



Comparisons of the Alliance Thinking in Japan and South Korea as a Reflection of National Identity

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While Tokyo and Seoul are often paired as key U.S. allies in Asia, and both alliances are now more solid than ever, their individual alliance dynamics have varied in important ways over time. This paper compares Japanese and South Korean alliance policies toward the United States, their attitudes and motivations, as well as the implications for how each country situates its alliance with respect to China. In addition, it considers how Japan-Korea relations affect alliance thinking, and, conversely, how alliance policies can affect the state of Japan-Korea ties going forward. While comparing the U.S.-Japan and U.S.-ROK alliances, I analyze these two bilateral relations in a trilateral context, looking at how they affect the overall U.S.-Japan-ROK triangle. In the background, I consider how aspects of national identity in each case are relevant to the conclusions to be drawn about alliance thinking and Japan-ROK relations.

Although U.S.-Japan and U.S.-ROK alliances remain strong today (especially when compared to past turbulent periods), they are driven by different motivations and mechanisms. I look at both strategic and identity reasons. To compare alliance thinking, I first evaluate each country's security interests and analyze the role of threat perceptions, including views of China and North Korea. I introduce a dual threat framework to explain why their behaviors have diverged and converged, and how Tokyo and Seoul may frame their alliances differently from Washington. I discuss how the above differences play out in terms of various alliance management policies, including the scope of and contributions to the alliance as well as attitudes toward China. In addition, I examine the role of domestic politics in the two alliances, including political opposition, public opinion, and base activism. In both Japan and South Korea, there is a gap between elite strategic priorities and public national identity, which has led to tensions in the management of their alliances with the United States. The paper also analyzes how changes in external factors – Chinese and North Korean actions – and internal trilateral factors – Japan-South Korea relations – are altering each ally's threat perceptions as well as views of the U.S.-Japan-ROK triangle. Finally, I link these findings to certain national identity themes.

THREAT PERCEPTIONS & ALLIANCE MOTIVATIONS

Although U.S.-Japan and U.S.-ROK alliances remain strong today (especially when compared to past turbulent periods), they are driven by different motivations and mechanisms. A dual threat framework explains the divergences and convergences in their behavior over time.¹ Threat perceptions take on two levels: systemic and local, and two sources: China and North Korea. Both South Korea and Japan frame their alliances first in response to local, imminent threats, be it North Korea or specific territorial disputes with Beijing, rather than China's systemic rise. For Tokyo, the U.S. alliance is increasingly about countering China (and responding to the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands dispute), but for Seoul, its alliance remains targeted at North Korea. The DPRK threat acts as an important mediating variable for South Korea but not Japan.

In the past, Japan was cautious about antagonizing China, and framed its alliance in terms of dealing with missile and nuclear threats from North Korea. However, escalating sovereignty disputes with China since the 2010s have increasingly pushed Tokyo toward an open embrace of the United States and the alliance, as Japanese threat perceptions of

China grew more concrete, imminent, and localized over time. In contrast, Seoul does not perceive direct security threats from China, and has adopted fluctuating strategies toward both larger powers depending on the degree of policy alignment on North Korea. The apparent shift toward China under two progressive governments in the 2000s was driven largely by perceived alignment and shared interests in Chinese and ROK policy toward North Korea. Seoul was hopeful that Beijing would play the role of a supportive mediator in the Six-Party Talks. However, as disillusionment grew and Beijing continued to support DPRK interests over those of the South, Seoul swung back toward Washington and sought to strengthen the alliance.

The importance of local, imminent threats may be a point often overlooked by U.S. policymakers with grand global strategies. While Japan is increasingly worried about China, its fears were also crystalized in the form of renewed, militarized clashes over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, representing a direct threat to Japan's national security, outside of systemic Sino-U.S. rivalry. This spurred fundamental changes in Japanese policy discourse, including a reorientation in defense strategy and a tightened, more integrated U.S.-Japan alliance. Japanese fears are also rooted in China's repeated use of the "history card" to deny Japan a right to defend its island as if that is "remilitarization."

In both countries, fluctuations in alliance policy due to domestic leadership changes have also become bounded as external threats increase over time. Previous attempts by more progressive administrations to seek closer ties with Beijing produced few substantive results and did not shield either Japan or South Korea from provocative Chinese actions. Wishful optimism for a cooperative China is being replaced by a more hard-nosed, U.S.-oriented strategy. At the same time, even as both alliances have strengthened, each ally's differing policies toward China mean that the nature of their alliance also differs, allowing us to draw comparisons between the Japan-U.S.-China triangle and the South Korea-U.S.-China triangle. National identity themes also come into play. South Korean threat perceptions are framed within the longstanding search for a path to reunification. Similarly, Japan's leaders have been searching for a path to "normal Japan" through acceptance in Asia, and they view China not only as a military threat but as a force for demonizing Japan with no room for any exit.

This is not to say that Tokyo prefers a zero-sum approach toward China and the United States, but this very much depends on Chinese policy toward Japan. South Korea faces a similar situation, although it usually feels less targeted by Beijing. By virtue of their geopolitical position, Japanese and South Korea foreign policies are arguably more reactive and taken in response to China's behavior. Neither country will want to push its U.S. alliance vigorously at the expense of long-term relations with China, but that could happen if threat concerns and their national identity implications intensify. Still, Japan has been, and will likely remain, the more openly vocal ally – linked to the factor of threat perceptions, including fear of what Chinese demonization means for their nation's identity. The different threat perceptions and alliance motivations of Japan and South Korea are reflected in the scope of their alliances as well as their attitudes toward China.

DEFINING THE ALLIANCE & MANAGING CHINA

One of the most obvious differences between the two alliances is that the U.S.-Japan alliance is regional in scope, while the U.S.-ROK alliance arose from the Korean War and remains targeted at contingencies on the Korean Peninsula (i.e., North Korea). South Korean policymakers and analysts have traditionally emphasized that their alliance with the United States is limited to helping the ROK defend itself from the North, and not to support Washington in regional contingencies such as a Taiwan conflict. Seoul continues to fear both abandonment and entrapment in its alliance. The U.S. policy of “strategic flexibility” in the 2000s, reducing permanent troop deployments on the peninsula, sparked fears that the United States would no longer effectively deter North Korea. With the current U.S. rebalance, South Korea is also concerned to some extent that a greater U.S. focus on Southeast Asia and broader deployment of U.S. forces would shift attention away from the Korean Peninsula and also lead to U.S. requests that Seoul pay more of the alliance costs. In fact, Seoul maintains a heavy reliance on the United States for its national defense, with scheduled transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) repeatedly delayed over the past decade, revealing an underlying sense of insecurity regarding ROK independent defense capabilities.

In contrast, the U.S.-Japan alliance was expanded in the 1990s to include “areas surrounding Japan,” implicitly referring to Taiwan, and Japanese bases in Okinawa and elsewhere would be important in providing logistical and rear-area support in the event of a contingency involving the United States. While South Korea has carefully avoided making public pronouncements or taking positions on the South China Sea disputes,² U.S. insistence has resulted in words of support for “freedom of navigation.” This is a signal linked to the South China Sea that has not been taken positively in China, although Seoul has been sparing in discussing the regional nature of the alliance as opposed to its global and peninsular aspects. Japan has criticized Chinese actions and provided capacity building assistance to Southeast Asian claimants such as Vietnam and the Philippines.³ Tokyo, no doubt, sees a worrying parallel between China’s military and island building activities in the South China Sea and China’s attitudes toward the Senkaku/Diaoyu island dispute with Japan in the East China Sea. Nonetheless, partly due to domestic opposition, it has not yet committed to direct military involvement in the South China Sea via JSDF patrols or freedom of navigation operations (although it has voiced support for U.S. FON operations).⁴

A large part of Japanese motivation stems from its desire to use the alliance as a means to deter Chinese growing influence and aggression, especially in the East China Sea. In the early 2010s Tokyo initially feared abandonment – that Washington would not come to its support – over the Senkaku/Diaoyu island dispute with China. It scrambled to secure public official U.S. statements that the islands fell under the bilateral security treaty. However, sentiments have changed since Beijing declared an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea in December 2013, which spurred Washington to more actively support Japan.⁵ Japan has been eager to consolidate the U.S.-Japan alliance as a broader mechanism to contribute to stability in the region, including disaster relief, humanitarian aid, and capacity building.

Japanese military action overseas remains a controversial and largely unprecedented step, as politicians have to justify it in terms of its impact on the “security of Japan.” While Tokyo has gradually expanded the roles and missions of its Self-Defense Forces, including overseas peacekeeping operations and non-combatant roles in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars under Koizumi,⁶ legislative reform efforts on relaxing arms exports and reinterpreting the right to collective self-defense have been a slow, incremental, and polarizing process. Especially since Abe’s second term and his push for “proactive pacifism,” Japan has stepped up the pace of security reforms. In April 2015, the United States and Japan announced the second-ever revision of their alliance guidelines, improving policy coordination and crisis management planning, and increasing cooperation on intelligence, surveillance, maritime security, missile defense, and other areas. In the summer of 2015, the government successfully gained legislative approval for a reinterpretation of collective self-defense, expanding Japan’s ability to respond to a variety of security contingencies as a U.S. ally.

Beyond the Abe factor, however, Tokyo has become a more proactive and eager alliance partner due in large part to its growing sense of a direct security threat from China over the disputed islands, for which it seeks continued military and political support from the United States. Without dismissing domestic divisions, there is an overall growing sense of urgency among the political and policymaking elite in consolidating Japanese defense capabilities alongside closer cooperation with the United States. At the same time, domestic political constraints and historical legacies (which will be discussed later in this paper) will continue to constrain its concrete contributions as a U.S. alliance partner.

For South Korea, the October 2015 joint statement between Obama and Park highlighted the two allies’ close alignment and cooperation on the North Korean issue. Amid inter-Korean tensions at the DMZ, Defense Secretary Ashton Carter publicly reiterated the U.S. commitment to extended deterrence, and emphasized the “ironclad” nature of the U.S.-ROK alliance.⁷ Such statements and meetings built on the renewed progress in the last few years, including the 2009 Joint Vision and the 2013 Joint Declaration commemorating the 60th anniversary of the alliance. While Xi Jinping has also echoed calls for denuclearization by North Korea, a lack of specific actions and Beijing’s past failures to support ROK interests have caused Seoul to continue relying more on Washington. Nonetheless, enhancing political and economic relations with Beijing is part of Seoul’s strategy to reduce mistrust and gaps between the two countries, with an eye to improving policy coordination and increasing pressure on Pyongyang. Of course, whether this produces any tangible outcomes remains to be seen. North Korea’s recent nuclear and missile tests have, however, increased South Korean skepticism about China’s willingness as well as ability to influence DPRK actions.

Seoul’s active engagement with China – indeed, presidents Park Geun-hye and Xi Jinping have met a remarkable six times since they both took office – should not be seen as South Korea bandwagoning with China while distancing itself from the United States and Japan. Rather, South Korea was trying to reassure Beijing that any alliance actions are not targeted at China nor does Seoul see Beijing as a threat,⁸ thus reducing the zero-sum perceptions of the ROK-U.S.-China triangle. Park Geun-hye has not sought improved relations with Beijing at the expense of the alliance – South Korean engagement with China is still very much within the framework of the U.S.-ROK alliance. In addition, President Obama has stated that closer Sino-ROK relations are not against U.S. interests. For South Korea, it is not so much a question of choosing either China or the United States, but instead using its

security alliance with Washington as increased bargaining leverage against China.⁹ ROK ambassador to the United States, Ahn Ho-young, publicly stated that the U.S.-ROK alliance remains the foundation of South Korean foreign policy toward China.¹⁰ The alliance remains crucial because it ensures that Seoul is not left isolated or vulnerable, even though Beijing might sometimes use the alliance as a pressure point against the ROK. At the same time, the perceived need for Chinese cooperation on the North Korean issue has made Seoul more wary of adopting alliance actions that might provoke Beijing's displeasure.

Indeed, the debated deployment of the U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in South Korea has been a potential sticking point in the U.S.-ROK alliance and, arguably, a symbol of Seoul's reluctance to aggravate Beijing or at least make any publicly provocative moves. While the United States has pushed for ROK cooperation in developing a multi-layered, integrated missile defense system, especially as Japan is considering similar deployments, South Korea has traditionally maintained a policy of three "nos": no request from the United States, no negotiations with the United States, and no decision on THAAD.¹¹ Certainly, part of the reason is that THAAD focuses on longer-range ballistic missiles, a bigger concern for Japan and the United States, whereas South Korea mainly fears shorter-range missiles and artillery fire from its northern neighbor. Some analysts have also suggested that the Korean defense industry has played a role in pushing for domestic development of an indigenous missile system. Ever so often, rumors that Seoul and Washington are discussing THAAD deployment are quickly dampened by the ROK and sometimes also the United States.¹²

Beyond its rhetoric over THAAD's radar coverage extending to the Chinese mainland and its threatening effect on China's nuclear second-strike capabilities against the United States, Beijing fears that a Korean missile defense system integrated with U.S. and Japanese systems would strengthen trilateral security cooperation and further constrain China as a quasi-alliance coalition. But recent public pressure from Beijing attempting to dissuade Seoul from adopting THAAD may in fact have the reverse effect, triggering South Korean sensitivities against being dominated by a larger neighbor (a painful historical legacy for the Koreans). Some have suggested that the recent intrusion by two Chinese jets into the ROK's air defense identification zone is a signal from Beijing against Korean considerations of adopting THAAD.

However, further North Korean nuclear and missile tests, alongside continued Chinese support of its ally, are pushing Seoul further into the arms of Washington. Although Sino-DPRK ties have reportedly been chilly of late and Beijing has verbally criticized past nuclear tests, it has avoided fully punishing Pyongyang for its provocative actions. For China, peninsula and regime stability remains the priority, even though there is increasing internal debate on how much Beijing should stand by the DPRK, and bilateral ties are shifting from a "special" to "normal" relationship. Largely consistent Chinese support for North Korea has destroyed the South's optimism that Beijing might be a proactive and cooperative partner in restraining DPRK provocations and finding a solution to the Korean Peninsula standoff.

In the wake of the fourth DPRK nuclear test in January 2016, both the ROK president and defense minister publicly stated that they would review the feasibility of deploying THAAD on South Korean soil.¹³ Reports suggested that there had been increased informal discussions between American and South Korean officials regarding the subject.¹⁴

After Pyongyang conducted a missile test in February, Seoul formally announced that it was starting missile defense talks with Washington.¹⁵ This sparked an unusually blunt and open exchange of criticism between South Korea and China. The Chinese ambassador to Seoul warned that bilateral ties could be “destroyed in an instant,” prompting retorts from ROK officials that this constituted “blackmail” and that Beijing should recognize South Korean deployment of THAAD as “a matter we will decide upon according to our own security and national interests.”¹⁶ While some former policymakers have emphasized that a decision in favor of THAAD should be made according to South Korean defense and security requirements vis-à-vis North Korea, instead of being a political decision,¹⁷ it will certainly remain hard to avoid politicized rhetoric and interpretations. Beijing’s support for the most recent round of UN sanctions on North Korea, depending on their implementation and effectiveness, may or may not leave South Korea cautiously ambivalent. Yet, continued Chinese reluctance to offer actions instead of words and to dissuade Pyongyang from further nuclear and missile pursuits suggests that Seoul will pursue options previously seen as taboo, by seeking closer and more overt military cooperation with the United States, even at the expense of angering China.

Seoul is also trying to transform its relationship with Washington beyond that of a simple patron-client security relationship. While seeking to maintain a strong U.S.-ROK alliance, South Korea has started to pursue a broader foreign policy agenda as part of its newly articulated identity as a “middle power.” This has produced some interesting synergies and tensions. First, Seoul wants the alliance to be *global* but not *regional*. Under Presidents Obama and Lee Myung-bak, a Joint Vision statement was announced in 2009, articulating plans for a 21st century global U.S.-ROK alliance. In recent years, South Korea has been active in international diplomacy, hosting the G20 summit in 2010 and promoting multilateral cooperation on climate change, international finance, anti-piracy, nuclear security, and so on. Yet, most alliance statements and agreements have focused on the Korean Peninsula, and (apart from North Korea) the ROK remains wary of inserting itself into regional security issues such as the South China Sea disputes or Taiwan – reluctant to articulate explicit public position. This suggests a continued reluctance to take sides and fears of alienating China, because of Seoul’s perception that Beijing is important in tackling the primary threat of North Korea. At the same time, optimism has waned that Beijing will play a proactive, constructive role in solving the North Korea issue. In the last few years, Seoul has increasingly relied on Washington for political and military support. Park Geun-hye has refrained from endorsing Xi Jinping’s “New Security Concept” that excludes extra-regional players such as the United States and has been presented as a replacement for the current alliance structures.¹⁸

Second, South Korea faces a possible tension between its middle power ambitions and middle state realities. Building on a legacy of past proposals by previous ROK presidents, Park Geun-hye has also been developing the idea of a Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI) in an attempt to institutionalize broader cooperation over a range of functional issues such as health, energy, and the environment. The aim is to first deepen multilateral cooperation and trust on practical issues and common interests, thus laying the groundwork for broader peace and stability.¹⁹ While this push for multilateralism is not necessarily contradictory to the alliance or U.S. interests in the region, whether it can gain concrete traction and how much South Korea can play a leadership role remains to be seen. Past attempts by Seoul to act as a “hub” of multilateral cooperation to promote peace and stability in Asia have often failed because the other larger powers in the region were

unreceptive, or have been limited to “low politics” issues such as economic and financial cooperation (that did not translate into pertinent security cooperation). China may not buy in because of suspicions that such proposals will be an extension of the U.S.-ROK alliance, while Tokyo under Abe has turned toward other partners such as Australia and India to counter Chinese influence – historical legacies between Japan and South Korea have also made sustained horizontal cooperation difficult. Even the United States may tend to view Seoul in terms of the U.S.-led alliance framework rather than as part of a multilateral middle power framework brokering between the larger powers. South Korea’s continued dependence on the U.S. alliance as the bulwark of its national security suggests that it may end up more as a middle state caught in between the United States and China, due to vagaries of unresolved regional security threats. The unresolved North Korean threat, which also requires cooperation from China, will likely remain a continued focus and constrain the security scope of the U.S.-ROK alliance going forward.

The different inclinations of Japan versus South Korea, with respect to their positioning between China and the United States, can also be seen in their regional economic policies. Japan is part of the U.S.-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which just concluded negotiations, while South Korea has joined the Chinese-initiated Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Without arguing that these institutions represent opposing, exclusive visions for regional economic order (which is not necessarily a zero-sum game), the differing responses of the two allies present an interesting comparison on how they situate the United States in their foreign policies. Similar to Washington, Tokyo framed these economic initiatives as part of a strategy to consolidate U.S.-led influence in the Asia-Pacific and counter growing Chinese clout. It was also keen to demonstrate its support as a “trustworthy” ally sticking by the American side.²⁰ The AIIB was in turn seen as a Chinese attempt to compete with the longstanding Asian Development Bank that had been spearheaded by Japan. Seoul, in contrast, did not perceive any threats from more Chinese leadership in the region, and certainly not in the economic realm (China being South Korea’s top trade partner). The AIIB represented just another way to strengthen regional cooperation and encourage Chinese participation in multilateral institutions. Seoul expressed interest in joining the TPP in October 2015, and also recently concluded negotiations over a China-ROK free trade agreement in December (no other major country has done so). Arguably, South Korea’s interests in deepening economic relations with Beijing are not just for commercial reasons, but also as a form of strategic competition against Sino-DPRK economic ties.

ALL POLITICS IS LOCAL: DOMESTIC CONSTITUENCIES & THE ELITE-PUBLIC GAP

Both Japan and South Korea have had their share of volatile domestic politics toward the U.S. alliance, stemming from a legacy of internal divisions over foreign and defense policies. The role of public opinion is growing, especially as both are established democracies with relatively free media and civil society. At the same time, it should be noted that fewer today are questioning the importance of the United States, and both bilateral alliances are arguably much stronger now than they were a decade or so ago. External events – namely, a growing sense of security threats, whether from China or North Korea – have pushed domestic political leadership to the right and more firmly into the embrace of the United States. We are unlikely to see a resurgence of the anti-American sentiment that, for example,

previously brought Roh Moo-hyun to power in South Korea. The Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) performed poorly during its brief time in office, and hence has not regained a credible political footing or direction. Ultimately, past attempts in both countries to distance themselves from Washington and/or cozy up to Beijing did not turn out well for their foreign policy and security interests. Future political leadership, even if from a more progressive party, will likely be more centrist and pragmatic. At the same time, in both Japan and South Korea, there remains a stark gap between strategic imperatives at the elite level and national identity at the level of the public.

The alliance continues to be an ambivalent/contentious symbol in Japan's domestic context. The political left sees it as entangling Japan in unwanted international security burdens, while the right either resent it as a reminder of Japanese post-war subordination or push further for the "normalization" of Japanese foreign security and defense policy. However, debates over reinterpretation of the constitution or collective self-defense have centered on the legality and appropriateness of such actions, rather than a complete abrogation of the U.S. presence.

Although the Abe administration has been able to pass a slate of security policy reforms, most notably the legislation on reinterpreting collective self-defense this past summer, the prime minister was riding on a previous mandate consolidated by domestic economic reforms (a priority for the Japanese public). Despite criticism from constitutional scholars and opposition from other political parties, the government was able to push the bills through because of the LDP majority in the Upper and Lower Houses. This has come at a political cost. Thousands of Japanese demonstrated outside the Diet building during the debate over the security legislation, and media polls show that Abe's approval ratings have dropped sharply – to 35 percent in September 2015, the lowest since he took office, according to the *Asahi Shimbun*.²¹ Apart from concerns that Japan would be entangled into U.S. conflicts, even supporters felt that the new defense laws had not been explained clearly enough to the public. Uncertainties also remain over the exact political process in determining when a situation falls under collective self-defense. Even as Washington welcomes Japan's adjustments, political constraints continue to limit the pace and scope of security reforms. Thus, further contributions to the U.S.-Japan alliance will be subject to domestic public opinion and the effectiveness of economic policies that had thus far ensured political stability for the second Abe government. Even though a multitude of recent polls show overwhelmingly positive attitudes toward the United States and the alliance (even more so when compared to other countries, including China), believing that they are crucial to guarantee Japan's security, a majority of the public still think that Japan should pay less for the alliance, that local interests should come first, and that Washington has a tendency to overlook Japanese interests.²²

Indeed, base politics have resurged in Japan over the past year, since the election in December 2014 of a new Okinawa governor, Onaga Takeshi, who has opposed plans to relocate the U.S. Marine base from Futenma to Henoko. Despite attempts at negotiation during summer 2015, no compromise was reached and the Abe administration resumed construction in the fall. Local protests continued, resulting in some scuffles with the Japanese Coast Guard. Both local and national governments have filed suits and countersuits against each other. The Abe administration argued that Onaga had failed to comply with the national construction plan, while Onaga claimed that the national government had violated the terms and environmental requirements of the agreement made with the previous governor. Continued delays in the

completion of the new airfield (although the national government has thus far refused to stop construction) will underscore the domestic political dissonance between local and central governments, and highlight the tension between a desire for greater local autonomy and a need for centralization to improve security and crisis management.²³

Nonetheless, Abe's relatively firm stance suggests that the current administration is less inclined to let local resistance impede its national security policy. Whether this will eventually consolidate Japan's shift to a more active alliance partner or further entrench local opposition remains an open question. This situation highlights the importance of considering how the trilateral bargaining game between the United States, the central government, and the local government may affect alliance management and military effectiveness. While Okinawans have had a long history of resistance, which suggests that base protests will remain driven by identity and norms,²⁴ other scholars have pointed to fluctuations in the degree of protest as evidence of a political economy argument in which side payments and economic transfers are used by the central government to satisfy local actors.²⁵ The relatively strong security consensus among Japanese policy elites today, coupled with the relative power of the bureaucracy, would likely reduce the power of normative arguments and the ability of activists to significantly influence base policy outcomes, although some symbolic concessions could be made.²⁶

Alliance management thus requires careful consideration of domestic politics, such as local dissatisfaction over basing policies or the partisan divide over the scope of Japanese military activities abroad. Especially with the renewed political dominance of the LDP, U.S. confidence in the alliance has been restored, and major policy mismanagement – such as the bungling of the Futenma base relocation by the DPJ under Hatoyama in 2010 – is unlikely to recur. Nonetheless, it should be noted that these policy tensions have been longstanding and will continue to plague LDP attempts to make Japan a more equal and active partner in the alliance. Moreover, the changing balance of domestic interests regarding China could be a double-edged sword for the U.S. alliance. The limited success of Japan's previous policies of reconciliation and economic interdependence in achieving major progress in Sino-Japanese relations has increased pessimism as well as the influence of nationalist voices.²⁷ Even as leftist parties are opposing defense reforms, ultra-nationalists have instigated provocative actions toward China while making inflammatory, historically-revisionist statements that spark South Korean anger. Thus, both ends of the political spectrum pose headaches for the alliance from the U.S. perspective. Ironically, a rightist prime minister that is more eager to increase Japanese security contributions (which Washington has been pushing for many years) is also more inclined to make cooperation with China and South Korea more difficult.

South Korean perceptions of the United States and the U.S.-ROK alliance have been extremely positive over the last few years, especially among the younger generation. According to Asan Institute polls since 2010, the United States has consistently ranked as the most favorably viewed country, its score hovering at close to 6 out of 10. (Under Park Geun-hye, who has had several successful summits with Xi Jinping, China's rating has also been increasing, to 5.37 in March 2015). In addition, although South Koreans saw China as the next economic superpower, they still approved more of U.S. leadership, and chose the United States over China as a preferred future partner.²⁸ In a March 2014 survey, 93 percent of respondents viewed the alliance as necessary, and 66 percent favored retaining the alliance even after reunification. This suggests that the U.S.-ROK alliance is taking on

a broader scope, and that the public may be seeing other sources of threat apart from North Korea. At the same time, the majority of respondents viewed the bilateral relationship as being fundamentally unequal, suggesting that public skepticism may grow if Washington is seen as telling Seoul what to do or overlooking its national interests.²⁹

Ultimately, South Korea does not see relations with the United States and China as being zero-sum, with favorability ratings for both on an upward positive trend after Park Geun-hye's meetings with both Obama and Xi in late 2015. Despite increasingly positive views of China, South Koreans preferred to strengthen cooperation with the United States, and also preferred to address regional security issues via trilateral cooperation with the U.S. and Japan rather than bilaterally with China. Although China was still seen as the main obstacle to solving the North Korean nuclear issue, an increasing proportion pointed to Washington as well.³⁰ While attitudes may have changed after the North's nuclear and missile tests in early 2016, public opinion polls suggest that continued alignment and progress on the North Korea issue is important in strengthening the U.S.-ROK alliance.

THE WEAKEST LINK? JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS

Japan-Korea relations have certainly affected alliance thinking in each country. This has traditionally been the missing leg in a potential trilateral framework with the United States. Rather, each tends to vie for importance via the closeness of alliance relations with Washington. When the U.S.-ROK alliance was declared a linchpin of regional security in 2009, Japanese policymakers fretted over the meaning of the word and whether it excluded Japan.³¹ (In 2014, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Danny Russel referred to the U.S.-Japan alliance as the “cornerstone” and the U.S.-ROK alliance as the “linchpin.”)³² Arguably, a relatively strong and stable U.S. presence has reduced the political imperatives for Tokyo and Seoul to smooth over differences and cooperate more closely. Rather, they can lean on Washington as a guarantor of regional security. This echoes Victor Cha's argument that the two countries are quasi-allies, working together more when they fear abandonment from the United States.³³ Continued South Korean grievances against Japan for its historical revisionism, Yasukuni Shrine visits, the “comfort women” issue, and Dokdo/Takeshima island dispute have impeded closer strategic cooperation – an intelligence-sharing agreement was torpedoed in 2012 due to opposition by ROK parliamentarians and public.

Even as bilateral ties started out frostier under Abe and Park, and Japan-ROK identity issues have drawn great attention, currently they may be less important than Japan-China issues for Japan (Abe compromised in December with the ROK) and North Korea issues for the ROK (Park compromised with Abe through the second half of 2015). The December 2015 bilateral agreement on the “comfort women” issue was unprecedented and momentous. It revealed the underlying strategic awareness on both sides of improved cooperation, as well as U.S. pressure behind the scenes for both sides to improve relations. If implemented fully, it could have a major impact by helping to smooth over political tensions, facilitating more systematic cooperation within a trilateral alliance. This could increase efficiency in foreign and defense policy coordination over regional security issues and enable Japan and South Korea to take on a greater responsibility or leadership role in regional security. Of course, given their differing threat perceptions and political priorities, with each country having

its own inclination on policy toward China, the challenge will lie in agreeing on strategic goals and areas of cooperation. For example, Seoul would be more wary of security policies that can be interpreted as targeting China. However, resolving the North Korea issue could be a fruitful area of cooperation under an enhanced U.S.-Japan-ROK triangle, as DPRK nuclear and missile capabilities present a common threat to all three actors. A unified front could help to increase pressure on Pyongyang and even Beijing. At the same time, closer trilateral cooperation between the United States and its allies would likely spark greater fear in Beijing of containment, and could lead to more nationalistic/aggressive moves (especially under Xi Jinping).

Moreover, Japan and the “comfort women” issue is arguably the biggest gap between the elite and public right now. It is still unclear if the domestic public in South Korea will accept the agreement. Negotiations were driven by the Blue House and the Foreign Ministry, without any direct representatives for the “comfort women” and civic groups (or even the Home Affairs Ministry, which serves as the government liaison).³⁴ While this shows a desire among ROK policymakers to put historical issues behind them and focus on pragmatic concerns, it also underlines the tension between national strategic priorities, on the one hand, and domestic politics on the other. There remains a gap between the South Korean elite and public on views of Japan. While policymakers and analysts concur that North Korea and perhaps China are more significant and realistic security threats, public opinion polls reveal not just an increasing dislike of Japan but also perceptions of it as a threat.³⁵ The recent “comfort women” agreement presents a degree of optimism, and we are perhaps at the closest to a trilateral alliance as we have ever been. However, we need to watch for further concrete steps in terms of foreign and defense cooperation, in order to understand the longer-term effects on Japan-Korean relations and the alliance structure in Northeast Asia.

NATIONAL IDENTITY: CONTRADICTIONS AND CONVERGENCES

National identity has also shaped each country’s relations with China and their views of the alliance with the United States. This goes beyond history, to issues of how Japan and South Korea conceptualize themselves as well as their position and role relative to China and the United States. Tokyo sees China as a rival for strategic leadership in Asia, and the bilateral identity gap is worsened by continued Chinese demonization of Japan. To counter Japan’s poor relations with its neighbors (China, South Korea, North Korea), Tokyo seizes opportunities to highlight shared identities and values as a U.S. ally and member of the liberal, democratic community. It has sought partnerships with countries such as India and Australia, in hope of forming a broader multilateral coalition of like-minded liberal countries. The U.S.-Japan Joint Vision Statement of April 2015 highlighted seven “shared principles” for “global cooperation” between the United States and Japan. For example, they included support for the rule of law, peaceful resolution of disputes, international norms of behavior, free trade, multilateral institutions, and multilateral cooperation. These principles also echoed the six U.S. priorities of Hillary Clinton’s “Asia rebalance” policies published in a 2011 *Foreign Policy* article.³⁶

Seoul does not have the same sense of rivalry with Beijing but is wary of Chinese actions suggesting hegemonic intentions, such as the dispute over the identity of the ancient Koguryo kingdom. South Korea's pursuit of warmer ties with China, along with shared assertions of Confucian identity and shared antipathy to Japanese colonialism, also come into tension with South Korea's identity as a U.S. ally sharing the same liberal and democratic values, including a rule-based international order. Beijing's preference for Seoul to play a subordinate role rather than an active middle power (at least in the region), and its rejection of criticisms of human rights issues in North Korea, have highlighted the differing viewpoints and disconnect between the two countries. Moreover, the recent events regarding North Korea have highlighted how national identity forces are changing in South Korea. A crucial part of Korean identity relates to reunification of the peninsula. To the extent that Beijing is increasingly seen as the barrier to reunification, rather than as a partner in this pursuit, South Koreans will be less inclined to view China favorably. As with the factor of threat perceptions, national identity in South Korea is framed if not driven by the North Korean issue and the question of reunification.

U.S. pressure has also induced identity shifts in both Japan and South Korea, leading in part to the "comfort women" agreement in December 2015. Abe chose to satisfy the Americans and moderates instead of the domestic revisionists, and Park backed away from her previously strong anti-Japan stance. This, along with the aligned stances on North Korean provocations, has strengthened the image of a U.S.-Japan-ROK triangle and perhaps highlights Seoul's decision to reaffirm its identity on the U.S. side, and in opposition to North Korea and China. This top-down identity shift is made all the more stark by the disparity between elite-driven foreign policy priorities and domestic citizen protests against the "comfort women" agreement as well as the deployment of THAAD.

Driven by external security events, the national identity gap between Japan and South Korea may be narrowing, as both governments grapple with repositioning their countries and leaders adjust their political rhetoric to allow for more amenable bilateral and trilateral cooperation. The North Korean issue presents an excellent opportunity for trilateral cooperation, although ROK national identity might be sensitive to any apparent constraints by Washington and Tokyo that limits the pursuit of its own policy preferences toward the North. External security pressures are prompting in both countries a reexamination of conventional notions of identity and how to manage this alongside strategic imperatives. Japan is grappling with how to reconcile the need to respond to external threats with longstanding "pacifism" and a wariness of using military force. National identity is also in flux in South Korea, adjusting to its middle power aspirations and perhaps most importantly questioning Beijing's role in Korean reunification. Managing identity issues alongside security threats will remain a delicate balance for all sides.

ENDNOTES

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