



Japanese National Identity and the Search for Realism Toward North Korea and Russia

Gilbert Rozman

North Korea and Russia are seen as posing an increasingly dangerous military threat as we enter 2015, and the responses of other states to them are widely perceived as realist in nature, prioritizing security and setting aside other concerns. The United States, in turn, is regarded as the leader of the international community, steering the way in realist policies to forge coalitions with allies, partners, and others to diminish and counter these threats. To many observers, Japan under Abe Shinzo is rapidly turning into a realist state as well, prioritizing its alliance with the United States, strengthening defense ties with countries such as Australia and India as it seeks domestic agreement on the right of collective self-defense, and focusing on the expansion of China's military and the nuclear and missile threats of North Korea in rethinking regional security. Yet, however much one agrees that Japan is realist in relations with the United States, the puzzle remains with respect to Japan's recent policies or debates over South Korea, North Korea, and Russia. I concentrate here on the revisionist roots of Japanese policy toward North Korea and Russia, linking them to the much more widely discussed revisionism displayed to South Korea, and assess the evolving balance between realism and revisionism in conservative Japanese thinking, led by Abe, as the 70th anniversary of the end of WWII and 50th anniversary of Japan-ROK normalization of relations put the spotlight in 2015 squarely on various views of history in Northeast Asia.

While Abe is receiving considerable credit for a realist foreign policy, his actions in Northeast Asia are an exception. Policy toward South Korea is hijacked by the "comfort women" issue. Initiatives toward North Korea are centered on the "abductions" issue, and Abe's insistence on pursuing Russia is directed at the "Northern Territories" issue. In each case, a principal theme of Japan's national identity over many years has become the centerpiece in diplomacy. The result is quixotic quests for breakthroughs at the expense of sober calculations by foreign policy experts, coordination with the United States, and indications that favorable outcomes are in sight. The coexistence of as many as three postures of this sort in foreign policy toward one sub-region understandably raises the question of whether there is a common driving force. Given the tension between realism and revisionism in Abe's overall foreign policy,¹ it behooves us to look for the revisionist roots of these three specific approaches, as we reflect on Japanese debates about them. To focus on revisionist themes, however, is not to deny the important realist shift by Japan.²

Many agree that the biggest blemish in Abe's foreign policy realism has been the way he has handled South Korea. Despite the reprieve in March 2014 when Barack Obama found a way to bring Abe and Park Geun-hye together with him for a meeting, the identity gap between Japan and South Korea has not narrowed.³ Indeed, Japan has become obsessed with revising the verdicts on the "comfort women" issue, allowing a revisionist theme to trump any steps to increase trust with a country many consider critical for the defense of Japan. Less attention has been paid to the non-realist factors behind Abe's approaches to North Korea and Russia, which are not in the forefront—in contrast to the debates over South Korea—but do play an important role and are arousing distrust in other countries.

Northeast Asia is plagued by a spike in national identities trumping realist compromises in foreign policy and by a lack of consensus on how to manage North Korea and proceed toward reunification on the peninsula, which is also primarily caused by national identity gaps. What requires more systematic explanation is how the national identity in Japan is affecting its approach to the fundamental regional concerns of Korean reunification and

Northeast Asian regional cooperation and security, involving Russia and China. In 2014, to the dismay of South Koreans and the puzzlement of Americans, Abe set aside triangular coordination to launch negotiations with Kim Jong-un's regime at the expense of relaxing some of Japan's sanctions, and he kept those talks going into 2015 despite the North's delaying tactics. Moreover, in February 2014 Abe was the most prominent ally of the United States in attendance at the Sochi Olympics, and he kept reviving his overtures to Putin through the year in spite of Putin's aggression in Ukraine and the necessity of agreeing with Obama and other G7 leaders on imposing sanctions,⁴ albeit the weakest in the group often accompanied by apologetic remarks to Russians about Japan's reluctance.

The year 1945 has different meaning for those who view it as setting the international community on the path of universal respect for human rights and those who consider it the turning point for the rise of communism in Asia in the continuing struggle against Western imperialism and hegemonic interference. Abe's obsession with revisiting the verdicts on 1945, despite his acceptance of the significance of that year in advancing a laudable agenda, has made him the principal force arousing alarm, notably among South Koreans, that Japan is more concerned about declaring its historical righteousness than in affirming the postwar era and universal values. Thus, he is muddying the waters between the polarization of national identities taking place—between Chinese and Russian ideas about history and those of the U.S.-led coalition—, obfuscating for South Koreans, most of all, the clarity of this divide. In the second half of 2014, he and conservatives of like mind put “comfort women” even more in the spotlight than earlier in his tenure as prime minister.⁵ In the first half of 2015 attention turned to how he was preparing for the 70th and 50th anniversaries, distracting attention from how Xi and Putin have been preparing and what their thinking will mean for Kim Jong-un as he recalculates his moves.

The year 2015 has special significance for national identities in Northeast Asia. North Korea is not at the margins of what promises to be a whirlwind of celebrations, official statements, and media coverage. Its importance to other states and its own invocation of national identity give it a front row seat. Vladimir Putin has made that clear by inviting Kim Jong-un to Moscow in May to join in the 70th anniversary commemorations, even if Kim at the last moment declined. Xi Jinping may have concentrated on Park Geun-hye in hopes of a joint condemnation of Japan in 2015 to reflect the timing of its defeat, but the partner that is actually credited with working closely with the Chinese Communist Party in the 1940s to defeat Japan and to expel imperialists from Northeast Asia and enable a new order to rise is North Korea. This sets the background for Japan's overtures to Kim Jong-un and Putin, resonating with historical considerations even as they also cannot escape the region's security challenges. Aware of increasing threats from North Korea and a step-up in Russian sorties near Japanese airspace, Japan cannot disregard the new level of danger from the north just as it is repositioning its forces to face China's buildup in the south. Nevertheless, its media keeps putting the spotlight on identity issues.

The realist explanation offered by some Japanese is that Japan's approach deflects the danger of a Sino-Russian alliance. Moreover, they assert that Japan's talks with North Korea do not reduce its vigilance against the North's security threat or its participation in joint defensive measures. With such arguments, they minimize the revisionist motivations behind these initiatives and reject any linkages with Japan's approach to South Korea. In

Japanese media presentations, however, the realist case often is not in the forefront. There is ample evidence to look beyond these explanations to understand Japanese reasoning.

JAPANESE REALISM VS. REVISIONISM

A closer look at anomalies in how Japanese media discussed international relations at the end of 2014 raises questions about the balance between the successes rightly claimed by realists and the actual impact of revisionism on Japanese thinking and, especially, on how the leadership and its close supporters treated bilateral relations. This can be most clearly seen in triangular relations inclusive of the United States—the indispensable partner in Japan’s realist aspirations. Whether one focuses on the triangle with South Korea, North Korea, Russia, or China—Japan’s four neighbors—the lack of balanced analysis and the prevalence of simplistic criticisms of the way the Obama administration was proceeding, cast doubt on the realist thrust of policy. Both media debates and policy rationales were tinged with national identity claims.

Japanese publications are split between the beleaguered progressive media, represented by *Asahi Shimbun*, and the energized conservative media, dominated not only by *Yomiuri Shimbun* but also by the tenacious advocacy of *Sankei Shimbun*. Articles on South Korea and themes such as the “comfort women” have increasingly overlapped between the two conservative newspapers (in 2015 as Abe prepared to visit Washington and to choose the wording for critical statements about history, *Yomiuri* took a more pragmatic turn rather than *Sankei*’s intensified confrontational stance),⁶ although on Abe’s handling of North Korea and Russia *Sankei* took a more realist stance, focusing more on responding to threats and boosting alliance coordination. For a rare realist voice, I turn to *Gaiko*, a bi-monthly journal associated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Leading international affairs experts in Japan are mostly realists, whose articles can be found there and in the daily newspapers from time to time, while most commentators are, arguably, revisionists, whose views are often presented in the *Seiron* column of *Sankei Shimbun* and in journals such as *Bungei Shunju*. Japan’s newspapers and monthly journals have since the early postwar era conducted a running battle over national identity, and it is not diminishing.

At the end of 2014 *Bungei Shunju* issued *Nihon no ronten*, its annual coverage of the burning issues facing Japan. Realism was reflected in a call to rush the new security law, due to the fact Japan is squeezed by various crises. The realist theme was also evident in an article on how to get Komeito to agree to collective self-defense. Yet, the bulk of coverage either straddled revisionism and realism or stood squarely on the side of revisionism. Straddling were articles arousing a sense of alarm without equal signs of confidence in U.S. leadership and its alliance-building activities. One pointed to the failure of Obama’s foreign policy inviting the expansion of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Another noted that the battle for hegemony on the Eurasian mainland is beginning. A third warned of the nightmare of a new cold war with China and Russia on one side in light of the empire strategy of Putin. They make the realist case that Japan faces regional crises and needs to develop its military, along with the message that the United States is falling short in its responsibilities, leaving Japan in need of more autonomy. This also conveys the message that Japan is too dependent on the United States and needs more self-defense, which fits well into realist arguments but also opens the door to revisionist ones, which demand that

the national identity of Japan and its defense be more autonomous from its ally. Another message is that China's foreign policy driven by a vision of the "China Dream" is posing more than a realist threat.

The revisionist themes are prominent in this annual book. One article insists that *Asahi Shimbun* has been discredited for its coverage of the "comfort women" and more. There is an exchange of two views, one of which asserts that visits to the Yasukuni Shrine are appropriate while the other says that they are not until the issue of Class-A war criminals is resolved. One article looks back to the roots of the Tokyo Tribunal's pursuit of war responsibility to the Versailles Conference. The overall message here and in the conservative press is: Japan has been left disgraced by the way its history of the 1930s-40s has been treated at home and abroad; a new cold war is unfolding, but unlike the earlier one, Japan has ample room to maneuver; the United States is declining and its conduct of international relations is troubled and unreliable, but a close alliance is necessary; China's national identity drives its aggression and poses the primary threat; South Korea is hopeless as an ally and not so strong that it has to be taken seriously in realist calculations. In short, Japan can have both realism and revisionism without any need to sacrifice one for the other.

Japan faces distinct history challenges in South Korea, China, and Russia, and even the United States, all rooted in its era of imperialism. In 2014 the focus was South Korea; in 2015 the main danger comes from China and, if ties between Abe and Putin weaken, Russia too as the 70th anniversary looms; as increasingly recognized in Japan, the battlefield of the future is moving to the United States, which together with the international community represents the ultimate, decisive testing grounds. In the background is the rise of "hate South Korea" in public discourse rather than a clear-headed focus on the menace from North Korea, on the attack launched on the world order from Russia, and even on the urgency of strengthening the triangular security framework with the United States and South Korea. This rhetoric distracts from strategic thinking to meet today's challenges, as seen in the three cases below.

ABE'S PURSUIT OF KIM JONG-UN

North Korea is a strategic concern, raising fundamental questions of national interest in both South Korea and Japan, the two states under the greatest threat, as it also does for China, Russia, and the United States. It is of doubtless significance for national security, the regional balance of power, and concerns about weapons of mass destruction (WMD) proliferation and international peace. Yet, another dimension in how states, among them Japan, perceive North Korea, is often overlooked: It is a national identity concern not only for fellow Koreans socialized to recall a united peninsula, which Park is reinforcing in her ongoing campaign in search of reunification, but also, to a lesser but still meaningful degree, for Japanese, and for Chinese, Russians, and even Americans.⁷ Ignoring the national identity dimension by only paying attention to security may steer diplomats and analysts along the wrong path.

To some, North Korea represents unparalleled infamy in the struggle for human dignity against totalitarian abuses of all types of individual freedom, but to others it represents historical righteousness in the struggle between communist liberation and imperialism. The United Nations Commission on Human Rights and its endorsement by the General

Assembly gave a boost to the former theme, as did President Park Geun-hye's decision to keep the North's human rights in the spotlight in contrast to President Roh Moo-hyun's willingness to marginalize discussion of human rights in pursuit of other objectives. Yet, in this year marking the 70th anniversary of the end of WWII and the 50th anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations between Japan and South Korea, we should not overlook the salience of the latter theme. After all, the historical dimension of national identity concentrating on developments from the 1940s and 1950s has been resurgent in Northeast Asia. This is true of China and Russia, where sympathy for North Korea's reasoning about history remains deeply embedded, but it also applies to Japan and South Korea, which cannot avoid considering North Korea not just through a realist lens as a security threat and a force in the regional balance of power, but also as a factor in their internal struggles to reconstruct national identity and in their intensifying competition to win support in the United States and to redefine how their region is seen.

China has led the way, even before Xi Jinping made rejuvenation of the Chinese nation the essence of the "China Dream," in looking back to a millennia of sinocentrism and an interlude of humiliation more than forward to an international or a regional community with any semblance of common values. Vladimir Putin has made a more assertive push for history at the center of national identity with themes such as Novorossiia, Crimea as inherently Russian, and the revival of the Cold War.⁸ Yet, Abe Shinzo and Park Geun-hye are obsessed with each other's historical memory, which have ramifications not only for Japan-South Korea bilateral relations, but also for how each side sees North Korea. In this broader perspective, the specific themes dividing Tokyo and Seoul, such as "comfort women" and the Yasukuni Shrine, serve as symbols of a more wide-ranging division.

North Korea represents a serious challenge to Japan, not only as the gravest military threat but also as the sole state that has not reached any kind of settlement over the conduct of Japan to 1945. It evokes triangular reasoning in the context of troubled relations between Japan and South Korea and of potential reunification. Fearing an upsurge of national identity targeting Japan in a unified Korea, Japanese are wary of unification, at least on terms that Japan does not help to dictate. This is one reason for a unilateral initiative to the North. Even a process of reconciliation could leave Japan feeling more isolated, especially because of the heightened sense of distrust over South Korean emotionalism toward Japan. The worse the relationship with Seoul, the more important is pursuit of Pyongyang. Thus, even as progress remains slow or non-existent on the "abductions" issue, the Abe administration is hesitant to abandon the talks, for example by outsourcing its policy to Seoul or to Seoul and Washington.

Another reason for pursuing North Korea and exaggerating its prospects is to foster the impression, especially at home, that Japan is a diplomatic great power, not just a marginal factor, as seemed to be the case during the Six-Party Talks. Showcasing the autonomous nature of its foreign policy on a matter of strategic importance bolsters Japan's self-confidence, which is useful for Abe's revisionist agenda at home and for separating Japanese national identity from U.S. identity or U.S.-led internationalism.⁹ The same logic applies even more to Japan's pursuit of Russia. These initiatives raise fewer doubts when couched as narrow quests for resolution of a single longstanding identity concern, such as abductions or the Northern Territories. But when evidence of a serious chance for a breakthrough on the identity concern is not forthcoming, the initiatives have a life of their own—even in the face of realist reasons to desist.

The Moscow-Pyongyang axis drew close attention in the fall of 2014 with visits to Russia from the North Korean foreign minister and then from a special messenger for Kim Jong-un. Putin invited Kim Jong-un to the 70th anniversary celebrations in May. Two new Russian projects—the Khasan-Rason railway and the Rason wharf—were ready for utilization. Russia was beginning a project to improve the railroad from a coalfield to a port in return for rare metals. For Kim, ties to Putin were seen as a way to put pressure on China, while for Putin it was regarded as a card to be used against the United States.¹⁰ South Korea and Japan were being put under pressure too. The closer relationship of Moscow and Pyongyang was seen as based on the absence of Russian concern about any military threat from the North, i.e., it was making use of the alarm elsewhere, and the North's all-out support for Russia's move into Ukraine, i.e., making use of its isolated situation.¹¹ These were countries turning to each other to reinforce their belligerent attitudes toward others born of national identities of entitlement to expanded territorial control. Their desperation created an opening that might allow others to resolve national identity concerns of their own: Japan, the Northern Territories and abductions obsessions, but also the renewal of a great power identity separate from the United States and defiant of China; and South Korea, reunification, allowing it to become a new center of Northeast Asia able to balance great powers and express its identity separate from U.S. and Chinese needs.

Blaming Obama for being weak, distracted, or insufficiently strategic serves thinking that falls short of realism in Japan. His handling of North Korea and of Russia as well as his failure to do more to pressure Seoul in its dispute with Tokyo is an excuse to deviate from realist policies sought by the Obama administration. Strategic patience may be advisable given the need for multilateralism with allies (notably Tokyo and Seoul) and partners of diverse views and the continued prospect of China cooperating on North Korea, but it fuels doubts and leaves an opening for Tokyo to disguise policies chosen for other reasons as consistent with shared realism.

ABE'S DISREGARD OF PARK

In 2012 Japanese grew alarmed about the intensification of South Korean moves on matters of national identity, including actions by Korean-Americans. The community of Korean-Americans in Virginia pushed for renaming the Japan Sea in textbooks as the East Sea or with dual names, which was viewed as connected to the intensifying struggle over Takeshima/Dokdo that President Lee Myung-bak visited in August 2012. It was part of a broader foreign public relations push to criticize Japan, including on the “comfort women” issue, visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, and history textbooks. For *Sankei Shimbun*, this meant that South Korea was joining Russia, China, and North Korea, as territorial disputes were beginning to merge. The paper faulted the DPJ government in Japan in 2012 for weakness, not resolutely protecting Japan's own national interests.¹² The attitude that Seoul was inspiring Moscow and Beijing and that the national identity struggle with Seoul is a critical test of a “normal Japan” overcoming governmental weakness set the tone for Abe's approach to follow.

Sankei Shimbun has insisted, especially in a series in August and September 2014, that a “history war” is in progress, with South Korea the principal opponent and the United States the principal battleground.¹³ Japan's government is under attack—in states, in courts, in Congress, and (less often stated directly) in the executive branch. Washington think tank

seminars are not immune from charges of abetting the war.¹⁴ This series left no doubt that the “comfort women” issue is the defining theme, that *Asahi Shimbun* and statements by the Japanese government in the first half of the 1990s contributed greatly to the distorted view of the country, which has lingered for two decades and deepened distrust of Japan in the United States. Recent articles in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* are viewed as furthering China’s goal of splitting Japan and the United States. The stakes in this war could not be any higher, readers are told. Japan’s fate hangs in the balance. The state and people must draw together and counterattack.¹⁵ The impression is left that Korean-Americans and Chinese-Americans, working with the South Korea and Chinese governments, are intensifying their unending efforts to distort Japan. They have had success in Congress made possible by the weak resistance of Japan’s ambassadors and leaders in Tokyo. For *Sankei* the war extends to issues such as the Nanjing Massacre, cruel treatment of U.S. POWs, unit 731’s biological warfare, and sex slaves, and the anti-Japan propaganda is being broadened by organizations tied to these two states.¹⁶

South Korea’s attitude toward Japan should be considered in regional context. It is deferential to China, whose support of North Korea and use of economic levers to keep other countries in check are viewed with great nervousness. It is careful also not to offend Russia, whose ties with North Korea are again suspect. Although the United States is less thick-skinned about criticism, dependence on it is greatest, and the memory of tensions under Roh Moo-hyun must make leaders circumspect. Any venting of anger against North Korea has to be kept in the context of a single nation temporarily divided, necessitating sympathy for its population. That leaves Japan as the only, ready outlet for growing frustration as dreams over two decades of Korea’s resurgence—democratically from the late 1980s as the champion of values for its region, economically from the early 1990s for replacing Japan as the dynamo that would champion Asian values and steer China’s growth, and diplomatically from the late 1990s as the leader in bringing “sunshine” to North Korea, and by extension the region—have been dashed. South Korea needs to be deferential to others despite long-shot proposals such as its Northeast Asia Peace and Security Initiative. Japan is the one country whose lack of respect for South Korean attitudes is intolerable for reasons of national identity as constructed over at least a century, especially for the past half-century since the humiliating normalization of relations serving pragmatic needs, but failing to satisfy a quest for closure to the period of Japanese imperialism. This is the narrative that permeates conservative Japanese writings on the South.

The competition in the United States with Japan over symbols of identity defies any realist explanation. It weakens the triangular alliance framework most desirable for countering North Korea’s rapid military build-up. At the same time, it damages the prospects for a united front to shape China’s rise in a less aggressive direction. By highlighting the issue of the “East Sea,” it distracts fruitlessly from a clear focus on how Japan’s revisionist identity quest interferes with a shared realist agenda. In 2014 Koreans were right to affirm, as did *Asahi Shimbun*, that discrediting one source on the “comfort women” did not alter the core of the evidence, but there is a dearth of forward-looking thinking to convince Japanese that a solution is in sight.¹⁷

South Korea and Japan have each alienated those in the other country who are most amenable to finding a forward-looking approach to their problems. Both countries have premised policies in Northeast Asia on wishful thinking with little prospect of success. In doing so,

each boosts public belief that their country is more powerful than it really is and that reliance on each other and on the United States can be less than it really needs to be. They make it seem, especially in 2014, that national identity objectives can be pursued without paying a price in realist foreign policy.

The 50th anniversary reinforces the significance of the 70th for Japan-ROK relations. As an *Asahi Shimbun* editorial noted, historical memory is the main factor stalling Japan's relations with China and South Korea. Given Abe's views, the West is confused about who is challenging the postwar international order: Is it China? Is it Japan? China and South Korea were being driven closer with further potential in the anniversary year as the historical issue flares up again. In 1995, the editorial recalls, a Sino-South Korean summit targeted Japan after some members of Japan's cabinet repeated doubtful declarations about history. While earlier leaders of Japan have repeatedly won international understanding with their apologies and remorse, the burden in 2015 again falls on Japan to pursue a far-reaching dialogue, *Asahi* added.¹⁸ This was not the prevailing view in Tokyo, given the mainstream identity discourse.

ABE'S PURSUIT OF PUTIN

As Abe has resumed his pursuit of Putin since September 2014, uncertainty long prevailed over what conditions he would require for going forward with a summit in Japan in 2015. Realists looked closely at the situation in Ukraine to make sure that Putin was honoring his commitment in Minsk to stabilize the situation in the Donbas region without contributing to further unrest. They also kept a close eye on the U.S. reaction, advising against an invitation clearly opposed by the Obama administration as a blow to the unity of the G7 in keeping pressure on Putin. There is another condition, which the Japanese media and public were watching with the most care, i.e., whether Putin was showing any sign of compromise on the disputed islands, which for Japanese means not only explaining to the Russian people that his predecessors had agreed to return two, but also that he is looking to a solution for at least one of the other two, larger islands. Should none of those conditions be met and Abe decide on a visit anyway, this would give rise to analysis of his reasoning. In Japan, the visit is supposed to be about a deal on the islands, obscuring other issues.

If Abe is pursuing Putin as well as Kim Jong-un to leave a historical legacy as the one who resolved a pressing national identity concern, which requires in the one case a return of more than two islands and in the other an accounting of the fate of the abductees and the return of any who are alive as well as of spouses trapped in North Korea after accompanying their mates there, then one may suppose that he does not have to pay much of a price in realist terms. Yet, few expect solutions along these lines. If Abe goes forward without the promise of such a legacy, then there is bound to be a search for his motives. Claims that they are realist in nature—that he is splitting Russia from China or reducing the threat from North Korea—are unlikely to be taken seriously. That would lead analysts to look further into Abe's revisionist thinking beyond restoring Japan's honor by reassessing the history of the war era.

Putin's eagerness to visit Japan needs little explanation. In this way, he would drive a wedge between Obama and an ally, buttress fading claims to multipolarity in Asia instead of one-sided dependence on China, and, presumably, revive hopes that Japan is interested in an

energy deal beneficial to his plan to develop the Russian Far East. Yet, geopolitically, he has little to gain from a close ally of the United States now that he has swung his weight behind China and needs that country more. After oil prices crashed and the ruble tanked, economically, Putin also could expect little investment from Japan. In contrast to the major gains anticipated from China in 2004 when a compromise was reached in their final territorial dispute, which two well-censored media made no effort to dissect, Russia can expect little in return for what would be a wrenching decision for the Russian public at a time of heightened territorial nationalism and an arrangement wide open for scrutiny. Why would he make a deal fraught with such negative potential? Rather, he would hope to visit Japan with only vague statements. This harsh reality was largely overlooked in the Japanese media.

If Abe understands Putin's situation and appreciates the reality that talk of personal chemistry between the two is just for show, then what accounts for his pursuit? One possibility is that in 2014 and again in 2015 he was seeking to boost his image as an activist leader and his country's image as a great power for short-term purposes. An impression is left that Russia gains more than it actually does by dealing with Japan or that Japan is doing more than it really is in countering China. In concentrating on what Russia gains from Japan, in contrast to Russian sources stressing only what Japan gains from Russia, false impressions are spread of Abe's importance. At the same time, Japan's ability to pursue a separate agenda from the United States can be useful for Abe's revisionist agenda of differentiating Japan more clearly from its ally. The more personal stature he builds as a foreign policy leader, the more room he has to move on a revisionist agenda against U.S. objections and, ultimately, targeting the United States on history. As in the case of South Korea, revisionism is driving Abe's agenda to Russia and to North Korea in the face of doubts from realist voices.

Japan and Russia are seeking in bilateral diplomacy across Northeast Asia to make themselves appear more powerful and less dependent than they really are, as both face downgrading in status in the face of economic troubles, the rise of China, and the polarization of the region. Each is striving to remain relevant on the Korean Peninsula, having gained and then lost a foothold in the Six-Party Talks. In 2014 Japan used the abductions issue and Russia used North Korean anger at China to activate diplomacy with North Korea, each overstating the likely impact in the face of serious doubts by others. Tokyo and Moscow make it seem as if they have a lot to offer each other, but by the end of 2014 it was clear that they expect little from each other geopolitically or economically. As leaders intensify national identity spikes, the chances of a pragmatic deal that challenges the identity of each are fading. With each leader focusing on WWII in a narrow fashion, their clashing interpretations of that era rise more to the surface. They think the other will deal in part because they have an exaggerated view of their own significance and underestimate the other's national identity intensity, as if it recognizes its weakness and needs an agreement.

As early as January 2012, according to a Japanese article, Russia's response to the confessions of Kim Jong-nam, Kim Jong-il's eldest son, was interpreted as a rebuke to China, which is seen as the protector of Kim Jong-nam, and a play for influence in North Korea to replace China. Citing a 2011 meeting in Pyongyang between Mikhail Fradkov, the chief of Russian foreign intelligence, and Kim Jong-un as well as his father, the article contrasts Russia's marginal role in the Six-Party Talks to its new interest in becoming a

major player. It forgave massive debts from the Soviet period, setting aside \$1 billion for investing in linking Russia to South Korea via the North, and offered to assist Japan in restarting talks on abductions with North Korea.¹⁹ This notion that Russia opposes China in North Korea and seeks to work closer with Japan suggests a realist opening for Japan in its struggle versus China, but the article observes that Kim Il-sung's legacy is to reject reform and opening, leaving unclear what Russia actually expects to accomplish by embracing the new heir to the throne.

At the time of Abe's visit to the Sochi Olympics, *Yomiuri Shimbun* foresaw Japanese success in preempting a Sino-Russian joint remembrance in 2015 targeted against Japan.²⁰ Noting that Western leaders had not attended due to human rights issues, the editorial suggested that historical memories matter more to Japan. While trust between leaders could lead to an agreement on the islands and support for Putin's national priority to develop the Far East and East Siberia, the editorial looked ahead to a summit that would accomplish even more in influencing Russia's worldview. In 2014 officials kept putting more emphasis on a breakthrough with Russia than with South Korea. While realist reasons (forestalling a Sino-Russian alliance) played a role and economic reasons were occasionally cited, revisionist thinking, arguably, was a bigger factor. Park Geun-hye was perceived as a barrier to Japan's revisionist quest, while Vladimir Putin was eyed as a promising target open to finding common cause in a personal relationship with Abe with values overtones—but also viewed as a possible threat who could join with Xi Jinping in demonizing Japanese revisionism. In March and April, as Putin's aggression alienated him from the West and Obama's intervention brought Abe and Park together, realism appeared to be gaining ground in Japan. But in the fall as Abe prepared to meet Putin in Beijing and Park insisted on progress on the “comfort women” issue Abe refused to allow, revisionism prevailed. After all, conservatives regarded this issue as a stain on Japan's honor, considering the entire world (with the United States foremost) as the battlefield for Japan.²¹

The Seoul-Tokyo-Washington political axis is newly clarified of late with negative effects. In Seoul, ties to Japanese progressives are of reduced value as conservatives solidify control and blame progressives and past moderate LDP leaders for sending the wrong messages to Seoul. Failing to reach an understanding with the DPJ when it was in power in 2009-12 has left Seoul with an uncompromising image in Japan of no value in resuming talks.²² In Tokyo, wariness of Obama and conspicuous attempts to go around him in pursuit of congressional conservatives have a chilling effect on relations. The Yasukuni Shrine visit of Abe set in motion a year of lingering tensions, when even some strategists associated with past Republican administrations were suspect because of their wariness of Japanese revisionism as a barrier to a realist foreign policy. In all three capitals, especially in Washington, foreign policy experts have appealed for keeping the big strategic picture in the forefront to little avail.

On December 26, 2014, *Sankei Shimbun* reviewed policies toward Europe, noting that as U.S. international influence is in relative decline, Japan is striving to narrow the distance with Europe, which shares the same values, but Ukraine has thrown a wrench into Abe's efforts. Abe has sought to make the case that China is not a distant country to Europe, which is easier to grasp when parallels are raised between the situation in Ukraine and that in the East China Sea—both threats to international society. Abe also has sought to counter

campaigns by China and South Korea, timed for the 70th anniversary, against Japan by convincing international opinion that Japan is a peaceful country. Yet, at the same time, in an effort to keep Russia from leaning excessively to China, Abe is insisting on the value of his personal relations with Putin and on Japan's autonomous diplomacy. With vice-ministerial level talks set to resume with Russia in February, the paper cited hopes that the economic crisis in Russia raises the possibility of it drawing closer to Japan and agreeing to a territorial compromise in return for economic assistance. In this confusing situation mixing concerns over history, territory, and security, Japan is intensifying interest in Europe, but *Sankei* makes no mention of wider coordination under U.S. leadership.²³

SOUTH KOREAN REALISM VS. REVISIONISM

On November 9, 2014, *Sankei Shimbun* juxtaposed Chinese newspaper reports from the previous day that China had won in the showdown with Japan, securing in the four-point agreement on November 7 the two concessions it had sought on the islands and Yasukuni, with a report on the November 7 comments by Evan Medeiros that the United States had played an important role in preparing the environment for the agreement, especially for the plan for a crisis management mechanism to deal with unforeseen events in the East China Sea. It specifically cited U.S. concern about the impact of worsening Sino-Japanese and Japanese-South Korean relations on joint responses to North Korea, while showcasing Medeiros's claim for a large U.S. role.²⁴

On January 4, 2015, *Yomiuri Shimbun* clearly made the case that U.S. power and leadership are on the decline, the world is falling into chaos, and the role of Japan and the EU is growing, describing Obama as a "lame duck" whose position has been weakened further by his own hesitancy and the losses in the mid-term elections. Although the United States remains the only superpower, Japan must do more to fill the gap to maintain order in an increasingly unruly world, readers are told, but the editorial concludes by proposing it intensify cooperation with Germany, India, and Brazil to expand the Security Council. This totally unrealistic twist undercuts any semblance of a serious response to the anarchic trends identified as transforming the world.

CONCLUSION

Japan's conservative media have smelled blood, going on the attack with nary a sign of constraint from the second half of 2014. The initiative is in their hands, backed by their confidence that the prime minister and his cabinet are leading the way and by their perception that the worsening security environment, the distractions facing Obama and his weakness, and the disarray of Japanese progressives provide them with a golden opportunity to pursue a revisionist agenda along with a realist one. To date, attention has centered on Abe's defiant approach to historical symbols, which omits the broader context of diversified diplomacy with revisionist aims in dealing with the entire region of Northeast Asia, reaching to the United States and China. If in the early months of 2015 more caution was evident, notably in *Yomiuri Shimbun*, as Abe faced a troubled reception in Washington, the overall pattern remained.

South Koreans depict Japanese foreign policy as unbalanced, not based on realism in dealing with North Korea, China, and South Korea itself. Japanese portray the recent foreign policy

of South Korea as no less unbalanced, also not founded on realism in dealing with China and, of course, Japan itself.²⁵ Given the response to Russia in 2014, observers in the West cast doubt on the realist nature of the foreign policies of both states. (South Korea has not imposed sanctions and has been hesitant to criticize Russia despite its alliance). The overall impression is that, however realist Japan and South Korea are in strengthening their alliances with the United States in the face of perceived threats in their region, they are driven by other motives in formulating their policies in the Northeast Asian region, where North Korea stands at the center, Russia looms in the background, and they perceive each other more through a historical prism than a realist calculus. Japanese perceptions of South Korea's dearth of realism in foreign policy serve as justification for Japan's own incorporation of revisionist goals into debates on South Korea, North Korea, and Russia. Security in Northeast Asia and Korean reunification are seen through the lens of identity gaps and aspirations to reconstruct Japan's identity.²⁶

Those who have striven to carefully manage Japan and South Korea's relations with each other and the triangle with the United States and Russia have found themselves marginalized in critical decisions over the past few years. Experts on relations with Seoul cannot budge the conservative mainstream from its obsessions, and experts on Moscow have been at a loss to steer policy away from the territorial obsession, which is no less illusionary. While many see the pursuit of North Korea as rather harmless, if improbable, moves to solve the abductees issue, and the cost in coordination with Washington and Seoul needs to be considered. Yet, the failure of the appeals to Moscow and Pyongyang and the compelling realist case for trying harder with Seoul mean that, despite the static from quixotic diplomacy, in the second half of 2015 Abe has a chance with U.S. encouragement, to overcome the revisionist moves of 2014.

ENDNOTES

1. Gilbert Rozman, "Realism versus Revisionism in Abe's Foreign Policy in 2014," *The Asan Forum*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Jan.-Feb. 2015).
2. The annual public opinion survey based on October polling was reported in *Sankei Shimbun* on December 21, 2014, p. 3. Most unpopular is North Korea at 88 percent, China is next at 83 percent, Russia trails with 76 percent, only a slight increase of 1.6 percent from the year before in spite of its aggression in Ukraine, and South Korea stands at 66 percent, climbing from 58 percent over the past year. More detail is found in the Naikaku seifu kohoshitsu, *Yoron chosa*, December 2014.
3. For conservatives, 2014 stands as a great turning point when Japan at last counterattacked against slurs on its reputation and self-loathing, seen in the January 3, 2015 *Sankei Shimbun*, p. 8. They see South Korea as in the forefront of the surge in seeing foreign relations through a revisionist lens, blaming it for pro-China and anti-U.S. views that make any realist approach to it fruitless; thus leading to a revisionist one. Others who blame Abe point to an opportunity that was lost in 2012, which Abe had no interest in pursuing. See *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, January 11, 2015, p. 15.
4. For detailed coverage of Japanese articles reporting on Abe's overtures to Russia and to North Korea, see "Country Report: Japan," bi-monthly in *The Asan Forum*.
5. Gilbert Rozman, "Review Article: Civilizational Polarization and Japan," *The Asan Forum*, Vol. 2, No. 5 (Sept.-Oct. 2014)
6. "Country Report: Japan," *The Asan Forum*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2015).
7. I explored some national identity perspectives on North Korea in Gilbert Rozman, *Strategic Thinking about the Korean Nuclear Crisis: Four Parties Caught between North Korea and the United States* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, rev. ed. 2011).

8. Gilbert Rozman, *The Sino-Russian Challenge to the World Order: National Identities, Bilateral Relations, and East vs. West in the 2010s* (Washington, DC and Stanford, CA: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Stanford University Press, 2014).
9. As seen in Sakurai Yoshiko's January 29, 2015 article in *Shukan Shincho*, pp. 136-37, the right wing in Japan is turning its anger against the United States, insisting that it is completely siding with China and South Korea on the "comfort women" issue, the Yasukuni Shrine, and other historical matters.
10. *Yomiuri Shimbun*, November 18, 2014, p. 7.
11. *Asahi Shimbun*, November 15, 2014, p. 9.
12. Shimojo Masao, "Nihonkai kosho mondai de Kankoku o damaraseru," *Seiron*, April 2012, pp. 119-28.
13. *Sankei Shimbun*, September 1, 2014, p. 1.
14. *Sankei Shimbun*, August 30, 2014, p. 3.
15. *Sankei Shimbun*, September 3, 2014, p. 3.
16. *Sankei Shimbun*, August 31, 2014, p. 3.
17. *Asahi Shimbun*, August 28, 2014, p. 3.
18. *Asahi Shimbun*, December 9, 2014, p. 14.
19. Gomi Yoji and Sato Masaru, "Kim Jong-nam no 'kokuhakuhon' kara yomitoku Kitachosen no yugata," *Seiron*, April 2012, pp. 92-103.
20. *Yomiuri Shimbun*, February 11, 2014, p. 3.
21. *Sankei Shimbun*, September 28, 2014, p. 3.
22. *Yomiuri Shimbun*, August 7, 2014, p. 7.
23. *Sankei Shimbun*, December 26, 2014, p. 5.
24. *Sankei Shimbun*, November 9, 2014, p. 2.
25. These views are reported extensively in "Country Report: South Korea and Country Report: Japan," *The Asan Forum*, from its first issue in the summer of 2013.
26. Gilbert Rozman, ed., *East Asian National Identities: Common Roots and Chinese Exceptionalism* (Washington, DC and Stanford, CA: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Stanford University Press, 2012); Gilbert Rozman, ed., *National Identities and Bilateral Relations: Widening Gaps in East Asia and Chinese Demonization of the United States* (Washington, DC and Stanford, CA: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Stanford University Press, 2013).