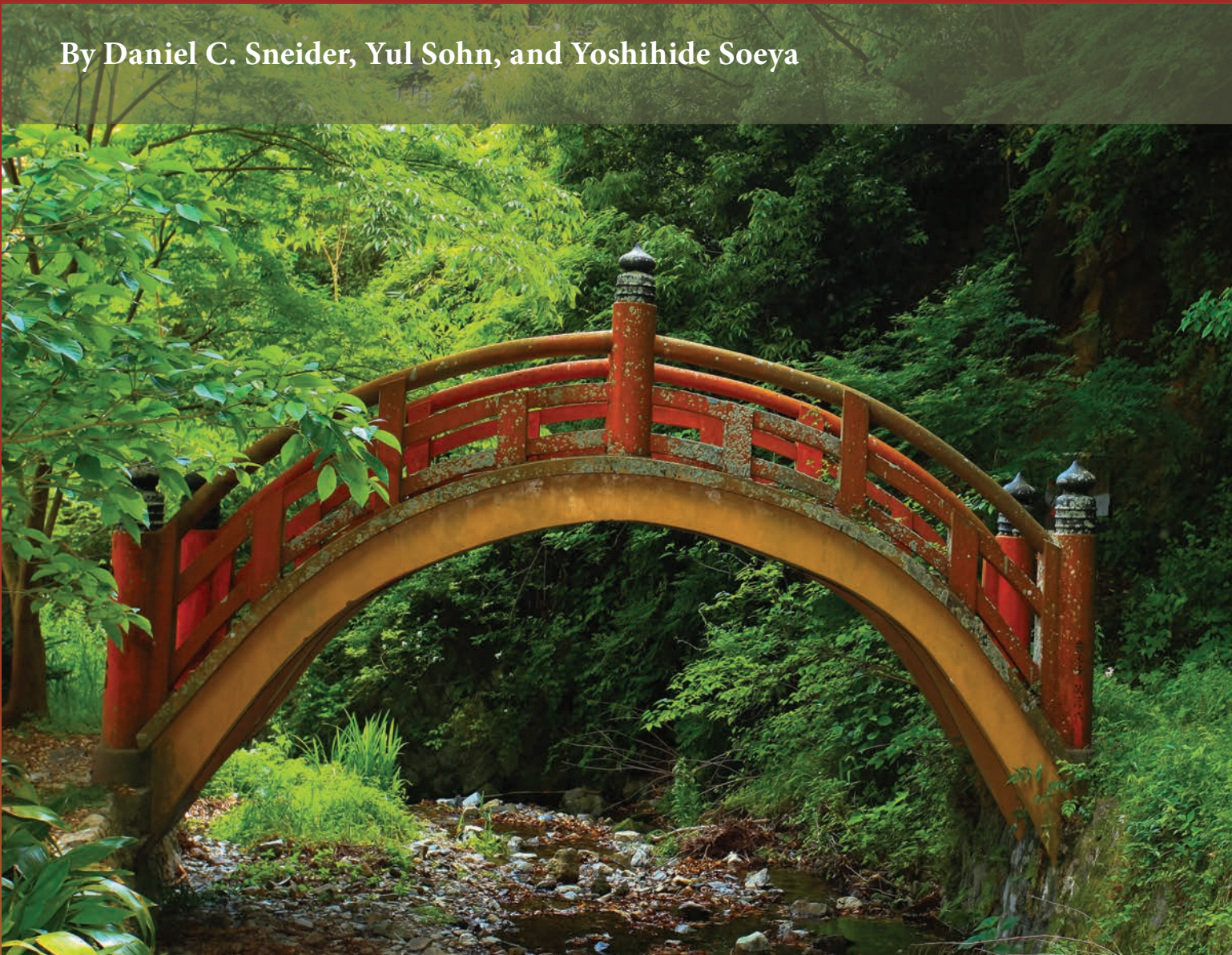


# U.S.-ROK-JAPAN TRILATERALISM

## *Building Bridges and Strengthening Cooperation*

By Daniel C. Sneider, Yul Sohn, and Yoshihide Soeya



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**U.S.-ROK-JAPAN TRILATERALISM**  
*Building Bridges and Strengthening Cooperation*

*Daniel C. Sneider, Yul Sohn, and Yoshihide Soeya*

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# U.S.-ROK-JAPAN TRILATERALISM

## *Building Bridges and Strengthening Cooperation*

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## FOREWORD

Recent developments in the relationship between the United States, Japan, and the Republic of Korea (ROK) offer proponents of trilateral cooperation room for cautious optimism. The December 2015 “comfort women” agreement between Japan and the ROK was a significant, albeit tentative, first step in resolving a long-standing obstacle to improved bilateral relations. In addition, at the end of June 2016 the United States, South Korea, and Japan completed the Pacific Dragon ballistic missile defense exercises, the first anti-missile drills that the three countries have ever conducted and a long overdue step in trilateral security cooperation in the face of growing North Korean belligerence.

While these developments are promising, and trilateral relations continue to advance, there remains significant room for improvement. The three nations must work to build on this momentum by addressing lingering tensions and concerns that inhibit greater cooperation. With China increasingly powerful and assertive and North Korean statecraft embracing belligerence and aggression, trilateral cooperation has never been more important, and the risks of a strained ROK-Japan relationship for U.S. strategic interests in the region never so high.

With these issues in mind, the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR) initiated a three-phase project focusing on the relationship between the United States, the ROK, and Japan. The project analyzes the evolution of trilateral dynamics since the end of World War II, identifies ongoing and future security challenges affecting the three nations, and proposes recommendations for how the trilateral relationship should advance in the coming decades. The initiative does not attempt to solve the history problems for South Korea and Japan, nor does it dismiss them. Rather, the initiative looks for opportunities for collaboration and cooperation within the context of a fraught historical relationship.

The first phase of the project was devoted to exploring the key issues of the trilateral relationship, identifying areas for further analysis, and promoting awareness in the U.S. Congress and among other important stakeholders. As part of this phase, NBR brought together three highly respected experts from the United States, South Korea, and Japan to discuss realistic but innovative ways to think about the trilateral relationship. These three experts—Daniel Sneider (Stanford University), Yul Sohn (Yonsei University), and Yoshihide Soeya (Keio University)—presented their preliminary thoughts at a roundtable event on Capitol Hill and authored briefs from U.S., South Korean, and Japanese perspectives. The essays in this report are based on those briefs and present the main findings from the first phase of the project.

In the opening essay, Sneider provides an insightful analysis of the trilateral relationship from a U.S. perspective. He begins by acknowledging the positive recent developments in the ROK-Japan relationship but cautions that they are only a fragile first step toward the two nations engaging in truly robust cooperation. He highlights that historically progress in the bilateral relationship has required the United States to play a mediating role, often quietly and behind the scenes. As Sneider concludes, the United States needs to continue to attend to the trilateral relationship, both by strengthening strategic cooperation and by solidifying progress made on resolving wartime history disputes.

In the second essay, Sohn offers a thoughtful assessment of the trilateral relationship from a South Korean perspective. He underlines the strategic challenge that South Korea faces in

simultaneously improving U.S.-Japan-ROK cooperation while also expanding South Korea's ties with China. In examining the historical development of the trilateral relationship since the Cold War, Sohn notes that North Korea's nuclear program has provided the impetus for enthusiasm for trilateral cooperation, but he underscores that this threat has not been enough to overcome mistrust caused by history issues. He concludes by arguing that South Korea should play a middle-power role, bridging the Chinese and trilateral U.S.-ROK-Japan networks to achieve a stable outcome on the Korean Peninsula.

In the final essay, Soeya deftly explains these trilateral dynamics from a Japanese perspective. He emphasizes that Japan and South Korea share many national interests and as middle powers must carefully navigate the strategic disputes between the United States and China. He also reviews the new Japanese security legislation and analyzes what it could mean for the trilateral relationship, as well as what obstacles still lie in the way of cooperation. Soeya argues that Japan and the ROK both have a vested interest in improving middle-power cooperation, particularly in the face of increasingly tense U.S.-China relations.

Taken together, the three essays collected in this report offer readers critical insights into both the past and future of U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateralism and provide realistic recommendations for leaders in all three nations to move the relationship forward. I would like to thank the Korea Foundation and the Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission for their support on components of this project. I am also extremely grateful to Claire Chaeryung Lee for her dedicated assistance and hard work.

Alison Szalwinski

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# Advancing Trilateral Cooperation: A U.S. Perspective

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay analyzes the U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral relationship from a U.S. perspective and highlights the critical role that the U.S. has played in mediating tensions between South Korea and Japan.

### MAIN ARGUMENT

The prospects for trilateral cooperation in Northeast Asia between the U.S. and its two principal security allies in the region, Japan and the ROK, have dramatically improved in the last year. In December 2015, the two governments reached a historic agreement to settle one of the most sensitive issues arising out of the wartime past: the treatment of Korean women coerced into sexual service by the Japanese Imperial Army, the so-called “comfort women.” Driven by North Korea’s unchecked pursuit of nuclear weapons and ballistic missile delivery systems, as well as by China’s aggressive actions in the South China Sea, all three countries now have a greater sense of shared security perceptions. The progress made on trilateral cooperation required considerable political leadership on all sides, most of all from Japan and the ROK, but also from U.S. officials. Although the U.S. has historically sought trilateral cooperation, it has been reluctant to intervene in the difficult relationship between Japan and South Korea. In the past, however, progress has depended on the U.S. performing a mediating role, and that was also true in the case of the recent steps forward. The U.S. needs to sustain its leadership role to ensure that trilateral cooperation is strengthened and solidified.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- The U.S. should offer further ideas on how all three countries might promote reconciliation in order to avoid backsliding on history issues. These could include jointly producing supplementary teaching materials on the wartime period, organizing dialogues among historians, facilitating exchanges among museum directors, and funding and organizing large-scale student exchanges.
- Trilateral consultations should expand beyond traditional security and military issues. The three countries should discuss coordinated responses in diverse policy areas, all of which have clear security implications.
- Areas for policy consultation could include energy security, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, cybersecurity, and intellectual property protection.
- The U.S. needs to sustain attention to trilateral cooperation and facilitate the process of reconciliation over painful historical issues, as exemplified by President Obama’s decision to visit Hiroshima.

Recent developments lend hope to the prospects for trilateral cooperation in Northeast Asia between the United States and its two principal security allies in the region, Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK). Last December, the two neighbors reached an agreement to settle one of the most neuralgic issues arising out of their wartime past: the treatment of the Korean women coerced into sexual service by the Japanese Imperial Army during the wartime era, the so-called “comfort women.” North Korea’s increasingly belligerent pursuit of nuclear and missile weapons, combined with China’s aggressive actions in the South China Sea, has reinforced a sense of shared security threats. The three countries are now moving to take practical steps toward security cooperation, including the sharing of military intelligence about the North Korean threat.

It would be naïve, however, to see this development as anything other than a fragile step forward. The gaps in strategic understanding and the readiness to confront history problems remain daunting. The history of the wars is deeply rooted in the politics of identity in both countries. Security perceptions are hardly identical, dictated as they are by geography and, for South Koreans, by the unresolved Cold War division of the Korean Peninsula. Most importantly, the ability of South Korea and Japan to bridge these gaps without the help of the United States has been and remains limited.

The danger for U.S. policymakers is to believe that history issues can indeed now be put aside in favor of a shared understanding of the strategic situation in the region. That belief would be dangerous because South Korea and Japan could fail to secure the progress that has been made and to move ahead on both the security and history fronts to create the basis for genuine trilateral cooperation. President Barack Obama’s decision to visit the site of the atomic bombing in Hiroshima offers both a moral and a practical example for leaders in the region to take further steps toward historical reconciliation.

In order to understand the U.S. role in the pursuit of trilateral cooperation and partnership in Northeast Asia, this essay examines the historical process that led to this moment. From that understanding, the essay focuses on the United States’ efforts to foster cooperation between Japan and South Korea, including on history issues. Finally, it offers thoughts on the challenges ahead and policy measures that might encourage deeper cooperation.

## A Historical Perspective on Trilateral Cooperation

The construction of a trilateral partnership between the United States and its two allies in the region, Japan and the ROK, has long been a strategic goal of U.S. foreign policy. As the Korean War made clear to U.S. policymakers, the United States’ security commitments to the ROK and Japan are interlinked, both conceptually and operationally. The defense of Korea depends on the infrastructure of U.S. bases and other rear-area support in Japan, and Korea is the de facto front line, the strategic buffer, for the security of Japan.

In the wake of the Korean War, the United States seriously explored the creation of a regional security structure that would parallel NATO and include elements of regional economic association. The goal of collective security was even enshrined in the U.S. bilateral treaties signed at the time, explicitly in the treaty with the ROK and implicitly with Japan. The then secret minute to the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty allowed U.S. forces in Japan, nominally under the UN Command, to respond to an attack on Korea without prior consultation with the government of Japan.

U.S. policymakers soon discovered, however, that what made sense in the minds of strategists foundered on the rocky realities of the region. Asian nationalism, particularly the still-powerful mistrust of Japan and opposition to any revival of a regional Japanese security role, was the most powerful obstacle. The Japanese people themselves were also reluctant to take on a greater security role, preferring to outsource their security to the United States while they focused on postwar economic reconstruction. The official Japanese interpretation of the constitutional prohibitions on the use of force, which were U.S.-imposed, clearly ruled out any collective security agreement that went beyond a narrow definition of self-defense.

Early U.S. efforts to press Japan and the ROK to normalize relations and settle their outstanding issues from the war and Japan's colonial rule of the Korean Peninsula met a brick wall, with ROK-Japan talks to establish diplomatic relations going nowhere. As a 1954 National Security Council report stated frankly, "underlying this failure and the chronic tension between the two countries is the deeply ingrained Korean fear and suspicion of Japan, and the equally fundamental Japanese sense of superiority over the Koreans."<sup>1</sup>

Despite the abortive attempts to create a regional security structure in the wake of the Korean War, the United States persisted in efforts to bring its two allies together. The normalization of diplomatic relations between the ROK and Japan in 1965 was a milestone, accomplished thanks to the efforts of South Korean and Japanese leaders but not without behind-the-scenes U.S. mediation. South Korea had sought an explicit apology from Japan for its colonial rule and reparations payments as part of any normalization of relations. The United States orchestrated a compromise in which Japan offered indirect compensation to South Korea in the form of economic aid and loans that were vital to the country's modernization, without labeling the funds as reparations for wartime and colonial rule.

A memo to President Lyndon Johnson in 1965, advising him on an upcoming meeting with Japanese prime minister Eisaku Sato, argued:

State calculates that a Japan-ROK settlement will save us \$1 billion over the next ten years (\$600 million in Japanese grants and loans, the rest in anticipated private investment). We are once again at a point where a settlement is within reach. If we miss this time, it will be very hard to get negotiations started again.... [Sato] needs a real push by you, perhaps along the following lines: We fought the Korean War in the interest of Japan's security as well as our own. A viable Korea is an essential buffer to us, doubly essential to Japan. Nothing the Japanese can do right now, in 1965, would advance the Free World's interests more successfully than a settlement.<sup>2</sup>

South Korea's military-led governments were largely content with this approach of indirect compensation. There were, however, serious moments of ROK-Japan tension, such as after the attempted assassination of Park Chung-hee in 1974 by a North Korean resident of Japan, which again required informal U.S. mediation. But South Korea's democratization in 1987 unleashed powerful civic forces that raised the visibility of painful historical issues, including Korean collaboration with Japanese colonial rule, the "comfort women," and the territorial dispute over

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel C. Snieder, "The United States and Northeast Asia: The Cold War Legacy," in *Cross Currents: Regionalism and Nationalism in Northeast Asia*, ed. Gi-Wook Shin and Daniel C. Snieder (Stanford: Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, 2007), 269.

<sup>2</sup> Karen L. Gatz, ed., *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 2, Japan* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Office of the Historian, 2006), 65. For fuller documentation of U.S. efforts to mediate differences between Japan and the ROK, see Karen L. Gatz, ed., *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Office of the Historian, 2000).

the rocky islets that the Koreans call Dokdo and Japanese refer to as Takeshima. The legacy of Japanese colonial rule re-emerged in Korean life, from academia to politics.

During the 1990s, progress was made toward reconciliation on wartime and colonial history issues, without any U.S. role, largely due to political changes in both countries. In 1993, Japan's conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which had resisted moves to confront unfinished history issues, lost power. The LDP was only able to return to power the following year by aligning with its archrival, the Japan Socialist Party, and it later formed the now-ruling coalition with the pacifist Komei party and other minor parties. The breakthrough Kono Statement, issued in 1993 after revelations by Japanese historians and the public emergence of Korean victims, acknowledged an official Japanese role in the coercion of women to provide sexual services to the Japanese Imperial Army. Even more important, the 1995 statement on the 50th anniversary of the war, issued by Japan Socialist Party prime minister Tomiichi Murayama, ruling in coalition with the LDP, offered contrition for Japanese aggression and colonial rule.

In South Korea, the end of military rule in 1987 and the democratization of the political system had an enormous impact on the handling of wartime history issues. These changes unleashed suppressed forces that raised previously taboo issues such as Korean collaboration with the Japanese colonial regime and the failure of Park Chung-hee's government to press Japan for reparations for wartime crimes. In 1998 and again in 2003, the process of democratic change in South Korea brought to power progressive governments led respectively by Kim Dae-jung and Roo Moo-hyun. They were supported by most civil society activists on history issues and were better positioned to find avenues for reconciliation. Kim did so at the time of his 1998 visit to Japan, accepting Japanese apologies for the war and forming a joint commission of historians to examine the past. Japan and South Korea also attempted to resolve the "comfort women" issue in the mid-1990s with the formation of the Asian Women's Fund, but this initiative failed due to the opposition of South Korean civil society.

Progress stalled, however, and was even rolled back, during the next decade. The return of conservative rule in Japan brought into power governments that sought to effectively overturn the Kono Statement and revise the Murayama apology. Meanwhile, successive administrations in South Korea found it hard to resist the temptation to play the card of anti-Japanese nationalism, particularly when popularity waned in the last years of a presidential term. There was some opening to improve relations again during the beginning of the Democratic Party of Japan's rule (2009–12), but ultimately such efforts also foundered. The relationship between Japan and the ROK took a sharp downward turn during the administrations of President Lee Myung-bak and Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda, and this antipathy deepened under their successors. The inability to hold a bilateral summit for more than three years was unprecedented during the post-normalization period.

## The Role of the United States

U.S. policy during this period was largely shaped by the primacy of security concerns—most of all the continuing threat from North Korea, which was compounded from the late 1980s by its pursuit of nuclear weapons. In this context, the United States sought to bring Japan and South Korea together in a structure of de facto trilateral security cooperation. In 1999, in response to burgeoning North Korean missile and nuclear challenges, the United States set up the Trilateral

Coordination and Oversight Group with Japan and the ROK to offer a united policy response. Such cooperation extended to the establishment of the six-party talks on the North Korean nuclear program that began in 2003.

The United States has worked to forge working-level trilateral cooperation among defense and military officials, including quiet discussions of joint logistical operations in the event of conflict. With the encouragement of the U.S. military, South Korean and Japanese defense and military officials have held consultations on mutual security issues, albeit under the radar.<sup>3</sup> When a bilateral agreement on intelligence sharing between the Japanese and ROK defense establishments foundered recently, the United States helped transcend the differences by forging a trilateral agreement that was more politically palatable.

In the past, U.S. policymakers tended to see wartime history problems as an irritant to be put aside in the expectation that such issues would diminish over time. They resisted calls for U.S. involvement, fearing that both sides would blame the United States for not supporting either. That said, U.S. officials did understand that history issues could not be completely ignored.

The Japanese and South Korean foreign ministers' joint announcement of a breakthrough agreement on the "comfort women" issue, issued on December 28, 2015, was the product of a delicate compromise forged by South Korean president Park Geun-hye and Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe. While giving due credit to their political leadership, this agreement could not have been reached without the persistent pressure of the Obama administration.<sup>4</sup> President Obama applied some of that pressure personally in public statements, but much of the work was done out of sight. U.S. officials engaged down to a very detailed level over specific language in the agreement, careful not to intervene too much but also clearly communicating to both sides their belief that a breakthrough was possible with compromise.

The United States' role flowed from the perception, deepened in the last few years, that the dysfunctional relationship between South Korea and Japan threatened to undermine U.S. strategic interests. The frozen ties at the highest level between the two principal U.S. allies in Northeast Asia barred progress on defense cooperation in areas such as missile defense, potentially weakening the defense of the Korean Peninsula against an unstable North Korean regime and aiding China's bid for regional dominance.

The origins of the December 2015 agreement date back to the previous government of the Democratic Party of Japan, which came into office seeking to improve relations with its Asian neighbors and ready to recognize Japan's responsibility for wartime crimes. Then prime minister Naoto Kan took a significant step in 2010, marking the one hundredth anniversary of the Japanese annexation of Korea by issuing an apology for colonial rule. "I would like to have courage to squarely confront the facts of history and humility to accept them, as well as to be honest to reflect upon the errors of our own," Kan said in his statement.<sup>5</sup>

On the South Korean side, President Lee Myung-bak, a former businessman, was eager to move ahead to improve ties with Japan. On August 30, 2011, however, the Constitutional Court of Korea ruled that the government's failure to find a solution with Japan to compensate the

<sup>3</sup> In off-the-record discussions, Japanese and South Korean officials acknowledge that such consultations take place. More recently, official trilateral defense consultations have occurred at a senior level. See, for example, "U.S., Japan, South Korea Hold Trilateral Security Talks," U.S. Department of Defense, April 17, 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/News-Article-View/Article/604481>.

<sup>4</sup> The discussion that follows of the U.S. role in these negotiations draws on the author's article in *Toyo Keizai*. See Daniel Sneider, "Behind the Comfort Women Agreement," *Toyo Keizai*, January 10, 2016, <http://toyokeizai.net/articles/-/99891>.

<sup>5</sup> "Statement by Prime Minister Naoto Kan," Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, August 10, 2010, [http://japan.kantei.go.jp/kan/statement/201008/10danwa\\_e.html](http://japan.kantei.go.jp/kan/statement/201008/10danwa_e.html).

surviving “comfort women” was a violation of the constitution. Following that ruling, officials from the two foreign ministries began discussions to find a formula that would go beyond the Asian Women’s Fund formed in the 1990s. The fund had been rejected by many of the victims and by Korean civil society activists because the Japanese government did not take responsibility for its historical actions, and compensation payments were made from private contributions rather than official funds. The officials discussed a new agreement that included a letter of apology from the Japanese prime minister to the victims and humanitarian payments from the official budget, though not as formal reparations. (Japan insists, and continues to do so, that the two countries had settled all such claims with the San Francisco Peace Treaty and the 1965 treaty to normalize relations with South Korea.)

In the meantime, however, the Japanese premiership changed hands in September 2011, with the more conservative Noda taking over. Noda was the son of an army paratrooper who personally shared the historical revisionism of many Japanese right-wing conservatives such as Abe. He supported visits to the Yasukuni Shrine and opposed the Kono Statement, which acknowledged the Imperial Army’s official role in coercing women to provide sexual services.

Noda and Lee met at a summit meeting in Kyoto on December 18, 2011. One week earlier Korean activists had erected a controversial statue memorializing the “comfort women” across the street from the Japanese embassy in Seoul. Japan and South Korea provide two differing accounts of what occurred at the meeting. In the Japanese account, faithfully put out through the media, Noda was prepared to discuss economic and security issues but was surprised when Lee insisted on dealing with the “comfort women” issue. According to a senior South Korean official, and partially confirmed by knowledgeable Japanese sources, Lee went into the meeting understanding that officials had reached a basic agreement.<sup>6</sup> He was surprised when Noda, personally enraged, spent the opening dinner demanding that the statue be removed and stating there was no need for a new apology. That battle continued into the next day of talks.

Both sides made a stab at reviving negotiations the following spring. Under the direction of then vice foreign minister Kenichiro Sasae, Japan offered terms that included a letter from the prime minister, a face-to-face apology by the Japanese ambassador to South Korea, and humanitarian aid, but without accepting official responsibility. By then, however, the breakdown in trust was too much to overcome. President Lee’s decision in August 2012 to visit the islands disputed between the two countries, the first such visit by a South Korean leader, made it very difficult for Japan to resume talks on this issue. Almost four years passed before the countries’ leaders would meet again in a bilateral summit.

Park and Abe both came into office deeply wary of each other. Park felt strongly about the “comfort women” issue and was determined to settle it before the remaining women, then numbering only in the 50s, passed away. As a member of the National Assembly, Park had personally attended the U.S. congressional hearings on the 2007 resolution on this issue. Relations deteriorated rapidly, however, after Abe signaled his intention to reverse the official Japanese government stance on the war, not least to deny any official role in the coercion of the women.

U.S. officials became increasingly concerned by the rupture in relations between Japan and South Korea, particularly in light of China’s growing military assertiveness. In November 2013,

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<sup>6</sup> This account was initially provided to the author in conversations both in Seoul in 2012 and in Tokyo with senior officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Subsequent conversations with South Korean participants in the Kyoto talks took place at Stanford University and in Seoul, including recently, as well as in Tokyo with a senior adviser to Prime Minister Abe.

Beijing alarmed Washington by declaring the establishment of an air defense identification zone in the East China Sea that overlapped both Japanese and South Korean territory. Vice President Joe Biden took a trip in December 2013 through Tokyo, Beijing, and Seoul, which came to be dominated by this issue. Thinking he had secured a promise from Abe not to take provocative steps on history issues, Biden pressed Park to agree to a summit with Abe. Shortly after Biden's visit, Park revealed her unhappiness with the U.S. pressure and expressed concern over Abe's trustworthiness during a private meeting with a group of researchers from Stanford University.<sup>7</sup> Her doubts were vindicated only days later when Abe shocked Biden by visiting Yasukuni Shrine, prompting an unusual public slap on the wrist issued by the U.S. embassy in Tokyo.

This situation triggered serious debate within the U.S. government about the efficacy of getting involved in the disputes on history between South Korea and Japan. While explicitly rejecting a mediating role, the United States, led by the president, applied more visible pressure on both Tokyo and Seoul. In March 2014, Obama brought the two into a trilateral meeting on the sidelines of the nuclear security summit in The Hague. At that meeting, the United States tried to overcome differences by focusing on shared security threats, namely those from North Korea, without much progress.

Obama tackled the history issues more directly during trips the next month to both capitals. In Japan, he was careful to avoid pressing Abe in public, though he may have been more direct in private. In Seoul, however, Obama went beyond Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's use of the term "sexual slavery" to directly address the issue of Japanese responsibility for war crimes. At a joint press conference with Park, the president stated:

With respect to the historical tensions between South Korea and Japan, I think that any of us who look back on the history of what happened to the comfort women here in South Korea, for example, have to recognize that this was a terrible, egregious violation of human rights. Those women were violated in ways that, even in the midst of war, was shocking. And they deserve to be heard; they deserve to be respected; and there should be an accurate and clear account of what happened.<sup>8</sup>

This message, however, was very carefully paired with a warning to Abe to move forward and an admonition to both leaders not to allow history issues to block progress on other fronts, including security cooperation. Obama went on to say:

I think Prime Minister Abe recognizes, and certainly the Japanese people recognize, that the past is something that has to be recognized honestly and fairly. But I also think that it is in the interest of both Japan and the Korean people to look forward as well as backwards and to find ways in which the heartache and the pain of the past can be resolved, because, as has been said before, the interests today of the Korean and Japanese people so clearly converge. They're both democracies. You both have thriving free markets. Both are cornerstones of a booming economic region. Both are strong allies and friends of the United States. And so when you think about the young people of the Republic of Korea and Japan, my hope would be that we can honestly

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<sup>7</sup> The author was a member of the delegation.

<sup>8</sup> "Press Conference with President Obama and President Park of the Republic of Korea," White House, April 25, 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/04/25/press-conference-president-obama-and-president-park-republic-korea>.



resolve some of these past tensions, but also keep our eye on the future and the possibilities of peace and prosperity for all people.<sup>9</sup>

According to senior U.S. officials, alongside the public statements, messages were delivered quietly and privately. A senior South Korean source involved in managing relations with Japan likewise said that “the U.S. State Department as well as the White House played a pivotal role to move Prime Minister Abe this time.” The official added that “the U.S. side made it no secret to the Korean side whenever high-ranking officials from Seoul visited Washington.”<sup>10</sup>

Abe certainly heard the U.S. message. During his 2015 visit to Washington, he clearly stated his commitment not to reverse the Kono Statement. The wording of his August 2015 statement on the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II likewise avoided provocation.

Park visited Washington in mid-October and found U.S. policymakers echoing Japanese accusations that South Korea was leaning toward Beijing, though the president avoided voicing such concerns in public. Within South Korean government and policymaking circles, there were calls for Park to abandon her insistence on a “comfort women” deal as a precondition for a summit and to instead adopt a two-track approach to relations with Japan, separating history and security issues.<sup>11</sup> She shifted her stance and met with Abe in early November on the sidelines of the trilateral summit with China.

In the year and a half that followed the trilateral meeting in March 2014, the South Korean and Japanese foreign ministries met as many as twelve times at the director general level in formal negotiations on the “comfort women” issue. U.S. officials were closely following those talks and quietly encouraging both sides to compromise, according to a senior U.S. official.<sup>12</sup> But those discussions did not become serious until after the bilateral summit in Seoul when both leaders made a commitment to try to conclude an agreement by the end of the anniversary year for the normalization of relations.

The December 2015 deal went beyond the framework first discussed four years ago. On the key issue of Japan taking responsibility and acknowledging the official role in the brothel system, South Korea backed off from insisting on “legal responsibility” but won an important battle to include that word “responsibility.” Japan also admitted “an involvement of the Japanese military authorities.” Combined with the agreement not to reverse the original Kono Statement, this concession marked a huge shift for Abe.

The negotiations also proposed a formula to create a foundation to which the Japanese government would contribute official funds. A senior South Korean official involved in the talks told me:

It was a new invention and I think it was a very good idea to avoid a definition of the money (compensation, atonement, or something else) that Japan is going to pay as part of the deal. Also it is noteworthy that PM Abe personally apologized, since he has been denying the comfort women issue from the beginning of his political life.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> “Press Conference with President Obama and President Park of the Republic of Korea.”

<sup>10</sup> Author’s interviews with U.S. officials and with South Korean policymakers at Stanford University in late 2015 and via email in 2015 and 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Author’s interviews with senior South Korean policymakers engaged with Japan in Seoul in 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Author’s conversations with a senior U.S. official in late 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Author’s email interview with a South Korean official in 2016.

Japan, for its part, insisted on the assurance that this was the final and irreversible resolution of this issue. South Korea opposed this wording, but according to the South Korean official, Abe insisted, and the ROK finally accepted. The ROK also agreed to attempt to relocate the statue, a Japanese demand going back to Noda and the beginning of this long negotiation process. The agreement did not formally commit to moving the statue, but Japanese ruling party officials have conveyed to critics within Japan the idea that this was understood.

The United States' response was not surprisingly highly supportive, and U.S. officials tried to avoid any claim of having facilitated the agreement. In a background briefing, a "senior official," understood to be Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Russel, went out of his way to give credit to the two governments and their leaders. But he could not resist a clear hint at a more active U.S. role:

The U.S. has played an appropriate and constructive role. The Obama Administration strongly supported all gestures of reconciliation. We have shared our best advice; we've underscored the benefits to us and to everybody in reaching an agreement; and we've worked quietly to, where possible, prevent or to resolve misunderstandings between the two.<sup>14</sup>

## Challenges to Cooperation and the Path Forward

The steps toward cooperation would seem to indicate that South Korea and Japan have moved closer to a shared strategic perception, in line with their U.S. ally, and that there is some commitment to putting history issues on a parallel track that will not undermine cooperation. But it would be premature to conclude that the history issues have been resolved.

Koreans fear that the Abe administration has merely set its obsession with reversing the postwar judgment on Japan temporarily to the side, mostly to please the United States. The recent efforts of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs to oppose any discussion of "comfort women" at the UN Human Rights Commission are seen as evidence of the lurking compulsion to suppress these wartime issues. The December agreement has not been implemented, particularly the formation of a fund for compensation, and it is not yet clear if Japan will insist on the removal of the statue that commemorates the women across the street from its embassy in Seoul. South Korean public opinion, as measured by polls, remains deeply divided, and the civic organization representing the victims has yet to endorse the agreement.<sup>15</sup> Japanese similarly mistrust South Korea and lobby in Washington to put the responsibility for failure on Seoul. Both sides watch to see if the United States is still committed to pressing forward on these wartime issues.

There also remains a serious divergence between South Korean and Japanese strategic policy and threat perceptions. The two countries are bound by their alliance partnership with the United States but their preoccupations are distinct. There is a widespread feeling among South Koreans that their country is caught between its largest trading partner, China, and its U.S. ally. Some in South Korea talk about acting as a "bridge" between the two great powers.

The central issue for ROK security policy continues to be the division of the Korean Peninsula, the ongoing threat of war on the peninsula arising out of North Korean miscalculation and the

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<sup>14</sup> U.S. Department of State, "Background Briefing—Developments on the Relationship between Japan and the Republic of Korea," December 28, 2015, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/12/250881.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> Prakash Panneerselvam and Sandhya Puthanveedu, "6 Months Later: The 'Comfort Women' Agreement," *Diplomat*, May 11, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/05/6-months-later-the-comfort-women-agreement>.

regime's undiminished desire to reunify Korea under its command. One element of the ROK response to the North Korean threat is Seoul's obvious effort to drive a wedge between Pyongyang and its Chinese patrons (just as the North seeks to do the same between Seoul and Washington).<sup>16</sup> All these factors combine to make the ROK reluctant to be drawn into an overt balancing strategy against China. Both progressive and conservative leaders in South Korea share this view.

For their part, conservative Japanese leaders and policymakers tend to view the Korean Peninsula as a secondary concern compared with China. The North Korean missile test over Japanese territory in 1998 alarmed Japan, and the issue of the Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea has been a prominent cause among conservatives. Recent North Korean nuclear and missile tests have alarmed the Japanese public and policymakers as well. But there remains great reluctance to recognize the priority of the Korean Peninsula for the defense and security of Japan, except to try to justify the recent revision of the interpretation of the constitutional restrictions on collective self-defense. Rather, Japanese policymakers tend to be preoccupied with the impact of China's economic and military power on Japan's future. According to U.S. military and defense officials, Japanese discussions of the implementation of the Joint Defense Guidelines agreed to last year with the United States have focused on how U.S. forces might aid Japan in the case of a Chinese challenge to disputed territories in the East China Sea.<sup>17</sup> In contrast, U.S. planners are concerned with Japan's potential role primarily in the defense of the Korean Peninsula and secondarily in other potential conflict areas such as the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea.

These gaps in strategic perception have been kept largely under the surface, including by U.S. defense and security planners who emphasize shared interests and wish to avoid disrupting the tentative steps toward trilateral cooperation. The United States is also wary of being drawn into choosing sides between its two allies. This is understandable but not helpful in the long run. An airing of differences is essential to real cooperation.

The United States needs to continue to steer its allies toward a shared understanding of the security imperatives that would underpin trilateral cooperation, including deepening joint contingency planning and intelligence-sharing arrangements. But it is also vital to lock in the progress made on wartime history. Japan and South Korea should work to avoid backsliding on the "comfort women" agreement, and the United States should offer further ideas on how all three countries might promote reconciliation. These include the following recommendations:<sup>18</sup>

- Producing supplementary teaching materials that would compare the treatment of the wartime period in the textbooks of China, Japan, South Korea, and the United States
- Organizing dialogues among historians, starting from the base of previous official dialogues to hold regular dialogues that feature broader participation from U.S. and European historians with an eye toward comparative discussion of the European and Asian experiences
- Holding exchanges among museum directors and those who create the narratives for museums dealing with wartime issues, again potentially including museum personnel in Europe and the United States

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Han Suk-hee, "South Korea Seeks to Balance Relations with China and the United States," Council on Foreign Relations, November 2012, <http://www.cfr.org/south-korea/south-korea-seeks-balance-relations-china-united-states/p29447>.

<sup>17</sup> Author's conversations with senior U.S. defense officials at Stanford University in 2016 and with military officials from the U.S. Pacific Command in Honolulu in 2016.

<sup>18</sup> These points draw from "Pathways to Reconciliation: A Track II Dialogue on Wartime History Issues in Asia," Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, Stanford University, Final Report, May 2014, 18, [http://aparc.fsi.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/pathways\\_to\\_reconciliation.pdf](http://aparc.fsi.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/pathways_to_reconciliation.pdf).

- Funding and promoting large-scale student exchanges among middle- and high-school students, modeled on the Franco-German student exchanges, that include a clear educational goal regarding the wartime period

Further trilateral dialogues between the United States, Japan, and the ROK that go beyond traditional security and military consultations are also needed and remain vital to deepening cooperation. There are already some efforts in these areas, and they should be pursued much more vigorously. These could include the following:

- *Energy security.* All three countries share interests in energy security, including increased use of alternative sources of energy as well as cooperation in the development and use of fossil fuels such as natural gas.
- *Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.* There are already limited exercises among security forces in the three countries, and this remains a very fruitful realm for establishing habits of cooperation and creating relationships between security forces, including coast guards.
- *Cybersecurity.* The United States, Japan, and the ROK all have been targets of cyberattacks, particularly from North Korea, and cyberespionage. There is developed capacity in all three countries to explore sharing technical capability and intelligence, as well as other forms of joint cybersecurity.
- *Intellectual property protection.* All three countries are advanced technological nations with a shared interest in protecting intellectual property from piracy and other threats to innovation and entrepreneurship. This issue has been a major subject of the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), and the three countries could form a separate partnership on intellectual property protection that is based on the TPP agreement.

If a lesson can be drawn from the historical process that brought us to this moment, it is that such cooperation can only emerge as a product of political leadership and sustained attention. There is a natural tendency on the part of governments and their leaders to shift attention to other issues after some progress has been made, as is the case with trilateral cooperation. But the history of Northeast Asia is replete with cases where progress has proved fragile and often is reversed. The handling of wartime history issues is unfortunately frequently a case of one step forward, two steps backward. The only way to avoid that pattern is to maintain the pressure to lock in progress and find new avenues to create more sustainable habits of cooperation.

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# Relocating Trilateralism in a Broader Regional Architecture: A South Korean Perspective

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay considers recent developments in bilateral relations between the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Japan and assesses the opportunities and challenges for U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateralism.

### MAIN ARGUMENT

Although historical issues and territorial disputes continue to create mistrust between South Korea and Japan, the landmark December 2015 agreement between Park Geun-hye and Shinzo Abe has the potential to dramatically improve bilateral relations and promote better opportunities for trilateral cooperation with the U.S. In order to deal with the North Korean military threat, well-coordinated trilateralism among the U.S., the ROK, and Japan must be combined with active cooperation from China. Using its reputation as a middle power focused on global issues, South Korea can play a mediating role in regional affairs. The next step for the country is threefold. First, the ROK needs to strengthen trilateralism by improving relations with Japan. Second, it needs to bridge Chinese and trilateral networks. Third, Seoul must prevent the Korean Peninsula from becoming an arena for U.S.-China competition.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- South Korea should work to implement a genuine two-track approach vis-à-vis Japan in order to encourage security and economic cooperation between the two countries within the trilateral framework.
- It should deepen partnerships with China and make clear to Beijing that South Korea's policy toward North Korea targets denuclearization while pursuing peaceful and gradual nonviolent unification.
- The ROK should avoid linking the Korean Peninsula to U.S.-China rivalry by stressing that trilateral military cooperation against the North has little to do with U.S.-China competition but instead aims at ensuring the stability and peace of the peninsula.

Various forms of trilateral cooperation have developed and evolved in the decades since the United States, the Republic of Korea (ROK), and Japan launched the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group in 1999 as a means of institutionalizing the process of policy coordination on North Korean nuclear development. But two legs of the triangle—Japan and the ROK—remain mired in historical animosity with complex roots, which hinders strategic and operational coordination of alliance policy and capabilities.

However, better opportunities for promoting trilateralism may emerge from the landmark December 2015 agreement between South Korea and Japan. The agreement took a major step toward resolving the “comfort women” issue, which has been the biggest obstacle to improving bilateral ties.<sup>1</sup> In addition, North Korea’s nuclear test on January 6, 2016, and its ongoing long-range missile programs pose a grave security threat to not only South Korea and Japan but also the United States. As the three countries quickly move to coordinate policies to harshly condemn and increase sanctions on North Korea, their partnership will find new opportunities to move from separate bilateral alliances into a closer trilateral arrangement that would improve their security posture vis-à-vis North Korea. Yet while the key to ending the North’s nuclear program is well-coordinated three-way pressure from the United States, the ROK, and Japan, this policy must be combined with active cooperation from China. Eyes are on Beijing to see whether the most recent test will finally compel a change in its own policy toward Pyongyang. Because the survival of the regime remains a strategic asset to China, Beijing remains reluctant to push too hard on North Korea.

The above indicates South Korea’s strategic challenge: the country needs to strengthen the U.S.-Japan-ROK relationship by improving ties with Japan, while expanding its own networks with China in order to gradually alter China’s strategy toward North Korea. Yet as it seeks to strengthen trilateral security ties, South Korea must be careful to ensure that China does not feel excluded from the regional security architecture. Simultaneously, Seoul is pursuing a path that promotes multilayered cooperative networks with China while hedging against Chinese predation by courting U.S. and Japanese engagement. Conceptually, this means that South Korea seeks to integrate U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral networks with China-ROK networks.

The first section of this essay briefly considers the history of the U.S.-Japan-ROK relationship, while the second section discusses the renewed enthusiasm for trilateral cooperation. The third section then assesses whether the recent developments in bilateral ties between South Korea and Japan have removed the structural constraints on their trilateral relationship with the United States. The essay concludes by examining South Korea’s role as a middle power and identifying concrete actions that the country can take to strengthen U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateralism by relocating it within a broader regional architecture.

## Historical Background

In South Korea, U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral cooperation has often been tainted by its Cold War legacy. During the Cold War, this triangle was charged with maintaining deterrence against the Communist bloc. The strategic confrontation between the southern triangle (the United States,

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<sup>1</sup> The issue of women who were forced to work in Japanese wartime military brothels, known as “comfort women,” has for long plagued Japan-ROK ties. Survivors and their supporters have sought for the Japanese government to admit legal responsibility and directly pay compensation.

Japan, and the ROK) and the northern triangle (Russia, China, and North Korea) was accompanied by irreconcilable ideologies and a clash of social systems. The policy of pursuing a virtual alliance with a former enemy and colonizer (Japan) was started by South Korea's militarist, authoritarian leader Park Chung-hee and engineered by Chun Doo-hwan. Although the public recognized this Cold War logic, continuing social discontent reflected not only citizens' inherent anti-Japanese sentiments but also the way the militarist leaders handled the issue. South Korean civil society charged that the Cold War alliance forced the country to the frontline of dangerous war planning, which helped sustain militarist rule.

The North Korean nuclear crisis improved the tainted image of trilateralism. Cooperation evolved as all three nations attempted to coordinate their respective North Korea policies. In 1999 the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group was formed as an opportunity for Washington to involve Seoul and Tokyo in the U.S. policymaking process and to avoid sending Pyongyang mixed signals. But the process weakened over time as conflicting views and interests over the most appropriate policies toward North Korea strained relations among the three nations. For example, the Roh Moo-hyun government regarded trilateralism as a spoiler rather than a catalyst for denuclearizing North Korea. Seoul subsequently became more willing than Washington and Tokyo to engage Pyongyang as the Kim Dae-jung government pursued its Sunshine Policy toward the North. The six-party talks also emerged as the key multilateral forum to address the North Korean nuclear problem, and trilateral cooperation only operated within the broader, multilateral context of this framework as an informal caucus among the three countries. Often South Korea played the role of mediator between North Korea, on the one side, and the United States and Japan, on the other.

## Renewed Enthusiasm

Renewed enthusiasm for trilateral cooperation came from the military transformation process led by the George W. Bush administration during the 2000s. In order to adapt to multilayered challenges, ranging from terrorism to major wars, the administration set out to transform U.S. forces into globally mobile units. If forces stationed in Japan and South Korea were to assume broader missions and roles, the two alliances would need to evolve as well. Against the backdrop of this changing U.S. security environment, trilateral cooperation resurfaced as a priority. Should tensions arise on the Korean Peninsula while U.S. Forces Korea were in operation elsewhere, or should a crisis occur, the United States would need a more integrated approach to coordinate regional strategies and combine available resources among the three countries.

In contrast with the transformation process of the U.S.-Japan alliance, in which the two sides agreed on expanding their common strategic objectives to include responding to terrorism, curbing nuclear proliferation, and carefully watching China's rise, Seoul and Washington made little progress on redefining the role of U.S. Forces Korea for a changing regional security environment. South Korea under the Roh government was reluctant to accept the concept of strategic flexibility, whereby U.S. forces could relocate to other parts of the world as needed. Roh was also wary of the United States potentially using the alliance to balance China. While advocating a multilateral approach to Northeast Asian security, he even suggested that the ROK should be less dependent on the United States and more self-reliant in defending itself. Consequently, the alliance relationship was strained.



The Obama administration's "rebalance to Asia" centers on the United States' ability to reinvigorate and leverage traditional alliances for a stronger and enhanced role in the region. Following the economic recession, and with fiscal retrenchment restraining U.S. military expenditures, the United States asked Japan and South Korea to assume increased financial burdens and share new operational roles and missions in alliance management. The Lee Myung-bak government responded positively. It quickly shifted policy course by taking a confrontational approach to North Korea and rehabilitating the ROK's strained relationship with the United States. The administration also supported U.S. efforts to reinvigorate trilateralism.

By December 2010, ministers from the three countries had agreed on a joint statement. The agreement went beyond mutual bilateral responsibilities to deal effectively with common security threats, including from North Korea, and underscored the importance of strengthening trilateral cooperation on economic, political, and security issues. The agreement further sought to find ways to address a long list of global challenges, including terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, piracy, climate change, epidemics, and energy security, while promoting green growth, freedom of navigation, and maritime security.

Admittedly, these are lofty strategic goals. Even when under a pro-U.S., pro-Japanese leadership, South Korea has been reluctant to engage in any meaningful military cooperation with Japan, given the politically sensitive nature of their relationship. For example, in June 2012 the Lee administration attempted to sign a general security of military information agreement that would provide a legal framework for sharing classified military data between the two countries and make trilateral defense cooperation with the United States easier. But the government's last-minute decision to not sign the agreement, even after circulating it through the cabinet, demonstrated the lingering anti-Japanese sentiments that deter meaningful defense cooperation with Japan.

After Shinzo Abe and Park Geun-hye were both elected in December 2012 as the new heads of Japan and South Korea, respectively, the political divide between the countries reached its worst mark. As the two conservative, nationalist leaders deepened tensions over history, public sentiments in each country became correspondingly aggravated. The bilateral feud produced significant structural opportunities for China to drive a wedge into the trilateral alignment in a way that has brought Seoul closer to Beijing while distancing it from Tokyo. While visiting South Korea in June 2013, President Xi Jinping urged South Korea to align with his country and denounce Abe's stance on Japan's historical legacies of colonialism and war. In turn, Park asked Xi to erect a monument to a Korean national hero who assassinated the first prime minister of Japan for his role in the Japanese colonization of Korea. The Japanese press branded these actions as a joint struggle against Japan.<sup>2</sup>

Alarmed by the Chinese diplomatic offensive on South Korea and also by the strategic irritants caused by Japan's move to strengthen its armed forces, the United States became anxious to improve the troubled relationship between its two allies and intervened at several pivotal points to help bring Abe and Park closer together. In March 2014, Barack Obama persuaded the two leaders to sit together in a trilateral setting on the sidelines of the Nuclear Security Summit in The Hague, which was the first top-level meeting between South Korea and Japan since Park and Abe took office. Soon thereafter, the United States successfully persuaded a reluctant ROK to join talks on a trilateral arrangement for sharing military information, participate in trilateral defense ministerial meetings, and hold a bilateral summit meeting. This trend continued when the three

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<sup>2</sup> *Asahi Shimbun*, July 6, 2013.

countries signed a memorandum of understanding on sharing intelligence on North Korean issues in December 2014.

## Will South Korea's Relations with Japan Improve?

Formidable obstacles persist to improving trilateral relations. Historical tensions and territorial issues are the main sources of mistrust between Japan and South Korea and have shaped the identity of each nation. In a 2015 joint public opinion survey conducted by the East Asia Institute of South Korea and Genron NPO of Japan, 57% of the South Korean public characterized Japan as militaristic and 34% described it as statist.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, 56% of the Japanese public viewed South Korea as nationalistic and 34% as statist. Despite the fact that both countries are allies of the United States, a large majority of South Korean respondents indicated high-level threat perceptions toward Japan. Because South Korea fears that Japan is reverting to militarism, the chances for meaningful defense cooperation are unlikely. This attitude is shown in a joint public opinion survey conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, the East Asia Institute, Genron NPO, and Horizon, which found that an alarming 54% of South Korean respondents believe that there is a possibility of military conflict between Japan and South Korea.<sup>4</sup> The clash of identity caused by historical conflicts is responsible for the soured bilateral relationship.

In December 2015, Park and Abe achieved a breakthrough that may improve the bilateral relationship after both sides agreed to “finally and irreversibly” resolve the long-standing issue of Korean “comfort women.” Diplomatic pressure as a result of the United States believing that tension between its two allies over history problems was damaging its national interests, combined with growing domestic criticism, forced Park to call for a resolution by the year's end, marking the 50th anniversary of diplomatic normalization. Park's grudging shift followed key concessions from Japan, including an official acknowledgment of the wartime military authorities' complicity in the sexual enslavement of Korean women and Abe's expression of sincere apologies and remorse to the victims. Tokyo offered to set up a fund of one billion yen (\$83 million), paid directly by the government, and to provide care for the surviving women.

It is too early, however, to tell if the December agreement succeeded in removing the biggest obstacle to starting a new era of bilateral relations. South Koreans continue to protest against the Japanese government for refusing to admit legal responsibilities for these crimes. Strong opposition also remains toward the removal of the statue of a girl symbolizing the “comfort women” that is installed in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul. Along with the opposition party and NGOs, the general public turned against the resolution. A joint survey conducted in January by the Korean Broadcasting System and Gallup Korea revealed that only 26% of the South Korean public supports the agreement, while 56% opposes it. An overwhelming 72% of respondents say that Japan refuses to apologize fully, while only 19% are satisfied by the Japanese statements. A significant percentage of the public (72%) is also opposed to moving the statue to a new location.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> “2015 Han-il gugmin sanghoinsig josa” [Survey on Mutual Recognition of Korea and Japan], East Asia Institute and Genron NPO, [http://www.eai.or.kr/type\\_k/p2.asp?catcode=1110181400](http://www.eai.or.kr/type_k/p2.asp?catcode=1110181400).

<sup>4</sup> Karl Friedhoff and Dina Smeltz, “Strong Alliances, Divided Public: Public Opinion in the United States, Japan, South Korea, and China,” Chicago Council on Global Affairs, October 19, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> “Gallup Korea Daily Opinion,” Gallup Korea, no. 193, January 8, 2016.

Worse, the government has been seeking to gain acceptance of the agreement from the surviving victims, but the women have denounced the agreement on the grounds that the deal was reached without their close consultation. The most recent South Korean general election held on April 13 casts a gloomy shadow over the government's actions. Opposition parties stepped up their criticism of the agreement by claiming that the bilateral accord is invalid and subject to renegotiation. With the general election handing the opposition parties a stunning political victory, the government's plan of implementing the agreement will likely face formidable obstacles.

Beyond the "comfort women" issue, there remain many other unresolved history problems, including controversies over Japanese textbooks, wartime forced labor, and visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, as well as territorial disputes over the Dokdo/Takeshima Islands. Clearly, the landmark agreement between the two countries is not the end of the historical disputes. The structural constraints on U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateralism are thus resilient and remain unresolved.

## South Korea's Middle-Power Activism

A significant challenge for South Korea is engaging with China while at the same time strengthening and sustaining trilateralism. This goal has been pursued in the name of the middle-power diplomacy that South Korea has sought to practice in international affairs.<sup>6</sup> As its assets have expanded, there have been increasing calls for South Korea to adopt a proactive foreign policy role commensurate with its material power. Seoul is re-evaluating the validity of a security posture based solely on the bilateral alliance with the United States and aspires to play a middle-power role that encompasses three dimensions. The first is to increase the degree of connectedness with actors from which the country gathers information and with which it can foster coalitions. The second is to adopt a mediating or bridging role. South Korea can use its leverage over other states and increase its bargaining power through links to partners that are otherwise weakly connected. Finally, South Korea aims to help establish principles, norms, and rules in international institutions.<sup>7</sup>

There is a strong need for South Korea to apply its middle-power role to help shape the regional architecture. Tensions have heightened in recent years as the United States and China compete over regional leadership. Whereas Japan is firmly aligned with the United States, South Korea has attempted to take a different approach by increasing its connectedness with both great powers. It maintains a long-standing alliance with the United States (and partially with Japan), while recently crafting an amicable relationship with China. But South Korea has not yet successfully played a mediating role in establishing a new regional architecture because both China and the United States support the initiatives of middle powers only to the extent that doing so serves their respective interests. In addition, the soured relationship with Japan has hampered South Korea's efforts to play a mediating role because, as stated earlier, this state of affairs helps the Chinese position but adversely affects U.S. strategic interests.

The U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral relationship should be resituated. The objective of South Korea's middle-power diplomacy is to deepen the trilateral cooperation network and locate it within a

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<sup>6</sup> The following discussion draws on Yul Sohn, "Searching for a New Identity: South Korea's Middle Power Diplomacy," FRIDE, Policy Brief, no. 212, December 2015, [http://fride.org/download/PB212\\_South\\_Korea\\_middle\\_power\\_diplomacy.pdf](http://fride.org/download/PB212_South_Korea_middle_power_diplomacy.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> See Sangbae Kim, "The Rise of Middle Power in East Asia: A Korean Perspective," East Asia Institute, Working Paper, January 2014, [http://www.eai.or.kr/data/bbs/eng\\_report/20140203158563.pdf](http://www.eai.or.kr/data/bbs/eng_report/20140203158563.pdf); and Sohn, "Searching for a New Identity."

broader regional architecture, which means bridging Chinese and U.S.-Japan-ROK networks. South Korea is developing its reputation as a middle power by expanding its engagement on global issues, including international finance, cybersecurity, climate change, and human rights. Its role grows at the same time as great powers attempt to establish norms and rules that govern those issues. For example, in order to contribute to redesigning the global financial architecture, Seoul hosted the G-20 summit meeting in November 2010. It also took the initiative to establish the Global Green Growth Institute to help developing countries pursue green growth. The Park Geun-hye government's recent initiative to promote the so-called MIKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, Korea, Turkey, and Australia) middle-power network is in line with South Korea's efforts to establish its identity as a middle power contributing to global stability and prosperity.

Using its reputation as a middle power focused on global issues, South Korea can play a mediating role in regional affairs. The next step for the country is threefold. First, it needs to strengthen trilateralism by improving relations with Japan. Second, it needs to bridge Chinese and trilateral networks. Third, South Korea must prevent the Korean Peninsula from becoming an arena for U.S.-China competition.

*Implement a genuine two-track approach vis-à-vis Japan.* Since the history problems recur as a result of the clashes of identity between the two countries and take the form of identity politics, finding a solution to the “comfort women” issue will take a long time. While the December agreement is significant, as both governments demonstrated a will to improve bilateral relations, it is unlikely that surviving victims and civil society groups will embrace the agreement in the near future. This is all the more so because opposition parties demanding renegotiation won the general election by a large margin. The ROK government needs to regard the deal not as the final, irreversible solution but as the beginning of a lengthy process by which it makes an earnest effort to seek the understanding of the former “comfort women” and explain the merits of the two-track approach. On a parallel path, the government should encourage security and economic cooperation with Japan within the trilateral framework. For this approach to work, leaders from both governments must resist using history as a means to mobilize identity politics.

*Deepen partnerships with China.* Beijing is concerned that measures to enhance military cooperation between the United States, Japan, and the ROK against North Korea would eventually provide a means to pressure China and that strong sanctions could cause the North Korean regime to collapse, leading to extended U.S. influence over the Korean Peninsula. Unless South Korea alleviates such concerns, its efforts to encourage Chinese support for North Korean denuclearization will be limited in their success. Seoul should avoid the impression that its sanctions-only approach eventually targets regime collapse. Instead, it should make clear to Beijing that this policy targets denuclearization while pursuing peaceful coexistence and gradual, nonviolent unification with the North. South Korea also should indicate its flexibility on the idea of the parallel track in negotiations proposed by Beijing, which means the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and the replacement of the Korean Armistice Agreement with a peace agreement.

*Avoid linking the Korean Peninsula to U.S.-China rivalry.* South Korea must delink peninsular issues and U.S.-China strategic competition, which significantly reduces its range of freedom in strategic maneuvering. To this end, South Korea must stress that trilateral military cooperation against North Korea has little to do with U.S.-China strategic competition but instead aims at ensuring the stability and peace of the Korean Peninsula. Seoul should take a long-term

perspective. It should work to cultivate diverse networks with China and persuade Beijing that South Korea's strategic goals are not incompatible with those of China; rather, in the long run both countries will be able to evolve in harmony. South Korea should also reassure China that its regional strategy as a middle power aims to promote peace and stability.



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# The Future of Trilateral Cooperation: A Japanese Perspective

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay examines the potential for trilateral cooperation between the U.S., Japan, and the ROK and argues that Japan and South Korea should take steps to strengthen the liberal international order through middle-power cooperation sustained by their U.S. alliance relationships.

### MAIN ARGUMENT

Japan and South Korea face the complex task of managing their security relationships with the U.S. at the same time that power shifts between the U.S. and China. The strategic clash between Washington and Beijing could deprive both Tokyo and Seoul of the freedom of decision-making and action. Despite concerns in South Korea about Japanese “military expansion,” the new security legislation passed in the Diet in September 2015 has the potential to enhance the security of the Korean Peninsula. It would also allow Japan and South Korea to engage in close cooperation in the domain of nontraditional security. Yet the goal of such bilateral security cooperation would not be to contain or encircle China but to strengthen the liberal international order. Middle-power cooperation is the basis for both nations’ survival strategies in the short to medium term, and in the long run it should solidify the common ground on which they must coexist with a strong (or disorderly) China.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Given that China will likely regard security cooperation between Japan and South Korea as directed against it, Tokyo and Seoul should be persistent in their efforts to ease Beijing’s concerns through extensive dialogue and concrete action.
- Policy consultations between Japan and South Korea should be institutionalized and strengthened. Resuming shuttle summit meetings on a regular basis should be a priority, as this step would prompt closer cooperation at the administrative level.
- The General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) should be signed as soon as possible, and negotiation of the bilateral Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) should resume immediately. The GSOMIA is important in the context of the North Korean problem, while the ACSA would be a useful tool for cooperation on nontraditional security.
- The U.S. should not interpret Japanese and South Korean conceptions of neutrality as anti-U.S. or detrimental to U.S. interests. For both Japan and South Korea, the role of their alliances with the U.S. is not to encircle China but to sustain a stable regional order.



In East Asia, each country is struggling to find an optimal strategy in the context of a shifting power balance between the United States and China. Against this backdrop, Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK) stand out as two countries whose levels of economic and political development, regional and global agendas, and even national interests are comparable. Illustrative of this reality, a senior South Korean official working in the United Nations once mentioned that when the ROK government proposes draft resolutions on various regional and global issues, Japanese support is often taken for granted.<sup>1</sup> The same should be true for the Japanese government. Indeed, Tokyo and Seoul are in the same boat and would benefit from jointly steering a course through bumpy waters toward a better future.

Close Japan-ROK cooperation, however, does not necessarily mean that they are united as a counterbalance against a rising China. Japan and South Korea are similarly situated in the evolving East Asian regional order as important allies of the United States. However, the two states should perceive their standing between the United States and China as conceptually neutral, even if as U.S. allies they are closer to the United States in reality. Japan and South Korea must remain conceptually neutral because they must coexist in the region as close neighbors of China.

At the same time, they continue to share concerns about the way China is using its growing power to attempt to consolidate a China-centered Asia, which is not a reassuring sign for neighboring countries. Given this dynamic, Japan and South Korea need close relations with the United States in order to promote a liberal international order in East Asia and to socialize China into this order. This situation exhibits elements of a paradigm clash between the postwar liberal international order created by advanced democracies led by the United States, which Japan and South Korea have joined, and the Sinocentric order that Beijing might be interested in reviving. Thus, the danger of power politics damaging China's relations with the liberal international order always exists.

Two basic factors, however, make this clash not necessarily preordained. First and foremost, China's spectacular economic rise is a result of the country entering the liberal international order. Second, there are liberal internationalists in Chinese society and government who would be interested in continuing down a path of economic development and political evolution by remaining within this order. This, however, does not mean that China's liberal internationalists are entirely happy with the institutions and rules of the existing order, despite the economic logic of China's participation in it. Here, the nature of China's challenges is fundamentally different from the above scenario of a paradigm clash.

From a Japanese perspective, there are two dimensions to trilateral cooperation among the United States, Japan, and South Korea under this broad and complex picture. One is the domain of traditional security, most notably relating to the issues surrounding North Korea and Taiwan, but also involving other areas such as the South and East China Seas. In these areas, China tends to see its "core national interests" at stake, and the role of the United States is key. The other domain involves nontraditional security cooperation, where Japan and South Korea can and should promote substantial cooperation and involve other regional actors in efforts to consolidate political and nontraditional security cooperation among East Asian countries, hopefully including China.

This essay does not look at the controversies over history that often prevail in the domestic politics of both South Korea and Japan, usually with negative effects on the actual management of the bilateral relationship. While I am fully aware of the importance of these issues, the management

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<sup>1</sup> Author's conversation with an ROK official.

of the history problems, on the one hand, and the discussion of the importance of cooperation between South Korea and Japan, on the other, should be compartmentalized and dealt with side by side, without one interfering with or hindering discussion of the other. This essay is concerned with the latter track. First, I will examine the evolution of U.S.-China relations in recent years by focusing on the Chinese conception of a new model of major-power relations and will discuss the implications for Japan-ROK relations. I will then consider the recent security legislation passed in the Japanese Diet in September 2015 and discuss its implications for trilateral security cooperation between Japan, South Korea, and the United States.

## A New Model of Major-Power Relations and the Implications for Japan-ROK Relations

Today, many Chinese people appear to believe that China is returning to the center of power in Asia, which, to their minds, is the natural and normal order in the region's long history. Behind this belief lies a strong awareness of victimization and humiliation during the modern history of China since the 1840–42 Opium War. For the Chinese people, bringing Asia back to such “normalcy” is tantamount to achieving historical justice. If this is the case, we should assume that the Chinese leadership's call for “a new model of major-power relations” with the United States is an equally strong motivation.

The concept was initially proposed by Dai Bingguo, a state councilor in charge of foreign affairs under the Hu Jintao administration, during the first U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue held in Washington, D.C., in July 2009.<sup>2</sup> It is widely believed that China's primary purpose in advancing this concept is to have the United States recognize and respect its core national interests. These core interests used to be limited to Taiwan and Tibet, but since the introduction of the concept of a new model of major-power relations, they have been expanded, at times to include the South and East China Seas (particularly the Senkaku Islands, which are under the administrative control of Japan).

In February 2012, then vice president Xi Jinping said in Washington, D.C., that this new model would be characterized by (1) “mutual understanding and strategic trust,” (2) “respecting each other's core interests,” (3) “mutually beneficial cooperation,” and (4) “enhancing cooperation and coordination in international affairs and on global issues.”<sup>3</sup> In April of the same year, at the fourth U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue held in Beijing, President Hu mentioned the concept for the first time. Later, in June 2013, Xi, now general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party and Chinese president, reaffirmed the concept during the summit with President Barack Obama at Sunnylands in California. Reportedly, Xi said to Obama that “the Pacific Ocean is wide enough to incorporate [the interests of] both China and the U.S.”<sup>4</sup>

Simply put, the concept of a new model of major-power relations signifies that China wants to peacefully coexist with the United States in the Asia-Pacific as well as at the global level. As is evident in the above statements by Chinese leaders, however, one critical condition is for the United

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<sup>2</sup> Hillary Clinton et al., “Closing Remarks for U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue,” U.S. Department of State, July 28, 2009, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2009a/july/126599.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> David M. Lampton, “A New Type of Major-Power Relationship: Seeking a Durable Foundation for U.S.-China Ties,” *Asia Policy*, no. 16 (2013): 51–68.

<sup>4</sup> Willy Lam, “Beijing's Aggressive New Foreign Policy and Implications for the South China Sea,” Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, June 21, 2013, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=41056#.VAw61cJ\\_vTo](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=41056#.VAw61cJ_vTo).

States to respect an Asian order with China as the primary architect. If this Chinese wish is to be achieved at all, the outcome would be a division of the Asia-Pacific region between U.S. and Chinese spheres of influence.

Hugh White of the Australian National University recently argued for power-sharing across the Pacific between the United States and China in order to avoid a strategic clash.<sup>5</sup> An important question, however, particularly for China's immediate neighbors, is whether a strong China that rejects U.S. primacy would be a benign hegemon in Asia. In fact, in this realist account of the strategic relationship between the United States and China, what is often missing is an examination of the place and role of China's neighbors in the transformation of an Asian order. Their coping strategies, or the lack thereof, will significantly affect the reshaping of this order.

This is exactly why the roles of Japan and South Korea, as well as the relationship between them, have become critical. In interviews about their views on East Asian affairs, fifteen South Korean public intellectuals from diverse ideological and political orientations were unanimous in stressing the point that South Korea practically does not have an option to choose the United States to confront China, or vice versa.<sup>6</sup> In the event of a strategic clash between the United States and China, South Korea's choice would be the United States, but should such a scenario occur, it would mean that there is no room for a South Korean role. Therefore, the argument goes, the goal of South Korean strategy should be to minimize the risks of such a conflict between the United States and China.<sup>7</sup>

However, the dominant view in both Japanese government and society tends to stress the "China threat" and gravitate toward the alliance with the United States. Many South Koreans are critical of this tendency for the reasons stated above, while many Japanese say that South Korean views toward China are naive. Under the present circumstances, therefore, these divergent views toward China, as well as the two countries' differing coping strategies, are a huge obstacle in constructing a credible partnership between Japan and South Korea to navigate the complex strategic relationship between the United States and China.

While South Korea's predicament is understandable, particularly given North Korea's nuclear weapons program and the long-term unification question, South Koreans tend to expect too much from China, which remains a unilateralist country believing in a Sinocentric Asia. The Japanese preoccupation with the China threat is also excessive: after all, as discussed in the introduction, Japan cannot move out of the region and must continue to coexist with China like all of its neighbors. Japan and South Korea should find an optimal point of cooperation for dealing with China's rise as the strategic relationship between the United States and China shifts. The appropriate concept of such cooperation should be "middle power" security cooperation, as will be discussed later.

In the next section, I will look into Japan's new Legislation for Peace and Security, passed in the National Diet on September 19, 2015, and discuss its implications for trilateral security cooperation between Japan, South Korea, and the United States.

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<sup>5</sup> Hugh White, *The China Choice: Why We Should Share Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Yoshihide Soeya, *Bei-chu no hazama-wo ikiru: Kankoku chishikijin tono taiwa* [Living between the United States and China: Dialogues with South Korean Intellectuals] (Tokyo: Keio University Press, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

## Japan's Legislation for Peace and Security: Implications for Traditional Security

The Legislation for Peace and Security consists of revisions to ten existing laws and the drafting of one new law.<sup>8</sup> These laws can be categorized into three areas of Japanese security and defense policies: (1) situations threatening Japan's survival, (2) situations of important influence, and (3) international peace cooperation. The first category relates to the question of the right to collective self-defense, whereas categories two and three involve important changes to the guidelines for Japan's traditionally restrictive defense cooperation with the United States and participation in international peacekeeping operations.

Category two—situations of important influence—concerns situations that have an important influence on Japan's peace and security, which is essentially the expansion of the revised guidelines for defense cooperation between Japan and the United States concluded in the late 1990s. The revision of existing laws in this category has opened up a new horizon for Japan's logistical support in the event of regional contingencies in two dimensions: expanding the logistical support activities of the Japan Self-Defense Forces (short of the actual use of force) and enabling the provision of support activities to foreign countries' armed forces (beyond the United States).

This revision is an important change from the previous regional contingency legislation that limited Japan's logistical support to the United States. Now, at least legally and theoretically, Japan is able to work not only with the United States but also with South Korea, or even trilaterally in case of a contingency on the Korean Peninsula, to conduct various support activities. In reality, however, cooperation on traditional security would be premature, or even hazardous, in the current political environment of Japan-ROK relations. Even at the level of logistical support, such cooperation involving the role of the Japan Self-Defense Forces would make the relationship difficult despite the obviously positive security logic. It is important for both governments and interlocutors to continue to nurture a political environment for military planners to be able to proceed rationally and realistically.

Category one, which pertains to the most controversial issue of the right to collective self-defense, gives rise to more complex issues. As a result of the new security legislation, the revised "three conditions for the use of force for self-defense" now allow for the use of force under the following conditions:

1. When an armed attack against Japan occurs *or when an armed attack against a foreign country that is in a close relationship with Japan occurs and as a result threatens Japan's survival and poses a clear danger to fundamentally overturn people's right to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness.*
2. When there is no other appropriate means available to repel the attack and ensure Japan's survival and protect its people.
3. The use of force should be limited to the minimum extent necessary.<sup>9</sup>

The italicized passage above gives room for the exercise of the right to collective self-defense, which successive Japanese governments have previously rejected due to the limitations arising from Article 9 of the Japanese constitution. Now, the Shinzo Abe administration has crafted a new

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<sup>8</sup> "Japan's Legislation for Peace and Security: Seamless Responses for Peace and Security of Japan and the International Community," Government of Japan, October 2015, [http://japan.kantei.go.jp/97\\_abe/Documents/2015/\\_\\_\\_icsFiles/afidfile/2015/11/05/peace\\_security\\_20151102\\_1.pdf](http://japan.kantei.go.jp/97_abe/Documents/2015/___icsFiles/afidfile/2015/11/05/peace_security_20151102_1.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 6, emphasis added.

interpretation of the constitution stating that the self-defense allowed by Article 9 consists of both self-defense and collective self-defense.

With respect to the right to collective self-defense as a security policy, the issue is not very straightforward. First, the domestic opposition's argument that Abe's legislation is a "warmaking" law is misplaced, as are South Korean concerns about Japan's military "expansion." After all, the right to collective self-defense is a legitimate one possessed by all sovereign states in the world, which is justified by Article 51 of the UN Charter.<sup>10</sup> In fact, most of the advanced democracies, including the United States and European countries, have expressed their support for the new legislation in general and for Japan exercising the right to collective self-defense in particular.

These objections are even more misplaced because the revised interpretation in the new law allows Japan to exercise at most only 50% of what is justified by the UN Charter—i.e., it applies only in situations where Japan's survival is directly threatened. In other words, the new legislation would not allow Japan to engage in military operations with the United States and other nations with which it has friendly relations if the case has no direct bearing on Japan's security.

Regarding a Korean Peninsula contingency, however, such an event would clearly be interpreted as a threat to Japan's survival. With this new legislation, therefore, Japan would be able to legally fight side by side with the United States and South Korea in the unwanted event of a military conflict on the peninsula. In reality, however, it is hard to imagine that military cooperation involving Japan's actual use of force would be realized even between Japan and the United States, let alone between Japan and South Korea or trilaterally.

It should be clear, therefore, that traditional security cooperation in a trilateral context—one that would involve the actual use of force by the Japan Self-Defense Forces—while now possible legally, will not happen in the foreseeable future. It is important, however, to recognize that in an actual crisis scenario this is an option that exists if indeed South Korea wants assistance.

Against this background, trilateral cooperation involving category two of the new security legislation—situations of important influence—is more urgent and should be given more attention. Examples would include logistical support by the Japan Self-Defense Forces for U.S. and South Korean forces, such as through provision of food, fuel, and communication equipment during actual combat. The United States and Japan have started to revise the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) on the basis of the new security legislation. Yet involving South Korea in this arrangement—though logical and rational from an operational perspective in the event of an emergency on the Korean Peninsula—seems politically unrealistic for the foreseeable future.

## Middle-Power Security Cooperation between Japan and South Korea

Category three of Japan's new security legislation concerns international peace cooperation activities, such as UN peacekeeping operations. In this area, too, the new legislation expands the scope of Japanese activities and the range of cooperation with foreign countries engaging in

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<sup>10</sup> Article 51 of the UN Charter states that "nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defense if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations, until the Security Council has taken measures necessary to maintain international peace and security. Measures taken by Members in the exercise of this right of self-defense shall be immediately reported to the Security Council and shall not in any way affect the authority and responsibility of the Security Council under the present Charter to take at any time such action as it deems necessary in order to maintain or restore international peace and security." The full text of the UN Charter is available at <http://www.un.org/en/charter-united-nations/index.html>.

the same missions. This includes possible cooperation between Japan and South Korea, which would make a tremendous contribution to international peace cooperation as well as help build a substantial security relationship between the two countries. In essence, Japan has come closer to the international standard accepted and implemented by “normal” actors engaging in nontraditional security cooperation, such as Canada, Australia, and South Korea. Japan-ROK cooperation in this domain, therefore, could be termed as typical middle-power cooperation for sustaining international peace.

Here, the term “middle power” does not describe the size of a nation. It is a strategic concept, implying a particular style of diplomacy or a characteristic of a national strategy backed by a commitment to the liberal international order. As such, a middle-power country does not have the option of directly and unilaterally engaging in the balance-of-power game among great powers. Instead, its strengths are exerted most effectively in the middle ground between great powers, primarily in the domain of nontraditional and soft security through mutual cooperation among middle powers.<sup>11</sup>

Due to the importance of vested interests in the post-World War II liberal international order, as well as the magnitude of uncertainties associated with the rise of China, the choice for Japan and South Korea has been and is likely to remain for the foreseeable future to maintain strong security relationships with the United States. Both countries, however, share interests in not destabilizing bilateral relations with China for two fundamental reasons.

First, a major strategic clash between the United States and China, if it were to actually happen, would deprive the regional middle-power countries of the freedom of decision-making and action. In such an event, the choice for both Japan and South Korea would be nothing other than working closely with the United States as their ally. Second, there are many issues and areas where cooperation with China is important for the national interests of middle powers as well as for regional stability. These include maintaining a prosperous economic order through stable economic relations with China and the country’s involvement in regional institutions for trade, investment, financial, and other functional cooperation.

Japan has had an image problem, particularly in Northeast Asia if not elsewhere, which has prevented many observers from focusing on and appreciating the real strengths of its de facto middle-power national strategy. In fact, Japan has been using its financial and diplomatic resources in many of the typical areas of middle-power strategy. These include participation in various activities of the United Nations and other global institutions in promoting nuclear and conventional nonproliferation, economic governance, social welfare and education, poverty reduction, and more recently human security.

In reality, Japan and South Korea are natural partners that both engage in a middle-power strategy. The two countries face common challenges and opportunities presented by the rise of China and its impact on the future of the regional order in East Asia. In coping with these challenges, it is critical that both states share an assessment of the impacts associated with a rising China. Given that no middle power can play a meaningful role alone, cooperation is an absolute necessity here. Objectively and logically speaking, there is no more natural partner for South Korea than Japan, and vice versa.

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<sup>11</sup> The discussion here draws on Yoshihide Soeya and Geun Lee, “The Middle-Power Challenge in East Asia: An Opportunity for Co-operation between South Korea and Japan,” *Global Asia* 9, no. 2 (2014): 84–91, <https://www.globalasia.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/570.pdf>.

In the domain of regional security, nontraditional security cooperation among middle powers is a natural first step. The Japan-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation, signed in March 2007, is an embodiment of such cooperation between middle powers.<sup>12</sup> South Korea and Australia also signed a similar but much more comprehensive agreement in 2009, titled the Joint Statement on Enhanced Global and Security Cooperation between Australia and the Republic of Korea.<sup>13</sup> Tokyo and Seoul attempted to reach a comparable agreement toward the end of the Lee Myung-bak government, with the two sides making progress on the bilateral ACSA and completing the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA). The latter agreement, however, has not been signed yet due to domestic opposition in South Korea.

## Conclusion

The strategic clash between the United States and China has the potential to deprive both Japan and South Korea of freedom of decision-making and action. The two countries face the complex task of managing their security relations with the United States amid a power shift between the United States and China. Under these circumstances, the common denominator for the national strategies and interests of Japan and South Korea is to maintain and strengthen the liberal international order through middle-power cooperation, sustained by their alliance relationships with the United States as its backbone. In the short to medium term, this is both countries' survival strategy as China rises, and in the long run this strategy should solidify the common ground on which both nations coexist with a strong (or, to the contrary, disorderly) China.

In the foreseeable future, China is sure to regard such security cooperation between Japan and South Korea as directed against it. Tokyo and Seoul should be persistent in their efforts to ease Beijing's concerns through extensive dialogue and concrete action. They should also consult closely regarding their assessment of the evolving security and political situation and attempt to fill the gaps in their approaches toward China as well as the United States. To this end, it is urgent that Japan and South Korea resume shuttle summit meetings on a regular basis, which would prompt close cooperation at the administrative level.

A natural first step to take is to resume talks on and sign the GSOMIA and advance negotiations on the bilateral ACSA. While the GSOMIA is important in the context of dealing with North Korea, the ACSA could be a useful tool to realize Japan-ROK cooperation in the domain of nontraditional security, such as peacekeeping operations, disaster relief, capacity building, and human security. If Japan and South Korea succeed in negotiating the bilateral ACSA, trilateralizing ACSA relations among Japan, South Korea, and Australia should not be impossible. Then, it would even make sense to invite China to participate in this framework, which should help facilitate confidence building.

Although the position of Japan and South Korea in advancing such cooperation is conceptually neutral vis-à-vis China and the United States, the United States should not take such neutrality as anti-U.S. or detrimental to U.S. interests. To the contrary, the United States' robust alliance relationships with both Japan and South Korea are the foundation of security

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<sup>12</sup> "Japan-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), March 13, 2007, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/australia/joint0703.html>.

<sup>13</sup> "Joint Statement on Enhanced Global and Security Cooperation between Australia and the Republic of Korea," Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia), March 5, 2009, <http://dfat.gov.au/trade/agreements/kafta/news/Pages/joint-statement-on-enhanced-global-and-security-cooperation-between-australia-and-the-republic-of-korea.aspx>.

cooperation between the latter two countries. Here, the role of these alliances is not to encircle China but to sustain a stable regional order—one in which Japan and South Korea can engage in serious efforts to facilitate constructive cooperation and create a robust regional infrastructure through their own initiatives.







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