the ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs to rejoin GSOMIA.
- Congress could investigate how available funds can be appropriated in the upcoming fiscal year to support the alliances with Japan and the ROK.
- The Senate Committee on Foreign Relations and the House Committee on Foreign Affairs could co-author a letter to the secretary of state in support of increasing diplomatic efforts to rebuild a strong U.S. trilateral relationship with Japan and the Republic of Korea.

⁴ “Bipartisan, Bicameral Group of Lawmakers Offers Legislation on U.S.-Japan-South Korea Trilateral Cooperation,” U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Press Release, February 12, 2019, <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/2019/2/bipartisan-bicameral-group-of-lawmakers-offers-legislation-on-u-s-japan-south-korea-trilateral-cooperation>.

Questions Congress Can Put to Administration Officials or Explore through Hearings with Private Witnesses

- *Mediator or Facilitator:* What is the appropriate role for the United States in attempting to mitigate or resolve tensions between the ROK and Japan?
- *Security Impact:* How have the tensions between Tokyo and Seoul affected the United States' ability to uphold its treaty commitments to its allies, and do officials in Japan and South Korea agree with your assessment of the damage?
- *Treaty Relations:* Japan-Korea relations rest on the bedrock of the 1965 treaty normalizing relations. Is that agreement obsolete? Is it time for Japan and the ROK to reexamine their relations and agreement now that South Korea is a full-fledged democracy and an advanced economic and military power?
- *GSOMIA:* How does South Korea's withdrawal from GSOMIA affect Japanese and U.S. interests in the region? How could South Korea be persuaded to remain party to the agreement?
- *Japan's normalization:* How could the Abe administration's ongoing efforts to reform Japan's pacifist constitution affect the interests of South Korea and the United States? ◆

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For more on the U.S.-Japan-South Korea trilateral relationship, see these previous NBR publications:

[The Case for U.S.-ROK-Japan Trilateralism: Strengths and Limitations](#)

[The Benefits, Challenges, and Necessity of Triangular Diplomacy: A Case for Enhanced U.S.-ROK-Japan Cooperation](#)

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