



Changes in the Japan-South Korea National Identity Gap

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The roller coaster of relations between Japan and South Korea has taken a sudden jolt with the December 28, 2015 agreement on “comfort women.” Some anticipate a turning point, stabilizing relations at last. Others skeptically warn that a downturn could occur again because the emotions on both sides are primed to be aroused by a new provocation. Concentrating on the “comfort women” issue—the central symbol of recent mutual distrust—does not suffice for understanding what has gone wrong or may lie ahead. With this issue declared “finally and irreversibly” resolved, there is new need to pay attention to how other signs of a national identity gap are changing. The legacies of Abe Shinzo and Park Geun-hye will be enduring, even if Abenomics is failing and Korean progressives gained in the April 2016 National Assembly polls.

In 1971 Richard Nixon and Mao Zedong appeared to be as irreconcilable foes as any leaders in the Cold War era, but they went down in history as the leaders who found a path toward two decades of dramatically increased cooperation and trust. A decade later Ronald Reagan loomed as the most demonized foe the Soviet Union had faced in the Cold War era before his reconciliation with Mikhail Gorbachev proved even more transformative in increasing cooperation and trust between enemies. For Abe and Park to go from implacable foes—beyond any personal antagonism in ROK-Japanese relations since at least the end of the Cold War (apart from Roh Moo-hyun vs. Koizumi Junichiro and Abe in 2005-07)—to partners in an historic agreement evokes parallels to these earlier breakthroughs. Comparisons must not only address the national security and economic explanations that have been cited for the earlier cases, but also the national identity explanations that apply to them and to today.

Various reasons can be advanced for why the late 2015 agreement does not warrant comparison with the transformative developments to end the Cold War era. Obviously, the impact on the international order is much less substantial. Instead of two states arming to fight each other changing course, two states sharing the same ally and quietly cooperating on security, at last, have found more common ground. Comparisons do not have to be based on the geopolitical impact of agreements. They can be grounded on awareness of the impact of narrower security calculations as well as economic interests. If steeped in national identity analyses, they can reveal how gaps in existing identities of two states ease or complicate improved relations. We must start with clear-sightedness that both Japanese and South Koreans remain deeply suspicious of each other’s intentions in regard to symbols of their identities.

The paradox of the two most trusted U.S. allies in Asia—each continuing to bolster its alliance with Washington, spurning each other—demands close scrutiny at a time when it appears that a foundation is, at last, in place for alliance triangularity. It is important to see this bilateral matter in the context of a quadrangle, adding the United States and China to the picture. Identity is about globalization – the United States; sinocentrism – China; humiliation – South Korea and Japan; disrespect. In all of these respects, this is also about assumptions based on entitlement. The key question in 2016 is: has anything fundamental changed in Japan-ROK ties? If so, is the explanation found in one state or the other, or in the larger quadrangle?

SECURITY AS THE DRIVING FORCE FOR BILATERAL BREAKTHROUGHS

Security was a driving force for Beijing and Washington in the early 1970s. One was under intense pressure from Moscow; the other was anxious to extricate itself from the Vietnam War. Security was also a powerful motive for Moscow in the late 1980s, anticipating a huge dividend from reorienting an economy obsessed with defense and war preparations and recognizing that it could not keep pace with the newest phase in the arms race. While savings on the defense budget were welcome also in Washington, they were not a priority. Even so, the security dividend loomed in a different way: the promise of rebuilding the world order away from bipolarity. Was the Seoul-Tokyo breakthrough also influenced by some far-reaching security logic?

A strong case can be made that it was. In 2014-15 the Obama administration saw the troubled state of ROK-Japan relations damaging to deterrence against North Korea and “rebalancing” to hedge against China’s increasingly aggressive behavior. It, arguably, considered these two threats more serious than any faced in East Asia since the Vietnam War. Thus, U.S. determination to overcome the ROK-Japan divide in order to boost triangularity and a region-wide alliance and partnership network was a more powerful force (albeit exercised quietly) than many had recognized. The contradiction between Japan’s obsession with the increasing danger from China and its stunning neglect of strategic priority for South Korea finally was resolved, as Abe defied his revisionist base to weigh security (including the pressure coming from Obama) heavily. A similar contradiction existed for South Korea, not only because of the deepening security threat from North Korea, but also because of the oft-unstated awareness of a threat from China, including from its ambivalent stance on the North. The security imperative was rising just as the distrust between Park and Abe was deepening. Thus, in 2014-15 U.S. diplomacy with both had unparalleled urgency.

Lee Byung-kee and Yachi Shotaro were behind-the-scenes forces for realizing the December 28 agreement. The fact that both are charged with national security is indicative of its impact on each side’s calculus. In the final stage, wording about the removal of the “comfort woman” statue was settled by the foreign ministers, as the Japanese side insisted on putting more pressure on the Korean side by substituting “strive” (*nuryokusuru*) for “expect” (*kitaisuru*).¹ This was interpreted by Japanese as a pledge, which, along with the commitment to make dropping the “history card” irreversible, would become the litmus test for whether this agreement will stick.

A *Toa* article assessed the prospects a month after the agreement. It noted that in November the foreign ministries had not made great progress before secret talks between Yachi and Lee, but Yachi’s trip in December proved decisive for Abe’s diplomacy. One noteworthy result of the agreement was an end to South Korean criticisms of Japan in the United States and elsewhere. Another was clarity that the “goalposts would not change,” an assurance, Japanese argued, that had not been followed before. The one that aroused the most negativity in South Korea was the promise of efforts to take the “comfort women” statue down in front of the Japanese embassy. Japanese were pleased with the forward-looking nature of relations now promised. Park couched the deal as a favor to the 46 remaining “comfort women,” giving them finality in their last years, but many of them and their association were not satisfied. Anger focused on Japan’s failure to take legal responsibility. The article reports

that the generation in its 20s and 30s remains overwhelmingly negative about the deal: 75 percent vs. 10 percent positive, contributing to the overall figure of 72 percent not in favor of moving the statue and the same total who did not think that Japan has apologized, despite Abe’s words to that effect to Park on the telephone. Washington saw this as an historical agreement boosting trilateralism, but few Koreans did.²

Hakoda Tetsuya credited the Korean Constitutional Court’s judgment that the 1965 normalization agreement did not violate the Constitution as a major catalyst (as was the verdict of non-guilty for the *Sankei* reporter held in Seoul) for the late December agreement. In 2012 the “Sasae plan” almost had led to a deal, but Abe refused to finalize it when he took office. Again in June 2015 a deal was “70 percent” concluded when another backwind was felt, due to anger over Seoul’s position on a UNESCO application for the Meiji industrial revolution legacy. Hakoda concluded that the deal would hold if both sides now take care “not to move the goalposts.”³

The role of security chiefs does not mean that security has trumped national identity. Rather, it suggests a kind of “security identity” clarifying where a country belongs. Partners of the United States of such significance as Japan and South Korea are pressed to assert an identity reinforcing U.S.-led values. Each side tightened the bilateral alliance over 2013-15, but pressure mounted to embrace shared values, which could not be achieved unless the two mitigated their own conflict over values.

NATIONAL IDENTITY AS THE DIVISIVE FORCE IN THE PATH OF BILATERAL BREAKTHROUGHS

The national identity divides between “Red China” and “Imperialist America” and between the “Soviet Scourge” and the “Evil Empire” could scarcely have been more pronounced just prior to the breakthroughs in relations. While under Lee Myung-bak and DPJ leaders of Japan there had been much talk of a narrowing of identity divisions (prior to the end of 2011 and, especially, Lee’s visit to Dokdo/Takeshima in the summer of 2012), they widened sharply in 2013 under Abe and Park and then failed to narrow even as Obama strove for trilateralism at The Hague in April 2014 and on other occasions. Given strong emotions over the “comfort women” issue and the territorial dispute too, the identity gap remained narrowly focused on a few symbols.⁴ That left it open to appeals to emphasize shared identities, for example, universal values, freedom of navigation, and antipathy to North Korea’s human rights abominations. Potential for overcoming troubling symbols of division was much greater for this breakthrough than many anticipated, if leadership was shown.

National identity boosters in 2014-15 in South Korea and Japan—as in China and the United States 45 years earlier and the Soviet Union and the United States 30 years before—opposed a compromise agreement that gave their side far from full satisfaction. Mao, Nixon, and Reagan had the national identity credentials to bring a compromise result to fruition. Gorbachev benefited from the unchallenged status of the CPSU general secretary, but his inability to convey strength on national identity left him vulnerable. Abe has such strong national identity credentials that he is using the deal with Park to boost his legacy. The national security case for Japan provides compelling support too. Park’s national identity

credentials are less persuasive to South Koreans; Korean progressives are more aroused by the identity case against Japan than are Japanese progressives by the case against South Korea, and Park's standing among conservatives is not as secure as Abe's has been. Even as she has built her case by standing firm on the "comfort women" issue, the fallback position as that issue is lost could be rather fragile. After all, she has been quite pragmatic in managing North Korea, the United States, and China—the main identity concerns.

Abe has a clear message—national interests and identities—in support of foreign policy to counter the threat from China. Park's national security message is not only rather unclear about national identity—except for showcasing a "bonanza" from reunification, which appears to do little either to strengthen a shared identity with North Korea or rally citizens against the identity threat from the North—it is focused on building trust with the great powers in service of the national interest. If some Koreans—mostly conservatives—will accept the argument that for the sake of the ROK-U.S. alliance and overall security a compromise was needed with Japan, the case is not easy to make without turning the focus to deterrence from serving as a bridge between great powers and to national identity through universal values. Abe can make a far better case for working in concert with the United States. If Park had been blamed for preventing a deal with Abe, it would have severely damaged the case she could make, but by striking a deal, she has gained much less than Abe.

The Glosserman-Snyder book has made a timely case for a grand Japan-ROK bargain with the United States facilitating the diplomacy and international norms serving to displace narrow symbols of national identity. In taking this stance, they see national identity as changeable and common ground for conservatives in the two countries to forge a degree of shared identity.⁵ The authors took hope from public opinion polls that show Koreans recognized the need to put a floor on bad relations with Japan. While Abe and Park did not go as far as they had advocated, the U.S. stance was commensurate with their blueprint and played a decisive role.

The symbols of an identity gap between Japan and South Korea are better understood than the roots of the gap and how it might be narrowed. The two states chose in 2013-15 to put "comfort women" at the forefront of efforts to reconstruct national identity—South Korea drawing a line against Abe's revisionism that was perceived as demeaning their country's historical worth, and Japan striking back against "historical memory" that undercuts its historical pride. The Yasukuni Shrine, the uninhabited rock known as Dokdo or Takeshima, and new history textbooks are among the other symbols invoked to demonize the other country and to express resentment at emotional attitudes not conducive to forward-looking bilateral ties. It is this legacy that was challenged at the end of 2015 through the Abe-Park deal. As "comfort women" had risen to unique prominence as a symbol, an agreement that promises a final, irreversible end to evoking it can have far-reaching significance.

CHANGING IDENTITY GAPS: AN OVERVIEW

Arguments about narrowing identity gaps center on structural causality, flows of information, and stage-by-stage trust building. They have been advanced by social scientists studying convergence, by politicians interested in spreading the gospel of good news about their country as well as incriminating evidence about other states, and diplomats intent on expanding contacts over the long run. Over time, we have learned that modernization and

other structural forces can be counteracted by the deliberate intervention of governments spreading misinformation, that the Internet and other sources of diverse information are no match for discrediting or censoring strategies, and that diplomacy is repeatedly frustrated by political insensitivity or resorts to emotional symbols that overshadow efforts at pragmatic compromises.

Theoretical approaches to what would change national identity gaps have concentrated on factors that have proven not to be decisive. The liberal identity paradigm can best be summarized as: convergence through the spread of universal values as modernized living conditions and unfettered information along with economic interdependence reduce mutual mistrust. Finally, from 1998 when cultural barriers between South Korea and Japan were removed followed by the sensational popularity of the “Korean wave” dramas in Japan and the surge in tourism between the two countries, conditions for narrowing the gap appeared to be in place. The sorts of barriers found in China and Russia, where top-down, highly censored methods of widening gaps operate, do not exist in the democratic states of South Korea and Japan. Yet, the outcome from 2000 to 2015 clashed with the theory.

The paradigm of realist identity formation also seemed to favor Japanese-ROK relations. They share the same ally and face similar threats from North Korea’s nuclear weapons and missiles, having earlier been on the same side of the Cold War divide. China’s military rise can be another potential driving force for overlapping thinking about security identity. The years 2012-15 saw deterioration in regional stability, adding to this rationale. Yet, the gap between Tokyo and Seoul widened.

As evidence for national identity gaps, we can cite public opinion polls that show views of: the defining conditions in the regional environment, the sense of responsibility of one country or another, and whether each other can be trusted. An early fall 2015 opinion poll conducted in Japan, the United States, South Korea, and China gives some clarity to the national identity challenge that Tokyo and Seoul are facing.⁶ After a year in which how Japan and South Korea perceive history stood in the forefront, the poll asked about opinions of the future. Both Japanese (60 percent) and South Koreans (80 percent) expect China’s influence to increase over the next decade, versus only 52 percent of Americans; yet all three are similar (46-52 percent) in anticipating no change in U.S. influence in Asia. Views of defining conditions are not so different. Views of the sense of responsibility in the conduct of various countries are more disparate: Japanese have a sense of their own country as responsible (79 percent) but only 25 percent see South Korea as such, versus 10 percent and 58 percent not viewing Japan and South Korea, respectively, as a responsible country; Koreans regard their own country as responsible (75 percent), but only 48 percent see Japan as such on world problems, with 42 percent and 22 percent respectively negatively inclined. On the question of whether one can trust a country, 70 percent of Japanese said, “yes” to America and just 16 percent “yes” to South Korea. Historical memory has become embedded in distrust on current foreign relations.

DIMENSIONS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY: IDEOLOGICAL, TEMPORAL, SECTORAL

Progressives in Japan and South Korea long have had an ideological outlook that left little room for internationalism with trust in U.S. leadership. Such thinking has lost force in Japan, but can still be seen in demonstrations against the right of collective self-defense.⁷ It is even

stronger in South Korean progressives' insistence on giving North Korea the benefit of the doubt despite ongoing behavior to the contrary. The progressives on both sides have tended to dismiss the other state as anathema to their cause, leading Japanese progressives to prefer North Korea as counterparts in Korea, keeping alive the hope of exposing families of the collaborators with Japan. If in Europe progressives often did forge networks across national boundaries, in these two countries they targeted each other's country as innately unworthy of any trust.

The more compelling ideological challenge comes from Japan's right wing forces led by Abe in recent times. Their utter disregard for South Korea, buttressed by general public sentiment that the South under Park Geun-hye has widened the identity gap to the degree that normal relations became impossible, is rooted in revisionist thinking that the "comfort women" issue and also other invocations of historical memory damage Japan's pride. Abe's 70th anniversary statement showed some solicitude for China's concerns, but little for South Korea's. In *Chosun Ilbo* one sees the residue of similar conservative disdain for Japan, but an ascendant realist tendency is driving a more pragmatic attitude to find a path forward with security ties as a priority. A common view in Tokyo is that Park's obsession with the "comfort women" is driven by a hostile ideology, in Seoul it is that Abe is obsessed with ideology.

As countries are marginalized by globalization and polarization dominated by the United States and China, they turn to their past for validation of their worth. For Koreans, history to the end of the nineteenth century despite rethinking during the 1960s-70s has the dual drawbacks of *sadae* (extreme deference to China) and failure to prepare the way to meet or even resist the new challenges of the modern world. Given the ambivalence about the Cold War era, when dictatorship drove modernization, the unifying historical narrative is antipathy to Japan's annexation and its genocidal cultural policies. There is no symbol of relief, such as any Japanese acknowledgment of forced annexation or success by Koreans in restoring their own sovereignty; other symbols have been chosen to test whether the Korean sense of dignity about the past is to be restored by Japan, but, so far, it surely has not been.

Japan's temporal identity likewise has become fixated on the period to 1945. Unable on the right or the left to take genuine pride in the Cold War era—as each blames the other for its shortcomings—they have battled over whether Japan now should look to the period 1868 to 1945 to put down deep roots for a reconstructed national identity. Increasingly, it is the conservatives who are defining historical memories, e.g., seizing the opportunity of major anniversaries to express pride in historical deeds, such as in 2005 glorifying Japan's victory over Russia. Along with China's effort to demonize Japan's history, South Korean interpretations of it are viewed with animosity. In turn, the more Koreans perceived a revisionist trend in Japan, the more they were inclined to put history higher in their perceptions of identity gaps with Japanese. The December 28 agreement may open the door to reconsider these embedded sentiments, but few are willing to go through the door.

This dimension has overshadowed all other dimensions in the Japan-ROK identity gap and is likely to continue to do so. It serves as a convenient outlet when direct attention to other dimensions is best avoided. Ideology can be encapsulated as an offshoot of history, often leaving aside the need to discuss it directly. Even as other dimensions, especially the horizontal one covering international relations, can lead to narrower gaps, insistence reigns that history is the sole, sharp dividing line.

It has long been assumed that Tokyo and Seoul would find little reason for a gap on the sectoral dimension. Politically, they are democracies, which showcase their adherence to the prevailing norms of freedom, popular representation, and human rights. In their economies, they had stopped claiming special characteristics, while embracing the general principles of the free market now to be reinforced by the “gold standard” of TPP (which South Korea is eager to join as well). Even in regard to cultural identity, they generally accept universal values within a single global civilization. Prospects for convergence on this dimension combining political, economic, and cultural aspects, were widely assumed despite historical memory.

The problem has not been political identity, as in the case of China or Russia, nor economic identity, as once was the case for both Japan and South Korea when their booms appeared to be never-ending, but cultural identity. Each has eschewed stress on universal values as the dominant cultural force and lost hope in a regional community of shared Confucian values. Instead, the uniqueness of Koreanness, even as it is less about bloodlines, and of Japaneseness, even if the extreme of *Nihonjinron* was less pronounced than in the days of the bubble economy, has been emphasized. The power of this aspect of identity had been underestimated. With all the talk that “civic identity” is gaining at the expense of “Koreanness” and *Nihonjinron* had faded after the bubble era, the resilience of claims to be a civilizational center is a surprise.

THE IMPACT OF THE “COMFORT WOMEN” AGREEMENT OF DECEMBER 28

Kimura Kan in March 2016 analyzed Park’s abrupt turnabout from hard on Japan, soft on China, explaining how the December 28 agreement was reached and the enormous U.S. role in the process.⁸ The impression is that Japan yielded on taking government responsibility—seemingly a blow to national identity, but not a new one—while South Korea yielded on accepting something close to the Kono line, not demanding legal reparations, and affirming that it was abandoning any further use of the “comfort women” issue, what Japanese call the No. 1 “neck” in bilateral relations. The price to Korean national identity is much greater, it appears. Kimura points to both Abe and Park making big identity adjustments in response to the U.S. “audience,” i.e., U.S. pressure. Torn between two groups of advisors, Abe chose the “attend to America” line over the revisionist line through a series of steps in 2015, culminating in this agreement. Countering the disturbing image for Americans of standing with Xi and Putin on September 3 and aware of the positive impact in Washington of Abe’s moves, including his speech before the Joint Session of Congress and his August statement, Park too decided that South Korea had to be a member of the “U.S. team.” This was more than a strategic shift; it was an identity shift, accepting U.S. leadership in articulating an identity in opposition to China as well as North Korea. Kimura notes that more than 50 percent of the Korean public disapproved of the December 28 deal and that Park’s popularity fell by 4 percent. Yet, Park acted and, he notes, seeks to join TPP not really for economic benefits but because this affirms her country’s place in the U.S.-led trans-Pacific union. While Seoul has focused on how to get Washington and Beijing to work closer together and Tokyo has focused on the need for Washington to more fully oppose Beijing, this divide narrowed in 2015 and is narrowing further after North Korea’s provocations.

Summing up Abe's handling of the history issue in 2016, culminating with the "comfort women" agreement with Park, *Yomiuri Shimbun* offers effusive praise for his success in uniting left and right in Japan and taking the "history card" off the table with China and South Korea, while also diffusing U.S. concerns. Listing the milestones of this remarkable year, ending with Abe insisting that he wants history now to be left to the next generation, the article concludes only with one sour note, i.e., that strong dissatisfaction in South Korea may mean that the "history card" is, in fact, not dead.⁹ Japanese view Koreans as emotionally driven to use the divide over history as a cudgel to demonize them, while assuming that they just want to put this aside, as if no national identity gap would endure. Indeed, reinvigorating triangular security ties with the United States, which center on North Korea but cannot exclude some focus on China too, appears promising to them for boosting identity overlap.

One response to the agreement from progressives in Japan is to foresee a new age in bilateral relations, when rising awareness of commonalities will prevail over symbols of differences. Okonogi Masao called for dialogue at the level of civil society in order to bring these commonalities to the foreground, as he described the 2016 agreement as the third (after 1965 and 1998) turning point toward a new era. He lists a shared sense of security, relying on the United States, market economies (unmentioned is possible TPP bonding and a desire to guide China toward greater market economics), democracy, human rights, and other universal values. Raising awareness of these shared identities is now within reach, building relations looking to the future.¹⁰ On the left, Japanese were determined to narrow the identity gap.

On the right, a more cautious attitude toward narrowing the gap could be observed. Bolstering this view was the claim that Park had succumbed to pressure to end her refusal to meet Abe and reach a deal on the "comfort women." As early as June 2015—weeks after the Obama-Abe summit and in preparation for her own summit with Obama—she did so, much to the relief of her security community in the face of pessimism about North Korea and concern in the business community.¹¹

One assessment of the December 28 agreement was that it resulted from new U.S. pressure and economic urgency in South Korea. Tokyo had been pressing for the words "final and irreversible resolution," but Seoul was balking in awareness that the public was too obsessed with this symbol, representing the history issue as a whole, to let go. The Park-Obama summit revealed a resolute U.S. position against China, given its militarization of the South China Sea and cyber security attacks, with insistence that the triangular alliance be realized and the history issue be resolved. At the same time, the rising value of the won and the slowdown in China's economy had put the brakes on Korea's economic growth, including a decline in Japan-ROK trade by about 20 percent in 2011 to 2014. Coupled with anti-Korean sentiments spreading in Japan—youth interest in studying Korean was falling and travel there had fallen by a third—Park yielded, is the message in a right-wing journal *Sapio*.¹²

UNCERTAINTY ABOUT THE DECEMBER 28 AGREEMENT STICKING

The December 28 agreement, building on the momentum of both the August Abe statement and response by Park and the Obama summits with both leaders, will be tested in the waning years of Park and Abe's tenure and by their successors. One test is whether the Koreans will

remove the “comfort women” statue in front of the Japanese embassy, despite opposition from most Koreans (among those in their 20s, 87 percent opposed doing so, and among those supporting opposition parties 75 percent were opposed).¹³ Another is will Abe be consistent in adhering to the spirit of the statement that Japan is responsible for the treatment of the “comfort women” and for past misconduct in South Korea. In *Asahi Shimbun*, e.g. in an article by Togo Kazuhiko, the need for both to build on the momentum was stressed,¹⁴ whereas conservative papers in Japan and progressive ones in Korea were focused only on the other side. *Mainichi Shimbun* also stressed mutual responsibility and the need to work hard in Japan to suppress opposition to the promises made, while observing that the ball is in now in the Korean court.¹⁵ As Tokyo Shimbun explained, Korean NGOs and overseas Koreans angered by the “comfort women” issue will continue to try to sway public opinion, but it took heart from what it calls “comfort women question fatigue” that has been mounting in South Korea.¹⁶ On February 1, *Asahi* was gratified that calm was largely restored in South Korea. Park’s support has stayed steady, Korean business is turning more to Japan, and the public is slowly shifting.¹⁷ Others said that North Korea had changed the subject, relieving Japan of being the whipping boy and turning public disapproval increasingly toward China.¹⁸

Expectations for the agreement sticking were not high on either side, notably on the far right in Japan (*Sankei*) and the far left in South Korea (*Hankyoreh*). These extremes viewed the other side as inherently hostile (anti-Japan, anti-Korea). Rather than discuss a joint approach with efforts on both sides to reinforce the agreement, they pointed to reasons the other side could not be trusted. Indeed, their agendas are more readily pursued if there is no self-criticism about this dispute and if the issue stays alive, given assumptions that the other side’s reasoning is still anathema.

The identity gap between Tokyo and Seoul is too ingrained to be overcome by one deal. As opponents asserted in comments from readers to *Sankei*, nobody believes that the final resolution of the “comfort women” issue has been reached, and many doubt that the statue in Seoul will be removed while regretting Japanese admissions about past conduct to get the deal. One article, reporting on reactions, warned that the deal could shatter the honeymoon between Abe and the right.²⁰

Despite opposition for some in the right wing, *Sankei* savored the agreement with Seoul as liberation from a destiny of apologies after one Korean president after another had reached an understanding with Japan only to have a successor resort to the “history card” again. In this light, the agreement is seen as the next step after the August Abe statement to relieve future generations of Japanese from having to keep apologizing, as Abe had insisted was his goal. In this perspective, Japan is now free to pursue narrow historical revisionism, while the ROK has abandoned the same.²¹

The key demand by the Japanese side was that the “goalposts” must not be moved again; this agreement must be final and irreversible. This is a sign of distrust linked to belief that the Korean DNA is anti-Japan. The key demand from the Korean side was that the Japanese government must assume real responsibility for the “comfort women,” a sign that what matters is an admission of guilt for Japan’s conduct during the period of imperialist control. Each side reflected its own national identity aims, gaining some “normalcy” in an identity obsessed with the other.

After the agreement, a backlash was inevitable in both states, but less so in Japan, where boosters of extreme national identity wrote of the reasons why South Korea capitulated. Even so, having been quieted in 2015 as Abe compromised his ideals, they were poised for renewed assertiveness as he gives more free rein to the revisionist side of his coalition. The lack of international identity in his circle would also make it difficult to rally behind possible U.S. efforts to solidify shared identity as a foundation for the desired trilateralism, nor would the progressives provide much help, given their limited interest in Japan's role in international security. The upshot is that, as occurred after the 1998 Obuchi-Kim Dae-jung "historic" agreement, the political elite in Japan is unlikely to abide by its spirit. Yet, Seoul is a bigger problem.

On the Japanese side there were many signs that the 2000s "Korea wave" had yielded to "hate Korea" of the mid-2010s. Bookstores had stacks of books with this wording in their titles. Japanese newspapers, not just Sankei, repeatedly reported on "anti-Japan" activities by South Koreans and Korean Americans. Fewer Japanese visited "Koreatowns" in Osaka and Tokyo (120 of about 500 stores closed from mid-2012)²² and traveled to South Korea, even as the number of South Koreans going to Japan was rising rapidly.²³ Turning this trend around today will not be automatic.

A month after the agreement conservatives in Japan faulted South Korea for not carrying it out—some threatening to withhold Japan's promised payment to the new fund for "comfort women" until the statue is removed. Yet, they also saw North Korea's behavior as driving the ROK into closer security ties with Japan.²⁴

The deeper backlash in South Korea has many causes. First, the split between the conservatives and progressives is wider; the latter are inclined to see the former as the progeny of collaborators and to consider the "comfort women" a symbol of victimization. There is little room for compromise with Japan. Second, the decision to side closely with the United States (and Japan), as polarization intensifies, leaves them without hope on North Korea or on Sino-U.S. balancing, challenging the goals for national identity they have relished. The price for Korean progressives and some under their sway is too high in contrast to the price for Japanese of all persuasions of a deal with South Korea. Park faces an uphill battle changing this thinking and getting her nation to accept that a "final and irreversible" resolution has occurred.

TRIANGULAR IDENTITY CONSIDERATIONS

In reaching a bilateral agreement there was recognition that identity with the U.S.-led international community must take precedence over newly resurgent identity gaps with each other. Over the two years after Abe's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine, the focus on U.S. thinking was unmistakable. Was it putting more blame on Abe or Park? Which side was gaining an edge in the "history wars" being fought inside the United States? Whose summit with Obama was more successful? Were statements by U.S. officials a sign of which way Washington was leaning? Were independent policies in pursuit of another great power (China for Park, Russia for Abe) causing too much damage to U.S. relations? As the world returns to bipolarity and U.S. leadership is more firmly asserted, coordination behind a shared identity puts pressure on moves by allies to assert alternate and clashing identities that interfere with this objective.

The Obama administration, championing international norms as freedom of navigation, succeeded in rallying countries across much of maritime Asia as well as Australia behind a framework of closer cooperation and sustained hedging against Chinese assertiveness and aggression. Under Abe, Japan firmly embraced the values advocated by the United States despite the shadow of historical revisionism, whose main impact was in relations with South Korea. In 2015 the image of Park joining Xi in demonizing Japan, as Abe showed sufficient restraint on history to satisfy the U.S. administration, and Park hesitating to openly support freedom of navigation due to not wanting to antagonize China, left Park appearing out of touch as the region was drawing closer together behind the U.S. “rebalance” to Asia. The pressure on Park was enormous to reassure Obama, clarify Seoul’s place in the emerging coalition, and strive for a resolution to the “comfort women” issue. The triangle symbolized the “rebalance” in Northeast Asia, and it became a vital piece in the U.S. framework.

While the U.S. factor loomed large, the China factor may have been no less important as Abe sacrificed on long-held views about national identity in pursuit of a regional alignment against a threat deemed so serious—not just militarily and economically, but ideologically—that his policies toward Southeast Asia, India, and Russia are premised on it. That his policy toward South Korea long seemed to be the exception might be attributed to the assumption in Japanese conservative circles that Park’s “honeymoon” with Xi Jinping and antipathy toward Abe left little room for maneuver. Yet, signs of more nervousness in South Korea about China (despite Park’s attendance at Xi’s 70th anniversary military parade), as hope for cooperation against North Korea was fading, gave Abe reason to put relations on a fresh footing.

Following the “comfort women” agreement and North Korea’s fourth nuclear test, there were growing expectations of triangularity with the United States, which prompted progressives in both Japan and South Korea to object—in no small part because of national identity concerns. As Washington was rallying its allies and putting a rare degree of pressure on Beijing, *Asahi* editorialized that not only is China a “hole” in the containment of North Korea and, as a great power, should assume responsibility for tighter sanctions on a country that is endangering world peace, but that the United States should meet the North’s wish for negotiations on a peace agreement, putting responsibility on the Obama administration for the North conducting three nuclear tests on its watch.²⁵ This appeal for resumption of the Six-Party Talks, as sought by Korean progressives, undervalues what has already been done to engage the North and misjudges what the North has really been demanding. The U.S.-Japan-ROK alignment has strong support from conservatives, as conducive to pursuing their ideas for national identity, but progressives are left quite skittish.

CONCLUSION

Narrow national identities have been exacerbated in Japanese-ROK relations to the detriment of the U.S. “rebalance” to Asia and the benefit of China’s divisive plans to weaken the U.S. and Japanese positions in East Asia. Allies long resentful of real or imagined U.S. pressure seen as unbecoming treatment of an equal partner became obsessed with bilateral identity gaps. The Japan-China gap over history reinforced their national identity gap on other dimensions and the polarization occurring over universal values, but the Japan-ROK gap over historical symbols defied the currents in the region and posed a serious obstacle to the “rebalance.” Finally, in December 2015 an agreement was reached on the principal symbol of Japan-ROK

mistrust, opening the way to convergence around values conducive to U.S. leadership in the increasingly troubled environment of Chinese, Russian, and North Korean defiance.

The road ahead to subsuming identity differences under the rubric of shared international identity is unlikely to be smooth. Pragmatic conservatives welcomed the December 28 agreement, but ideological conservatives are wary, and Korean progressives are the most wary. Distrust of the United States—and focus on a national identity gap with it—lies behind their wariness. Fearful of the future, they cling to symbols of the past on which they anchor their sense of national identity. The priority of reunification is an enabling factor in South Korea. A search for pride in the prewar and wartime past is a driving force in Japan. Park and Abe boosted the themes that work against refocusing on the future. Whether they can switch to new appeals, backed by Obama, for a shared international identity remains to be seen.

Japanese and South Korean leaders in 2015 both made unexpected shifts in national identity. Abe was able to do so with less opposition than Park for four reasons: 1) as the leader of the revisionist cause, he could keep much of his base, as he championed other symbols of their identity; 2) South Korea is a less prominent factor in Japan's identity than Japan is in South Korea's identity; 3) the Abe strategy of pursuing the closest alliance ever with the United States was more compelling and more consistent with U.S. appeals for trilateralism and a more visibly shared, joint identity, while Park's strategy of combining closeness with the United States and a "honeymoon" with China proved impossible to sustain; and 4) Abe's driving force is fear of China's demonization of Japan's national identity, giving him a more powerful symbol of what needed to be done, in contrast to Park's driving force of the "bonanza" of unification with North Korea, which proved to be an illusion. The failure of "trustpolitik" with the North and reliance on China left Park in urgent need of strengthening ties and affirming an identity overlap with the United States, which was prioritizing trilateralism, i.e., Japan ties, within the international community.

After the February 7 North Korean long-range missile test, Japanese stressed the unanimity of approach in Seoul, Washington, and Tokyo, but not in Beijing. There was a sense that Seoul is back in the fold,²⁶ although some in the progressive camp in both Tokyo and Seoul still talked of 5 vs. 1, as if China and Russia would concur.²⁷

The significance of this agreement is captured in references to a "new age" not only in bilateral relations, but in U.S.-led regionalism, strategically, economically, and in the increasingly polarized struggle over identity. Thus, much is made in both Tokyo and Seoul of how this is not just an agreement between the two but a turning point toward trilateralism as welcomed by the United States.²⁸ Much depends on how the political struggle for succession to Park and Abe proceeds in the coming years.

While the national interests of Tokyo and Seoul are more aligned than before and more so than in 1998 when an agreement sought to leave "history" behind, the national identity conflict is far from resolved. There is no "final and irreversible resolution" when opponents of Park are rallying behind the "comfort women" statue in front of the Japanese embassy, as if its removal is tantamount to abandoning the essence of Korean identity. Nor can one be optimistic that Japanese revisionists, including high officials, after swallowing many challenges to their agenda from Abe, will not insensitively provoke South Koreans. It is too early to conclude that recent compromises—more at U.S. insistence than a sign of strong domestic movements—are transforming national identity narratives.

Pressure during the Cold War kept Japan and South Korea rather subdued in the way they presented their national identities, especially at odds with their ally. Again in 2015 U.S. pressure was rising to express a shared identity, demonstrating a consensus versus China's aggressive moves, above all. More eager to rally around this goal, Abe proved more conciliatory and was quicker to satisfy U.S. expectations. After all, he understood that China's challenge to Japan's national identity as well as its security was incalculable. Park was slower to respond, understandable in light of the lack of attention to Chinese demonization of South Korea in 2009-12 (parallel to that of Japan but not as vehement or as conspicuous) and her obsession with a joint Sino-ROK strategy toward North Korea. The message from Washington to Park that Japan is not the enemy but a democratic partner and a close U.S. ally, grew pointed.

The U.S. challenge of building on an agreement for which it struggled so hard will not be easy. It needs to strengthen a shared security identity (South Korea is the weak link) and use it to broaden agreement on internationalism (which new 2017 leadership in the United States could leave in doubt), presumably directed against China's actions. TPP, trilateral security, and a vision of community all will matter. It would be shortsighted to expect that Washington can impose its vision as during the Cold War. Instead, it must be attentive to the struggles over national identity in both Japan and South Korea and the lingering potential that they will retarget each other. This is no time to rest on one's laurels for a job well done in 2015. The Japan-South Korea agreement remains fragile and will require constant attention and reinforcement.

ENDNOTES

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8. Kimura Kan and Kawashima Shin, "ianfu mondai goi wa Beichu powergame no okurimono," *Chuo Koron*, March 2016, pp. 34-43.
9. *Yomiuri Shimbun*, December 31, 2015, p. 4.
10. *Asahi Shimbun*, December 29, 2015, p. 8.
11. *Yomiuri Shimbun*, December 29, 2015, p. 9.
12. *Sapio*, March 2016, <http://zasshi.news.yahoo.co.jp/article?a=20160216-00000021-pseven-kr>, accessed February 17, 2016.
13. *Mainichi Shimbun*, December 31, 2015, p. 2.
14. *Asahi Shimbun*, December 30, 2015, p. 3.
15. *Mainichi Shimbun*, December 31, 2015, p. 2.
16. *Tokyo Shimbun*, December 31, 2015, p. 3.
17. *Asahi Shimbun*, February 2, 2016, p. 3.
18. *Yomiuri Shimbun*, January 15, p. 3 and February 7, 2016, p. 7.
19. *Sankei Shimbun*, January 8, 2016, p. 6.
20. *Tokyo Shimbun*, January 9, 2016, p. 22.
21. *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, December 26, 2015, p. 2.
22. *Tokyo Shimbun*, December 29, 2015, p. 22.
23. *Yomiuri Shimbun*, December 29, 2015, p. 29.
24. *Sankei Shimbun*, January 28, 2016, p. 9; *Yomiuri Shimbun*, January 28, 2016, p. 3.
25. *Asahi Shimbun*, January 9, 2016, p.16.
26. *Sankei Shimbun*, February 8, 2016, pp. 1, 8.
27. *Mainichi Shimbun*, February 8, 2016, p. 6.
28. *Tokyo Shimbun*, January 9, 2016, p. 22.