

2014
Vol. 25

JOINT U.S.-KOREA ACADEMIC STUDIES

ASIA'S SLIPPERY SLOPE: TRIANGULAR
TENSIONS, IDENTITY GAPS,
CONFLICTING REGIONALISM, AND
DIPLOMATIC IMPASSE TOWARD
NORTH KOREA

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2014 | VOLUME 25

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SOUTH KOREA'S TRIANGULAR RELATIONS

Japan-South Korea-U.S. Relations

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In November 2011, the Obama administration announced that the United States would be “pivoting” towards the Asia-Pacific and away from the Middle East, expanding its already significant role in the region. Underlying this “rebalancing” is President Obama’s belief that U.S. strategy and priorities needed to be adjusted to take account of the fact that Asia is now the center of gravity for national security and economic interests. The United States, he believes, needs to do more to safeguard U.S. interests in this vital region by reassuring allies, keeping trade flowing, deterring North Korea, keeping China in check as it acts in an increasingly assertive fashion in the South China and East China Seas, and addressing myriad lesser threats from piracy to terrorism.¹

As the Obama administration tried to implement this “pivot to Asia,” it hit a snag. To succeed, it must have the cooperation of South Korea and Japan, America’s two closest allies in Northeast Asia, but since the announcement of the “pivot,” their relationship has soured considerably, making it difficult to present a united front in dealing with an increasingly assertive China and an erratic and belligerent North Korea. Since coming to office in February 2013, President Park Geun-hye has yet to hold a bilateral summit with her counterpart, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo. While going so far as to say that she would be willing to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, Park said that holding a summit with Abe is “pointless” if “Japan continues to stick to the same historical perceptions and repeat its past comments” and without a formal apology from Japan for wartime “wrongdoings.”² President Obama was only able to bring the two leaders together for the first time on the sidelines of the Nuclear Security Summit at The Hague in late March 2014. Abe, for his part, caused predictable consternation in Seoul in late December 2013 with his visit to the Yasukuni Shrine, which honors Japan’s war-dead, including 14 convicted Class A war criminals from World War II—in part because he believes Park has shown little interest in rapprochement. Then on January 28, 2014, the Abe government announced that it will revise existing middle and high school teaching guidelines to refer to the disputed islets with South Korea (and China) as “integral territories of Japan,” further angering them.³ In both cases, Abe likely figured he has nothing to lose by catering to his right-wing supporters and doing what he has wanted to do all along since the relationship was not improving in any case.

This chapter begins by examining the major factors responsible for the downward trajectory of South Korea-Japanese relations, then looks at factors that should bring the two powers together, and finally concludes with some suggestions for how the United States can bring its two allies into closer alignment as part of a tripartite security relationship. At a time of strained budgets in Washington, this is one of the most important issues it can tackle to enhance security and prosperity in East Asia.

MAJOR ISSUES IN KOREAN-JAPANESE RELATIONS

The factors exacerbating Seoul-Tokyo relations are many, including the following.

The comfort women, a Korean grievance, dates to the last part of Japan’s colonization of Korea when it was embroiled in World War II. The abuse of sex slaves from occupied countries, including Korea, China, the Philippines, and the Dutch East Indies, has proved to be a painful memory for South Koreans, not least because it was repressed for nearly half a century. Only in 1990 did the first South Korean women lift the “veil of shame” they had

drawn over Japan's forcible recruitment of as many as 200,000 young women and girls to serve in military brothels.⁴

The Koreans have been demanding a "sincere apology," compensation for these comfort women, and for the Japanese government to accept legal responsibility for its historical conduct. Comfort women and their advocates maintain that they did not benefit from the grants South Korea received from the 1965 normalization between Seoul and Tokyo and that the government of Park Chung-hee (father of the current president) did not represent them when he accepted Japanese "reparations" at the time. Moreover, the South Koreans believe that the Japanese government is evading its legal responsibility. While it helped to create the now-defunct Asian Women's Fund (established in 1995 and dissolved in 2007) to express "a sense of national atonement from the Japanese people to former 'comfort women,'" they point out that AWF was nominally a non-governmental organization and, therefore, did not represent an official state redress of their grievances.⁵

For its part, the Japanese government has steadfastly maintained that the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty signed between Washington and Tokyo and the 1965 normalization have settled all postwar claims of compensation. Tokyo also maintains that it has both acknowledged and apologized numerous times for its various crimes during WWII, including its role regarding comfort women. Among these, the Kono Statement issued by Chief Cabinet Secretary Kono Yohei in 1993 made a formal apology endorsed by the Japanese government to the comfort women and others affected by the war.⁶ The Japanese want to know, in essence: "How much longer and how many times more should we apologize?" A July 2013 Pew poll shows "apology fatigue"; a strong majority of Japanese (63 percent) thought Tokyo has sufficiently apologized for its military actions in the 1930s and 1940s and no further apology is needed.⁷ A number of Japanese, mostly from the right wing of the ruling LDP, cannot resist fanning the flames by claiming either that comfort women were "necessary" or, more frequently, that their condition was not "as bad" as critics claim.⁸ This is further enflamed when some call for a revision of the Kono Statement, however unlikely that is, and when the government protests against statues that are springing up in the United States and South Korea in honor of the victims.

The controversy has grown since Abe came into office in February 2013 in part because as prime minister in 2006-2007 he argued that there was no evidence that any of the comfort women had been coerced into prostitution.⁹ Abe voiced doubts about the validity of the Kono Statement and even went as far as to periodically suggest that his government might consider revising it, although in March 2014 he did finally announce that his administration would not revise this landmark apology made to comfort women. From the South Korean perspective, time is running out. Just 56 of the 239 women who publicly acknowledged their experiences as comfort women are still alive, and many are in their late eighties.¹⁰ South Korean public interest in the fate of the comfort women has surged since the Constitutional Court ruling on August 20, 2011, which held that inaction on the part of the South Korean government was unconstitutional. It held that the government was obliged to be more diplomatically active on behalf of the victims to secure an apology and compensation, and that its failure to seek a solution with Japan "constitutes infringement on the basic human rights of the victims and violation of the Constitution."¹¹ In the United States, too, the issue of comfort women has

gained visibility because of the efforts of Korean-American activist groups. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton instructed the State Department to refer to them as “sex slaves,” rather than the euphemistic term “comfort women,” to Japan’s dismay.¹²

Yasukuni Shrine, a symbol of historical revisionism, which Abe visited in December 2013, sparks fear in South Korea that Japan is pursuing an aggressive, “right-wing” agenda. Abe’s visit predictably ignited a firestorm of condemnation from South Korea (as well as China) and even a rare admonition from the United States. South Koreans argue that such actions demonstrate a lack of Japanese remorse for imperial-era aggression and are proof that Japan has not completely rid itself of its militarist tendencies. The controversy over the Shrine first surfaced when Emperor Hirohito refused to visit it from 1978 until his death in 1989,¹³ following the internment of 14 Class A war criminals nearly two decades after the first Class B and C war criminals were included.¹⁴ Since the 1978 decision, no Japanese emperor has visited Yasukuni, but prime ministers Nakasone Yasuhiro, Hashimoto Ryutaro, and Koizumi Junichiro preceded Abe in doing so. The leaders of the Democratic Party of Japan refrained from visiting the Shrine while in power. Abe and others defend their visits, saying that it is a national religious institution, which honors the dead of previous wars, not just war criminals or others who died in WWII. They thus claim that the visits are meant to pay their respects to the souls who have died in the service of Japan through history, not to honor war criminals.¹⁵

South Koreans note, however, that Yasukuni is not just a memorial. It also contains a museum visited by thousands of Japanese school children every year, which presents Japan’s 20th century wars in a nationalistic, if not outright xenophobic, manner. The museum glorifies kamikaze pilots but plays down the fact that Japan began the war with China and with the United States (which is blamed for provoking the attack on Pearl Harbor), and it does not give any but the most oblique attention to the atrocities committed by Japan, including the Rape of Nanking. Yasukuni visits are thus a potent reminder to the South Koreans that the Japanese government consistently fails to fully acknowledge its atrocities and its failure to educate its young people about those crimes.

The territorial dispute over two tiny rocky islets in the Sea of Japan (East Sea), known as Dokdo in Korea (“solitary islands”) and Takeshima (“bamboo islands”) in Japan, arises from Korean claims that it was the first to discover the islets and displayed acts of sovereignty in administering them as an appendage of Ulleungdo, a bigger neighboring island, and that it was unable to protest Japan’s annexation of them in 1905 as part of its conquest of Korea. The crux of Japan’s argument is that the San Francisco Peace Treaty, which outlined how Japan’s colonial empire was to be dismantled¹⁶ and forced Japan to recognize Korea’s independence and renounce all right, title and claim to Korea, did not require Japan to renounce its claim to the islets. Thus, it is still the legal ruler. But shortly after the treaty was signed, on January 18, 1952, South Korea declared its sovereignty by setting up the “Rhee Line,” which essentially retained the “MacArthur Line” (the boundary MacArthur established after WWII that remained in the San Francisco Treaty), which included the waters surrounding the rocks.¹⁷ The Japanese government protested, claiming that this was a unilateral act in contravention of international law, but the rocks have been under de facto South Korean control ever since. South Korea was not a party to the 1951 treaty; so it does not necessarily feel bound by all of its terms.¹⁸

Control does have potentially significant economic implications. Both countries believe that the surrounding area is one of their most fertile fishing grounds and that gas reserves of unknown size may lie nearby. In November 1998, South Korea and Japan renewed a 1965 treaty that set a provisional fishing zone around the islands. Under the agreement, fishing boats from Japan and South Korea were allowed to operate in each other's 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone if they obtained permits, with fishing quotas and conditions for such operations to be determined by the two countries every year.¹⁹ This agreement laid the foundation for a subsequent 2002 fisheries accord in which each state agreed to lower its catch quota in order to preserve depleted fish stocks around the islets.

A major diplomatic crisis ensued in 2005 after Japan's Shimane prefectural government declared February 22 to be Takeshima Day. Competing claims began to escalate. In 2006, in one of the worst incidents, Korea dispatched 20 gunboats and threatened to use force to prevent Japanese maritime survey ships from approaching the islands.²⁰ As the two sides edged toward confrontation, rhetoric escalated and nationalist public opinion was mobilized, particularly in South Korea. Last-minute diplomatic efforts—with quiet, behind-the-scenes U.S. support—resulted in a temporary stand-down, but the patchwork agreement was followed by a hardening of positions that does not bode well for a solution to the dispute.²¹

President Lee Myung-bak made an unprecedented trip to the islands on August 10, 2012, making him the first leader from either country to do so. The move was widely seen as an attempt to boost Lee's falling approval rating but also served to worsen ties between Tokyo and Seoul. Provocations continue on both sides. Most recently, on January 28, 2014, Tokyo announced a revision to the state teaching guidelines for middle- and high-school textbooks, which instructs teachers to describe the contested island as an “integral” part of Japanese territory.²²

Constitutional revision and Japan's military capabilities, for Koreans, are exacerbating conditions as Japan attempts to increase its armed forces and expand its freedom to deploy them. Constitutional change has been at the forefront of political debate since Abe and the LDP regained power. Citing growing security risks in Asia and the lack of a right to collective self-defense as inhibiting Japan's status as a “normal country,” Abe calls revising the constitution his “historic mission.”²³ He plans to start by revising Article 96, which stipulates that a two-thirds vote in the Diet and a public referendum is required for constitutional change, and replace it with a provision that would require just a simple majority for amendments. Abe next wants to alter Article 9, the renunciation-of-war clause imposed upon Japan following WWII, which states: “Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes.” Further, it stipulates that “land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained.”²⁴ Abe's goal is to rewrite Article 9 by stating that Japan refrains from the use of force to settle international disputes, rather than prohibiting the maintenance of a military force. He wants to create a full-fledged military, or National Defense Force (as opposed to today's Self-Defense Force), with the right to launch pre-emptive military strikes and to engage in “collective self-defense” to aid the militaries of its allies, including the United States. These changes are justified on the basis of changing regional security dynamics, including China's military build-up and the ongoing standoff with China over the sovereignty of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and threats

from North Korea including missile launches. Abe and others argue Japan cannot fulfill its obligations under collective security agreements and within the United Nations without a “normal” military force.

Changing the Constitution remains a highly divisive issue in Japan and could take years. Changing Article 9 is particularly difficult. It has become a deeply embedded part of Japan’s own national identity. More than a legal statement, it is a statement of Japanese values and culture as they have developed since 1945. To many Japanese, it is a source of pride that theirs is the one country to renounce war. Abe’s critics argue that “changing the amendment conditions is an act of defiance against a state founded on a Constitution.”²⁵ A majority of Japanese (56 percent) oppose changing the Constitution, although opposition has declined by 11 percent since 2006, when some 67 percent were against it.²⁶ Given the current pushback from opposition parties, peace groups, and the media, Abe for now is treading cautiously and focusing on a drive to reinterpret the current language first, asserting the right to exercise collective self-defense, rather than seeking outright revision.

Abe’s strongest argument is that there is already a considerable gulf between the reality of Japan’s defense posture and any reasonable reading of Article 9. Military spending is already the fifth largest in the world at \$46.9 billion,²⁷ it has the most sophisticated navy in Asia (after the U.S. Navy), and it is in the process of developing a sophisticated, two-tiered ballistic missile defense (BMD) program. Moreover, Japan has sent its forces to Iraq and on refueling missions in the Indian Ocean in support of the Afghanistan war, in addition to contributing to official UN peacekeeping operations.²⁸ Abe can argue that leaving Article 9 unchanged, even as Japan expands its military missions and capabilities, is hypocritical and counter-productive because the Constitution is being undermined.

While the United States sides with South Korea on the issue of comfort women and the Yasukuni Shrine and stays strictly neutral on territorial disputes, it is in Abe’s corner on constitutional revisionism. Having Japan play a more active role in collective security will decrease the burden on the United States, which is dealing with rising debt and a falling defense budget. But Korea is clearly wary of Japanese ambitions, and fears, rather improbably, that constitutional revision symbolizes a return to militarism and aggression. Recent polling data from the Asan Institute suggests that 62 percent of Koreans view Japan as a credible military threat.²⁹ When respondents were asked to rank Japan on a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being most favorable), they gave an average score of 2.7. For North Korea, the equivalent figures were 70 percent and 2.4, which suggests that South Koreans view the Stalinist dictatorship as only slightly more menacing than their democratic neighbor.³⁰ A separate Pew Research Poll in July 2013 found that 77 percent of South Koreans had an unfavorable view of Japan. Favorable views have declined by 25 points since 2008.³¹

The impact of personalities, namely those of Park and Abe, is contributing to the strain in relations. Park Geun-hye has a particular burden to avoid appearing too favorable towards Japan, given her father’s past as an officer in Japan’s army, fluent in Japanese, who later signed the treaty to normalize relations. While it helped in rapid economic development, most South Koreans still feel it failed to properly address suffering imposed by Japan’s occupation. Park’s domestic political foes brand her father as “pro-Japan,” a powerful stigma for South Korean politicians. As a result, Park is under domestic pressure to walk a fine line,

not appearing too close to Japan while maintaining effective cooperation. Park also has a history as an advocate for comfort women seeking restitution from Japan and therefore is particularly offended by Abe's stance on this issue.

Abe's outspoken nationalist views do not bode well for improved relations. His comments and actions on controversial historical issues suggest that he has personally embraced a revisionist view, which denies that the crux of Japan's empire was oppression and victimization of its neighbors. He has been tied to groups such as Nippon kaigi kyokai which argue that Japan should be applauded for liberating much of East Asia from Western colonial powers, the Tokyo War Crimes tribunal was illegitimate, and the killings by Japanese troops during the Rape of Nanking were either exaggerated or fabricated.³²

During his first term in office, Abe backtracked on his most controversial statements that upset South Korea, but in April 2013, he made comments to the Diet that suggested that his government would not reaffirm the apology for Japan's wartime actions issued by Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi in 1995, which is regarded as Japan's most significant official apology for wartime acts. He added that the definition of "aggression" has yet to be "firmly determined" by academics or the international community.³³

IS THERE HOPE FOR IMPROVED RELATIONS?

This summary of issues that divide Tokyo and Seoul might suggest that there is no hope for an improvement in relations. That would be an unduly pessimistic conclusion. There are reasons to be more optimistic about the prospects for cooperating more closely, given the right conditions—especially the right push from their common ally, the United States.

Public Perceptions are in Constant Flux

In 2010, South Koreans viewed Japan almost as favorably as China, South Korea's largest trading partner.³⁴ Less than four years later, Japan is viewed almost as unfavorably as North Korea. While this is a reflection of how toxic relations have become, it is also a sign of how public attitudes can change. In the 1990s, Korea-Japan relations appeared to be trending up after the Kono Statement and the Murayama apology. Monuments and museums were built in Japan to commemorate the victims of WWII and more wartime atrocities were addressed in Japanese textbooks.³⁵ In 1998, when President Kim Dae-jung came into the office and initiated his "Sunshine Policy" towards North Korea, seeking reconciliation through engagement, he employed a similar strategy of active engagement in his dealings with Japan. During an official visit to Japan in 1998 he and Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo declared their intent to improve South Korean-Japanese relations through "political, security, economic and cultural exchanges."³⁶ This led to increased collaboration on regional security matters relating to North Korea and dialogue between the two nations' militaries.³⁷

Increased cultural contact positively affected mutual public perceptions. A Korean ban on Japanese cultural imports (such as songs and movies) enacted after 1945 was lifted and, in 2002, Japan and South Korea successfully co-hosted the World Cup.³⁸ Imports of Japanese products, including cars and electronic goods, surged 82.9 percent from 2002 to 2008. The percentage of Japanese who said they "liked" Korea reached 63.1 percent in 2009, the highest total since the survey began in 1978.³⁹ Japanese consumers became

fascinated by Korean singers and TV and movie stars as part of a “Korean wave,” or *hallyu*, of pop culture. An increasing number of tourists have followed on the heels of these cultural exchanges, reaching 4.84 million in 2007.⁴⁰ In 2012, 3.5 million Japanese accounted for the largest group of foreigners to visit South Korea.⁴¹

This indicates that cooperative Korea-Japan relations are possible given the right conditions. There were motivating factors for both sides to come together for the Obuchi-Kim declaration in 1998. A year earlier Japan faced a security crisis due to North Korea’s test firing of a missile over the Japanese mainland. Meanwhile Kim Dae-jung came into office with South Korea still reeling from the IMF financial crisis in 1997 and saw Japan as a potential source of assistance.⁴² The current low in relations could yield to another period of increased cooperation in response to the right security or economic incentives.

The North Korean Threat

Since the mid-1990s, growing South Korean and Japanese concerns over the North Korean military threat have triggered tentative moves to improve bilateral relations and military cooperation. This effort assumed greater urgency after Pyongyang’s dangerous provocations during 2010-2013: sinking the South Korean corvette Cheonan, killing all 46 seamen; shelling the island of Yeonpyeong, killing four people; testing a third nuclear device; launching short-range missiles; and threatening a war against Seoul and Washington. Japan clearly shares Seoul’s concerns about these actions. Not only have North Korean missiles flown through Japanese airspace, it has admitted abducting Japanese citizens, and it has regularly threatened Japan. One South Korean official explained, “As North Korea raises its threat of provocation, a consensus has formed that there needs to be closer military cooperation among [South Korea, Japan, and the United States].”⁴³ Another commented that the need for South Korea and Japan to share military intelligence “became clear each time North Korea tested a nuclear weapon or launched a long-range missile, but the lack of an accord made that impossible.”⁴⁴

The China Factor

China is another potentially common security concern, although the threat perceptions are quite different in Tokyo and Seoul. Tokyo’s immediate concerns regarding China are its military modernization program and its actions regarding Japan’s southwestern islands. Since 2010, there has been a rapid increase in the number of Chinese vessels and aircraft that come close to, or enter, Japanese territorial waters and airspace in the East China Sea, resulting in Japanese and Chinese patrol ships in almost daily contact in waters surrounding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. China has been developing new gas fields in the area near Japan’s claimed median line, and various Chinese officials have been questioning Japan’s claim to sovereignty over Okinawa.

South Korean-Chinese relations are generally good, but there is anxiety in South Korea about the rise of China, fostered by China’s claim to the ancient Korean kingdom of Koguryo (covering parts of the northern and central Korean Peninsula), Chinese fishermen’s illegal fishing in South Korean waters, Beijing’s support for North Korea, and territorial disputes over a submerged rock in the East China Sea known as Ieodo to Koreans and Suyan Rock to the Chinese. When China recently declared an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) that

included Jeodo, it drew a negative response from Seoul,⁴⁵ which extended its own ADIZ to include the disputed territory. South Korean perceptions of China have suffered: In a July 2013 Pew poll, 78 percent of South Koreans had a favorable view of the United States while just 46 percent had a favorable view of China.⁴⁶

Military Cooperation

In response primarily to the threat posed by North Korea, but also to some extent because of the looming challenge from China, Seoul and Tokyo have taken preliminary steps to exchange observers during military exercises and allow participation by the other power in what had been bilateral training events with the United States. In June 2012, Seoul and Tokyo were on the verge of signing a bilateral military agreement known as the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) to improve joint security capabilities, but less than an hour before the ceremony, Seoul canceled due to flaring public criticism and legislative backlash. This would have been the first military pact between Seoul and Tokyo since the end of Japanese occupation and would have provided a legal framework for the exchange and protection of classified information about North Korea's nuclear and missile programs, potential military incursions, and terrorist or cyber attacks, and also about China's rising military power.⁴⁷ The agreement would have provided South Korea with access to information collected by Japan's high-tech intelligence satellites, AEGIS ships, and early-warning and anti-submarine aircraft.

Despite the failure to conclude GSOMIA and current souring of the relationship, the Park administration is well aware that improving military cooperation with Japan is beneficial because it enhances South Korean security. Japan also provides a critical base of support for U.S. forces which would defend South Korea during a conflict with Pyongyang. Seven U.S. bases in Japan are designated as part of the United Nations Command Rear and would serve as a staging area during a Korean crisis. Japan would also likely be a key economic contributor to Korean unification, including aid, food and medicine, and even civilian and medical personnel. Japan could also offer development assistance and aid.

Economic Ties

The close economic relationship between Seoul and Tokyo is another strong force for stability despite flare-ups over historical and territorial disputes. They are the two most mature market economies in East Asia. Japan is Korea's third largest trading partner after China and the United States, while Korea is Japan's third largest export destination. South Korea continues to rely on Japanese FDI because Japan's niche technologies are needed to complete many Korean consumer products for export. Between 1962 and 2011, Japan was Korea's second largest FDI provider, with \$28.2 billion or 15.1 percent of total FDI.⁴⁸ Japan's FDI in South Korea more than doubled from 2011 to 2012 to hit \$4.54 billion, which is more than the \$4.01 billion that Korea received from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Malaysia combined.

Both countries suffered from the 2008 financial crisis, and the Japanese economy has been further hurt by the great earthquake that struck eastern Japan in March 2011. These developments brought new momentum to map out a coordination strategy through enhanced cross-border FDI. Since the earthquake, Japan has been looking to relocate some domestic

parts and component factories to earthquake-free destinations. Korea proved to be ideal, with only a few hours of delivery time separating the two locations, and, while South Korean firms pay high wages, its workers also have high productivity.

The 2008 crisis changed Japanese views of the Korean economy. Japanese once viewed South Korea as a “cormorant economy”—a term coined by Japanese economist Komuro Naoki to indicate that, although Korea exports finished products, it loses much of its profits by buying parts and materials from Japan.⁴⁹ This view became untenable after South Korea recovered faster than Japan from the downturn. Economic disparities between the two countries have also dramatically diminished as Korea has pushed forward. GNI per capita in Japan was 8.4 times that of South Korea in 1973; by 2012, the lead had shrunk to 1.8 times. Korean electronics manufacturers Samsung and LG have overtaken Japanese rivals such as Sony and Panasonic in manufacturing smart phones and high-definition TVs. Japan’s newfound respect was evident during the 2008 crisis when the two cooperated as near equals to implement an aggressive economic stimulus plan and currency swap agreement.

LOOKING FORWARD: THE FUTURE OF THE JAPAN-SOUTH KOREA-U.S. STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIP

The Obama administration is making a renewed effort to reaffirm its desire to enhance security and economic ties in the Asia Pacific region. President Obama visited Asia in late April, including Tokyo and Seoul, with the principle objective of demonstrating his commitment to “rebalance” from the Middle East to East Asia. But for Washington’s strategy to work, stronger bilateral ties between Seoul and Tokyo and a more robust triangular security structure are needed in light of growing North Korean and Chinese security threats to the region and the declining budget of the U.S. armed forces. Enhanced cooperation between Seoul and Tokyo can increase America’s capacity to deal with regional threats by redistributing military roles and responsibilities among its most capable allies. History and other contentious issues, however, make a truly triangular relationship difficult to achieve. The South Korea-Japan leg of the relationship is not solid; sometimes it is practically nonexistent. It is imperative that Washington does more to try to bring its close Asian allies together. It can start by facilitating contact and reconciliation on smaller and less contentious issues of mutual concern, as it did when it convened a trilateral meeting at The Hague in March, coupled with “track two” initiatives involving knowledgeable former U.S. policymakers and experts in South Korea-Japan relations. If these initiatives bear fruit, they could lead to a broader reconciliation effort. The priority should be to encourage the involvement of both Seoul and Tokyo in multilateral security structures, and for them to develop joint strategies for addressing common threats and objectives in areas such as maritime security, missile defense, anti-submarine warfare (ASW) and mine warfare, and ODA.

In the maritime sphere, South Korea and Japan should build on the Defense Trilateral Talks that have been held annually since 2008.⁵⁰ Trilateral naval drills, held most recently in October 2013, should be intensified.⁵¹ Parallel involvement should be expanded to other

exercises as well, particularly those relating to maritime and air-defense contingencies, with U.S. forces based in Japan and South Korea included as appropriate.

Missile defense offers a particularly fruitful area for cooperation: the United States should encourage South Korea to engage in trilateral missile defense cooperation exercises in order to implement a multilayered regional missile defense network that includes both South Korea and Japan. An inability to defend against missile launchings leaves South Korea and Japan vulnerable to attack and more susceptible to North Korean threats. The United States has tried to develop common missile defense infrastructure to guard the region against missile attacks from North Korean and Chinese launch sites but has achieved only mixed results. By linking U.S., South Korean, and Japanese sensors, the allies could better deter and, if needed, defeat future North Korean missile attacks, while protecting vital U.S. military capabilities based in Japan or Guam, and minimizing the risk that a North Korea provocation could lead to an all-out conflict.

To make such cooperation possible, Washington should privately urge continued progress toward implementing the scrapped military agreement, GSOMIA, and logistics-sharing agreements. This will require deft public diplomacy from the Park government to convince the South Korean public and legislature of the mutual benefits of the accords. The three countries should also emphasize trilateral cooperation in ASW and mine warfare. As South Korean Vice Admiral Jung Ho-sub noted, “The problem is that the ROK Navy alone cannot deal with a North Korean submarine threat . . . It does not have sufficient intelligence on when and where North Korean submarines might infiltrate. It also has limited ASW assets for the protection of SLOCs (Sea Lines of Communication) around the major harbors and the vital waters near the Korean Strait. Also, an insufficient number of US naval assets are permanently stationed around South Korea’s vital sea-lanes.”⁵² Japan could help fill this gap with its strong ASW and mine-sweeping capabilities. The GSOMIA would enable Seoul and Tokyo to share intelligence on the North Korean submarine threat, enhancing joint exercises and cooperation. Their navies, notes Vice Admiral Jung Ho-sub, are “uniquely suited for multilateral cooperation because of their intrinsic unobtrusive nature as over-the-horizon security forces, out of public view.”⁵³ Trilateral training can occur far from the Korean Peninsula. Mine-sweeping exercises near the Strait of Hormuz and joint patrols to combat Somali pirates in the Gulf of Aden, for example, not only could serve common allied interests but also develop skills and familiarity that could be applied in a Korean crisis.

There are numerous other areas in which all three countries could cooperate, including joint peacekeeping missions, counter-terrorism, counter-proliferation, counter-narcotics, cyberspace, humanitarian assistance, and disaster operations. Beyond the military realm, they can work together in providing ODA to Southeast Asia and elsewhere. ODA has been the cornerstone of its foreign policy since Japan began allocating aid to Southeast Asian nations in 1954 and over the past half century, it has provided more than one-third of all the ODA that members of ASEAN have received.⁵⁴ Japan continues to be the largest provider of economic aid to Southeast Asia and its largest source of FDI. As a former beneficiary of development cooperation, South Korean aid is also substantial in Southeast Asia. It has maintained close economic and diplomatic relationships with ASEAN, as one

of its important trade and investment partners, but South Korea has insufficient ODA experience as a donor.⁵⁵ Well-chosen, noncompetitive aid projects could enhance mutual cooperation between Japan and Korea, either on a bilateral or multilateral basis.

The United States, Japan, and Korea should initiate trilateral security talks that build on existing trilateral foreign and defense minister talks—held with Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel several times in the past year and the July 1, 2013 foreign ministers meeting with Secretary of State John Kerry in Brunei—to exchange views on North Korea and a wide range of issues.⁵⁶ The purpose of creating such discussion forums with both foreign and defense ministers from all three countries is to encourage development of a joint strategic vision that better incorporates the missions, roles, and capabilities of their militaries as well as coordination on related diplomatic issues, especially regarding Southeast Asia and the East and South China Seas. Freedom of navigation, and opposition to arbitrary and sudden declarations of ADIZs are also issues on which the three countries share common concerns and prescriptions. Finally, a comprehensive trilateral plan should include a strategy for Korean contingencies, including aid and development contributions.

To enable these talks to bear fruit, leaders in both Tokyo and Seoul should begin by defusing tensions at home by discouraging inflammatory propaganda. Refraining from visiting Yasukuni Shrine again, Abe and other Japanese leaders should cease making insensitive remarks regarding comfort women, and stop escalating propaganda on the territorial issue. In return, Park could at a minimum exercise “quiet diplomacy,” as advocated by Gerald Curtis, on the Dokdo/Takeshima issue, since it is not in the national interest to provoke Japanese nationalism when Korea already has effective control.

In all these areas the United States could act as an honest broker, facilitating progress and tamping down tensions. If such preliminary steps prove fruitful, it could launch a more concerted diplomatic effort to try to resolve the outstanding issues between the two countries. That may sound improbable, but Kerry was until very recently engaged in an active effort to bridge the historical differences between Israelis and Palestinians—a process that has scant chance of immediate success because, in addition to everything else, Israel is a pro-Western democracy and the Palestinian territories (half ruled by Fatah, the other half by Hamas) are not. While significant differences between South Korea and Japan will not be easily resolved, the two pro-American democracies have many shared interests, and even elements of shared culture, which the Israelis and Palestinians lack. The odds of success in Japan-South Korea talks are actually higher than in Israel-Palestinian talks. Imagine if Kerry were to engage in the kind of intensive “shuttle diplomacy” between Tokyo and Seoul that Henry Kissinger employed in the 1970s to allow Israel to reach an agreement with its historic enemy, Egypt. The effort might still fail, but then again it could succeed—especially if both South Korea and Japan receive the kind of focused, high-level American attention which Israel and the Palestinian Authority currently receive.

CONCLUSION

The South Korea-Japan relationship is as troubled as any relationship in the world between mature liberal democracies, and there is plenty of historical reason why this should be so, but history does not have to be destiny. Many other nations have overcome decades, even

centuries, of tension and outright conflict to establish close working relationships. Think of France and Germany. A similar transformation will not occur anytime soon in the South Korea-Japan relationship, but there are many shared interests to bring the two neighbors together. With a little help from Washington it is quite possible, even probable, that they will be able to enhance cooperation with each other and with the United States in ways that will make Northeast Asia more secure.

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