



THE LIMITS OF IDENTITY POLITICS AND THE STRATEGIC CASE FOR U.S.-ROK-JAPAN TRILATERALISM

By Brad Glosserman

Abstract

The ROK-Japan relationship seemingly found a floor after the downward spiral that marked the end of the Lee Myung-Bak presidency and the first three years of President Park Geun-hye. Seoul and Tokyo are now cooperating more closely together and with the United States to address the North Korean security threat. In particular, hard military cooperation has been enhanced as the three countries' navies hold joint exercises and their diplomats have increased the tempo of meetings to better align policies. Fault lines and points of disagreement persist, however, in particular the fate of the December 2015 "comfort women" agreement. The election of Moon Jae-in in Seoul and Donald Trump in Washington could pump new centrifugal forces into these bilateral and trilateral relationships, however, erasing those gains. Strategists in both countries should be concerned about their country's prospects in the middle- and long-term. In many ways, options will diminish and the best counter to those shrinking horizons is the forging of relationships with like-minded partners who share geopolitical concerns. Dealing with North Korea (or northern Korea post-unification) poses a special problem for Seoul. In either case, China will retain outsized influence over South Korean policymaking, and THAAD is illustrative of how Beijing will try to use that influence in an overbearing and heavy-handed manner. It makes much more sense for Seoul to attempt to use Japan as an offshore balancer to limit Chinese influence and overreach.

Key Words: *Japan-ROK relations, identity politics, trilateralism, comfort women agreement, regional uncertainty*

Introduction

Northeast Asian security dynamics are in a state of unprecedented flux. The status quo is being pummeled by new security capabilities, national political dynamics, and a shifting balance of power. As a result, many of the verities that have guided policy in this region for the last two decades, if not longer, are being questioned and must be reassessed.

In this environment, U.S. strategists and security planners have put a premium on cooperation among the U.S. and its two regional allies, the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Japan. As tensions in the region have increased, cooperation has, worryingly, become more difficult, primarily as a result of growing frictions between Seoul and Tokyo. This tension has roots in the tangled history of ROK-Japan relations, which has been magnified in recent years by the emergence of identity politics in both countries. This orientation is increasingly central to domestic politics in both countries, which, in the hothouse atmosphere of Northeast Asia, has deepened divides among these erstwhile partners even as security threats intensify.

In *The Japan-ROK Identity Clash*, Scott Snyder and I offered several recommendations to the ROK, Japan, and the United States aimed at assuaging tensions which were adopted—renewed bureaucratic attention and energy focused on trilateralism, an agreement on "comfort women," and greater activism on the part of the United States to address history issues.¹ To our chagrin, however, the problems persist and show no sign of abating, while Japan-ROK identity-oriented tensions and a distracted U.S. threaten to roll back hard-won progress.

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Nevertheless, there are reasons to be optimistic about the prospects for ROK-Japan relations and trilateralism in Northeast Asia. First, there is the pragmatism and professionalism that animate the foreign and security policy bureaucracies in Seoul and Tokyo in response to the unmistakable threat posed by North Korea. Second, there are the ambitions of national leaders in each country, Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo in particular. Genuine historical reconciliation between South Korea and Japan may seem like a long shot, especially under current circumstances, but Abe at least aspires to greatness and while he has confirmed his place among Japanese prime ministers—he is currently the sixth longest-serving prime minister in modern Japanese history and if he stays in office until the 2020 Tokyo Olympics as he plans, he will be the longest-serving PM ever. A stable, enduring and forward-oriented relationship between the two countries would establish him—and his South Korean partner—as genuinely world historical figures. Third, there are compelling strategic reasons for both South Korea and Japan to forge a positive relationship. Strategists in both countries should be concerned about their country’s prospects in the middle- and long-term. In many ways, options will be diminishing and the best counter to those shrinking horizons is the forging of relationships with like-minded partners who share geopolitical concerns. It is hard to find two countries for which objective circumstances should more compel cooperation.

This paper attempts to make that case. It starts with a brief explanation of the case for partnership and an analysis of the issues that divide South Korea and Japan, and then looks in more depth at the state of bilateral and trilateral security cooperation.² It then explores the obstacles to closer cooperation between the two countries, and concludes with the strategic case for cooperation.

The Case for Partnership

At first glance, South Korea and Japan have compelling reasons to work together. They are both liberal democracies, with shared values political and economic interests. Both are trading countries with powerful export machines, which creates a convergent interest in the maintenance of a free and open international trading system. Both are members of many of the same economic and political institutions, the most prominent of which include the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, the ASEAN Plus Three, the G20, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the Six-Party Talks.

Significantly, both are U.S. allies. Their geographic proximity in combination with their shared values would seem to align their national security interests, and their diplomatic language (and their security diplomacy in general) tends to echo the other’s. Japan’s Diplomatic Blue Book has rightly noted that “The Republic of Korea (ROK) is Japan’s most important neighbor that shares strategic interests with Japan. Their good relationship is essential for peace and stability in the Asian-Pacific region.”³ The ROK government agrees, albeit with a little less enthusiasm, noting that “The Republic of Korea and Japan are close neighboring countries with a rich tradition of exchanges and cooperation, and are important partners that share similar values and interests.”⁴ Importantly, both countries see North Korea as an imminent and growing threat that must be addressed; both believe that Pyongyang is increasing its military capabilities in ways that undermine their own national security. Both worry that North Korea could embroil the region in conflict either by design or miscalculation and the impact would be devastating to them.

That seeming congruity of interests and perspectives has been sufficient to sustain some cooperation, but the gap between what is and what could be is a source of considerable frustration to individuals working on the front lines of security problems as well as analysts who view security cooperation through a predominately realist lens. Despite periodic attempts to put this bilateral relationship on a new, forward-oriented trajectory, the past continues to intrude on their present. The sources of mistrust and tension are manifold. The most important is Japan’s colonization of the Korean Peninsula in the early part of the 20th century, which yielded a lengthy list of misbehaviors for which many South Koreans demand an accounting: the “comfort women” forced into sexual slavery, forced labor, and the destruction of Korean culture through forced assimilation policies. The aftermath of the war produced the continuing division of the Korean Peninsula and a territorial dispute over islands occupied by the ROK and claimed by Japan. Japan’s failure to repent to the satisfaction of the ROK public ensures that these grievances stay alive and the ill will flares when these issues are discussed in contemporary Japan. The statements of nationalist politicians asserting Japan’s claim to the disputed territory, minimizing official responsibility for or the numbers of “comfort women,” or disputing the costs of colonization are all gasoline on the tinder of historical grievance.

As Snyder and I argued in our book, the primary dispute between the two countries concerns the treatment of history and national



narrative. For South Koreans, a distinctive national identity has been forged atop the image of “the other,” in many cases that of a hostile or threatening Japan. For Japan, the prevailing national identity incorporates elements of a victim complex that are incompatible with the notion that Tokyo itself can be a victimizer. Japan’s own sense of grievance is compounded by the belief that Japan’s help in modernizing Korea has been ignored. Finally, the two countries have a deep-rooted rivalry that goes back centuries and continues to color perceptions of the other to this day. These forces and memories have created a substantial impediment to a positive and sustainable relationship, and prevent the creation of momentum sufficient to keep relations moving forward when issues flare.

Relations reached their nadir in 2012, when South Korea canceled the planned signing of a bilateral General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), an important but nonetheless anodyne document, under parliamentary pressure at the last minute, underscoring the sense of drift, if not outright hostility, in the bilateral relationship. ROK President Lee Myung Bak subsequently visited the disputed territory of Dokdo/Takeshima and then made disparaging remarks about conditions for a hypothetical visit to Korea by Japan’s emperor. When Park Geun-hye succeeded Lee as president, relations remained largely frozen as Park waited for Japan to do more to demonstrate its commitment to a better relationship. There were few substantive encounters between the ROK and Japanese leaders, and the ones that did occur were notable by their coolness (especially in comparison with the cordial, if not friendly, relations between President Park and Chinese President Xi Jinping).

Park’s call went largely unheeded. But by 2015, conditions had changed and U.S. urgings and behind the scenes efforts had become so pronounced that South Korea and Japan could reach agreement on a “settlement to the comfort women issue.”⁵ The deal they struck was intended to “finally and irreversibly resolve” the matter. The fate of that agreement is now under review by the new Moon Jae-in administration, but the new government has said that it will not bar practical cooperation with Japan. It seems, at least for now, as though a floor has been established.

A Rebound, with Some Help

Throughout the Park presidency some trilateral cooperation continued, however. For example, in December 2014, the three countries announced an arrangement to share information related to North Korean weapons of mass destruction, nuclear

tests and long-range missile launches.⁶ Experts conceded that the agreement was limited in scope, but the demonstration of a commitment to cooperation and the implicit acknowledgement that some threats transcended politics were reassuring. This optimistic assessment was validated when South Korea and Japan signed the long-delayed GSOMIA in November 2016, but by then it was becoming clear that the Park administration was starting to unravel as a result of snowballing allegations of bribery and corruption regarding Park’s long-time personal friend, Choi Soon-shil.

These diplomatic breakthroughs can be attributed to the national security bureaucracies, which labored to insulate working relations from political perturbations. The United States attempted to jump-start Japan-ROK bilateral relations through a March 2014 meeting among Presidents Park, Abe, and Obama at The Hague. Following the December 2015 “comfort woman” agreement, the United States established a quarterly trilateral vice-ministerial meeting in an effort to institutionalize cooperation. Deputy Secretary of State Tony Blinken made trilateral coordination a priority as part of the Obama administration’s pivot to Asia with a major speech on trilateralism in March of 2016 at the Brookings Institution.⁷ When leaders did convene, the resulting diplomatic language was reassuring even if the body language was not. Foreign and defense ministers emphasized the importance of cooperation to address the North Korean threat and the need to align the positions of the three governments.

With the “comfort women” problem officially handled, trilateral activity accelerated throughout 2016. There were nearly a dozen senior-level meetings throughout the year, which corralled foreign ministers, vice foreign ministers, the U.S. vice president, and special envoys for North Korea, as well as top military officials such as defense ministers and heads of joint staffs. One of the highlights of the year was a trilateral missile defense exercise that was held in the summer of 2016.

There were concerns, however, that both commitment to trilateralism and the pace of activity would subside in 2017 with the changes of administration in Washington and Seoul. The “America First” mentality of Donald Trump raised questions about the U.S. commitment to its alliances worldwide, its readiness to address the North Korean problem, and the energy that it would expend on trilateralism. The impeachment of President Park and the seeming inevitability of a progressive victory in the subsequent ROK elections sparked similar concerns. Observers



worried about the alignment of the new Seoul government with Washington and Tokyo when dealing with Pyongyang and its readiness to cooperate with those two security partners. More troubling still were questions about the viability of the 2015 “comfort woman” agreement, which, if challenged, could destroy the foundation of ROK-Japan cooperation generally.

From one perspective, those concerns were validated by a downturn in relations between South Korea and Japan when a “comfort girl” statue was unveiled in front of the Japanese consulate in Busan. Calling the decision a violation of the December 2015 agreement, in January 2017 Tokyo recalled its ambassador from Seoul and its consul general from Busan. Close associates of Prime Minister Abe told the press that Japan would wait until Seoul took action to deal with the statue, a prospect that alarmed the United States and prompted departing Secretary of State John Kerry to call both Seoul and Tokyo to inform them of his concern and the U.S. willingness to work to bring the three back together.

In subsequent meetings between U.S. and Japanese officials, including the February Mar-a-Lago summit between President Trump and Prime Minister Abe, there were repeated affirmations of the value of trilateralism. Secretary of Defense Mattis, Secretary of State Tillerson and Vice President Pence all promoted the need for trilateral coordination during their respective tours of Asia and made the case in person while in Seoul and Tokyo. And in fact, trilateral meetings continued, with foreign ministers sitting down on the sidelines of the February G20 ministerial, while the Six-Party Talks envoys continued their consultations later that same month and again in April. Defense Trilateral Talks were held in April, and the defense ministers met on the sidelines of the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in early June.⁸

Valuable military cooperation was also taking place largely out of sight. In January, destroyers from the three countries (*USS Stethem*, *MSDF Kirishima*, and *ROKN Sejong the Great*) conducted “missile detection and tracking drills” in the waters off the Korean Peninsula and Japan, the third in a series of maneuvers (the first two were held in June and November 2015).⁹ In March, two of those three ships (the *USS Curtis Wilbur* substituted for the *Stethem*) held two days of drills in a “trilateral missile warning informational link exercise” to improve their ability to shoot down ballistic missiles. In April, the three held their first antisubmarine warfare drills, which involved more than 800 troops, multiple naval destroyers and helicopters. Finally, in May,

the three air forces conducted training missions when a Guam-based B-1B Lancer bomber first trained with F-15J *Eagles* from the Japanese ASDF and then flew to South Korean airspace, where it trained with ROK Air Force F-15K *Slam Eagles* and F-16s.

Plainly, bilateral political problems between Seoul and Tokyo have had limited impact on trilateralism in 2017. The highest-level meetings were halted, but that was a reflection of the political turmoil in Seoul more than anything else. It is well worth noting that military exercises, which typically occur far from public view, have intensified, as seems right, to keep pace with a worsening North Korean threat.

Both governments appear to have recognized that there must be limits to identity politics. The Japanese government recognized that it had backed itself into a diplomatic corner by withdrawing its ambassador and Busan consul general and reversed course. Tokyo realized that it needed a senior presence in Seoul during the Korean presidential campaign and could not afford to be seen as the belligerent as candidates assessed the future of relations with Japan. As a senior official explained, playing the blame game was an indulgence: “we cannot be talking about ‘which court the ball is in.’”¹⁰ Reportedly, Prime Minister Abe made the call to return the diplomats even though no results had been produced. As one security analyst explained “we prioritized immediate security concerns over bilateral political disputes.”¹¹ Similarly, the ROK government continues to support trilateralism, although it has been forced to handle gingerly any initiative supported by the ousted president, such as reconciliation, no matter how tentative, with Japan. When Japanese Ambassador Nagamine Yasumasa returned to Seoul in April, he was unable to secure a meeting with acting President Hwang Kyo-ahn for almost a month because the Seoul government worried about a domestic backlash over any sign of favoritism toward Japan.

New Political Realities?

The key question then is where President Moon will draw those lines. He is an unabashed critic of the “comfort women” agreement, noting that the deal needs to be renegotiated in principle, and telling Prime Minister Abe in their first phone call, “The reality is the majority of our people cannot emotionally accept the comfort women agreement.”¹² Instead, “the two sides should work together based on understanding of the emotions and reality of the people.” Moon has expressed reluctance about intervening or removing the statues of the “comfort girl,” to



great irritation of the Japanese, in front of their embassy in Seoul and their consulate in Busan. He has visited the Seoul statue and urged the public to remain interested in the issue.

This is part of a wider activism against Japan's historical misdeeds against South Korea. Moon was a member of a public-private committee on wartime reparations formed in 2005 by then-President Roh Moo-hyun. That panel demanded the Japanese government officially acknowledge and accept legal responsibility for crimes committed against "comfort women." It also concluded that the 1965 normalization agreement did not cover those claims. During the 2012 presidential campaign he promised to restrict Japanese companies that used forced Korean labor during World War II from bidding on South Korean projects. He also visited the disputed island of Dokdo/Takeshima. Moon has demonstrated a readiness to play the history card.

Significantly, however, he also believes that this issue should not affect the wider South Korea-Japan relationship. A week after the election, Moon's special envoy Moon Hee-sang visited Japan to tell Prime Minister Abe that the new president wanted to resume shuttle diplomacy, noting that the two nations shared values, were neighbors, and had to work together to resolve the North Korean problem. The prime minister reciprocated, adding that "South Korea is our most important neighbor with which we share strategic interests. I hope to build a future-oriented, bilateral relationship with President Moon and his administration." President Moon delivered that same message himself in a May 12 teleconference with Abe, noting that it was vital to cooperate to deal with North Korea, while he underscored the Korean public's opposition to the "comfort women" agreement and the need to resolve the wider set of history issues. (Some news reports characterized the conversation as "acrimonious.") North Korea provided a quick reminder only four days following Moon's election of the need for cooperation by testing missiles. Korean, U.S., and Japanese officials all conferred and agreed on the need to work together to rein in such misbehavior.

This two-track approach—one track focuses on peace and security and the other deals with historical disputes—could insulate security cooperation from the pressure of identity politics, but doing so will require reservoirs of patience and a reluctance to play the identity card that few politicians (Korean or elsewhere) have been able to maintain. There is another bound on the likely limits of trilateral cooperation in the new administration in Seoul: as a progressive, Moon has reservations about the value of the

alliance with the U.S., and military cooperation with Washington and Tokyo more generally. A top advisor noted that while Moon values the GSOMIA, he does not want to see it become a tool to promote wider alliance-like cooperation among the three countries.¹³

“Critical to Japan's future is a positive relationship with its neighbors.”

Time Horizons Converge

As Moon takes office in Seoul, he has three main objectives, all of which are inter-related. First, he must restore credibility and legitimacy to the Blue House. That is always a challenge for a newly elected president in South Korea given the deep divides in Korean politics, but it is especially daunting after the impeachment of Park Geun-hye. Expectations and anger are high on all sides. Second, he must get the economy back on track. The third task is dealing with North Korea.

The United States will prove a key partner in addressing all three. The alliance with the U.S., while contested by some, is considered a bedrock commitment by the majority of South Koreans, as Moon's ally and friend Roh Moo-hyun discovered during his presidency. Every ROK president must manage that relationship well and doing so provides credibility and legitimacy. A strong relationship with the U.S. is critical to South Korea's security and its economy. That task is today complicated by the mindset of the partner in Washington and the questions that swirl around the Trump administration's commitment to allies and the provision of security in Asia.

While Moon has said that he and Trump are on the same page when dealing with North Korea,¹⁴ he must worry about Washington's inclination to rely on China to bring North Korea to the table. Trump's transactional mindset could encourage him to trade South Korean equities in dealing with North Korea—and the Korean Peninsula more generally—for Chinese cooperation to address that problem. For Moon, who seeks to put Seoul in front in dealing with Pyongyang, that prospect is worrisome.¹⁵ In addition, the prospect of U.S. unilateralism could encourage South Korea to consider unilateral steps of its own in response, a



worrying dynamic that would have a severe impact on the close institutional coordination between Washington and Seoul that has been cultivated in recent years. Similarly disconcerting is the fear—ever lurking in the back of Korean minds—that the U.S. might take sides in disputes between Tokyo and Seoul and not back the ROK position.¹⁶

As Moon surveys his three priorities, Japan would appear to have a role—unfortunately negative—in dealing with the first, and is tangential to the other two. That would be a miscalculation. Japan can be instrumental in the realization of all three objectives. More importantly, however, middle- and long-term strategic assessments provide a compelling logic for Seoul to build an enduring positive relationship with Tokyo.

As far as domestic legitimacy is concerned, criticizing Japan to mobilize support, while tempting, would alienate a vital security partner, and would thus be a mistake. The decision to pursue relations with Tokyo on two separate tracks is proof that the new ROK government recognizes the value of working with Japan on such issues. The previous U.S. administration worked hard to facilitate cooperation between these two allies, but U.S. officials have never harbored a desire to mediate between the two. It does not make sense to increase the load borne by Japan at a time when Washington is sending mixed messages about its readiness to intervene. That is not good alliance management.

Japan plays an important role in dealing with North Korea, Moon's third priority. The key to getting Pyongyang back to the negotiating table is ensuring that all other members of the Six-Party Talks are united. Pyongyang has an unerring ability to discern cracks in the coalition aligned against it and exploiting them. At a minimum, South Korea, the U.S., and Japan must have a common position and not be working at cross-purposes. While Japan is often overlooked when assessing Korean Peninsula affairs, it has a stake and, more importantly, it can be a spoiler.

Japan may even have a role to play in helping the ROK economy. While the primary challenges are structural and their resolution will depend on political will in Seoul, Japan could offer some assistance to mitigate short-term difficulties. For example, creative diplomacy by Tokyo could help Seoul reduce the economic damage inflicted by China's response to the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Aerial Defense (THAAD) missile defense system. In fact, such assistance is in Tokyo's own interest: not only does it help build a more positive image of Japan among

South Koreans, but it would help Koreans stick to a decision—deployment of a missile defense system—that boosts Japan's own security.

There is, however, a longer-term rationale for Seoul to “get Japan right.” I have argued that Japan faces long-term decline and must adjust its policies and ambitions accordingly.¹⁷ If this is “peak Japan,” then Tokyo must begin now to reassess its relations with Asia and, ultimately, revisit the seminal Meiji era decision to go “out of Asia” (*datsu-a*). Critical to Japan's future is a positive relationship with its neighbors. Tokyo has already done much of the work when it comes to Southeast Asia, largely managing to overcome historical issues and developing cooperative and constructive relationships, although the process is by no means complete. There is more work to be done when it comes to China and South Korea.

It is imperative that South Korea get in front of that process for three reasons. First, because Seoul does not want Japan to first reconcile with Beijing. If that should occur, then Seoul's risks being marginalized and the object of decisions made by the two larger powers. It would become a rule taker rather than a rule maker.

Second, Korea faces a demographic trajectory much like that of Japan: declining birth rates and a graying population. From this perspective, Korean strategic choices will diminish as the economic consequences of a shrinking population become apparent. Korea has shown greater willingness than Japan to adopt more radical measures to address this problem—such as allowing more immigration—but current trends remain troubling.

South Korea has a ready solution to its demographic ills that Japan does not—unification of the peninsula. But, that is not an unalloyed alternative and the problems posed by unification—real or prospective—give Seoul a third reason to move now to build a better relationship with Tokyo. United or divided, dealing with North Korea (or northern Korea post-unification) will absorb Seoul's capacity and attention. In either case, too, China will retain outsized influence over South Korean policymaking, and the case of THAAD is illustrative of how Beijing will likely try to use that influence in an overbearing and heavy-handed manner. It makes much more sense for Seoul to attempt to use Japan as an offshore balancer to limit Chinese influence and overreach.



From a longer-term perspective, Seoul needs to resist the siren song of identity politics and reach out to Japan to forge an enduring and forward-looking partnership. That will not be easy. Suspicion and ill will run deep in both countries. Prime Minister Abe is playing the long game, however, and succeeded in ways that many had never anticipated. As Snyder and I argued in *The Japan-South Korea Identity Clash*, he, with a bold and willing South Korean partner, could become world historical figures by overcoming their two countries' tangled history and creating the partnership that has been attempted yet never realized. In this process, effective trilateralism with the United States is both a means and an end: a way to facilitate the confidence building process that produces a real bilateral partnership and a vital mechanism to promote the security of all three countries.



Endnotes

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