



The ally of my ally is my ... friend? The security implications for Northeast Asia over the next 10 years of the relationship between Japan and South Korea

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between South Korea and Japan. It asserts that while there should be strong grounds for a close bilateral relationship, there are underlying tensions as a result of historical legacies, their longstanding territorial dispute, and continuing uncertainties posed by the regime in North Korea and the re-emergence of China. It argues that the relationship is important both because of how it affects the management of current security challenges in Northeast Asia, including in relation to the role of the US, and also because of the potential implications of any changes to the relationship.

The paper contends that any deterioration in the Japan-South Korea relationship would likely unsettle regional security, which is good reason for the two to seek to resolve their outstanding issues. However, it also notes that any improvement in their relationship may not necessarily be seen by China in a positive light, which in turn could impact the regional security environment. It concludes that the current and occasionally tense relationship between Japan and South Korea may actually be a more stabilising factor than it first appears and, paradoxically, may be a not unreasonable dynamic in terms of the security of Northeast Asia.

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Introduction

Northeast Asia, defined in this paper as the area encompassed by the People's Republic of China, the Korean peninsula and Japan, comprises some of the world's largest countries and most technically-advanced economies.¹ A particular feature is the increasing influence of China, as well as a number of territorial disputes between states with significant economic and military resources, and with which Australia enjoys strong economic relations.² As such, any major changes to the regional security dynamic have the potential to significantly impact Australia.³

Much of the current focus on Northeast Asia falls on the relationship between China and the US, and their respective relationships with Japan and the two Korean states—the Republic of Korea (South Korea) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea). What this focus sometimes ignores is the relationship between South Korea and Japan, a relationship that has the potential to directly affect regional security over the next ten years. This is due to their bilateral territorial dispute and the continuing uncertainty posed by the regime in North Korea, both of which are short- to medium-term challenges to regional security.

This paper will assess whether and why the Japan-South Korea relationship is important, and the impact of the relationship on regional security.⁴ It will argue that the relationship is important both because of how it affects the management of current security challenges in Northeast Asia and also because of the potential implications of changes to the relationship. The paper will conclude by offering some high-level observations about the implications of the Japan-South Korea relationship for security in Northeast Asia.

Before proceeding further, it is important to define the term 'security'. This paper will follow the traditional definition, as it relates to the security of states in the international system.⁵ While far broader and more complex definitions exist, and continue to be debated, such a discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

The current relationship

To provide some context, it is useful to briefly highlight the key issues in the Japan-South Korea relationship. On the surface, there ought to be strong grounds for a close bilateral relationship. Both are economically advanced democratic states, with strong military alliances with the US, and both share some common external concerns, notably related to the re-emergence of China and the unpredictable regime in North Korea. However, despite these similarities, several factors are driving tension in the relationship.

In particular, the relationship is significantly affected by the legacies of the Japanese occupation of Korea from 1910 to 1945, which still causes a range of issues and controversies in their relationship.⁶ There are several related concerns that exacerbate the current relationship, notably visits by senior Japanese leaders to the Yasukuni shrine; the extent to which Japan has apologised for its behaviour during the colonial period, including the use of 'comfort women'; and the manner in which the colonial period and World War 2 are typically portrayed in Japanese history textbooks.

However, it would be a mistake to focus only on these issues as a source of tension in the relationship. For example, as David Kang and Jiun Bang outline, a range of other economic and trade issues also affect the relationship.⁷ Similarly, the treatment of resident Koreans in Japan can also affect the relationship, as does disputed ownership of the Dokdo/Takeshima Islands in the Sea of Japan.

Nonetheless, the relationship is not wholly negative, despite periods of friction. The 2002 Soccer World Cup, which was jointly hosted by Japan and South Korea, is a prime example of bilateral

cooperation. Other examples also exist, especially in the security sphere. For example, in recent years, the US, Japan and South Korea have held trilateral military exercises.⁸ Further, South Korea deployed military forces to Japan to assist with disaster relief and search-and-rescue operations following the tsunami in 2011 (and, crucially, Japan chose to accept this assistance).⁹ In addition, following China's declaration of an increased Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea, Japan supported South Korea's extension of its own ADIZ.¹⁰ All this indicates that at least a moderate level of security cooperation exists, despite broader tensions in the relationship.¹¹

In this respect, Park notes a general improvement in relations between Japan and South Korea over time, despite periods of increased friction, which Park argues tend to pass relatively quickly.¹² Other observers have also noted increased security cooperation between the two states from 2010, which led to the signing in mid-2012 of a 'General Security of Military Information Agreement' and a military 'Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement'.¹³ However, at the last moment, South Korea cancelled the signing of the agreements and, as at the time of the writing, they have not been signed.¹⁴ The bilateral relationship—at least at a political level—has remained tense ever since.

Is this relationship important and why?

The preceding overview outlines that there are factors both driving and limiting greater cooperation between Japan and South Korea, and that overall their relationship remains somewhat uncertain. However, what this does not do is outline whether or why any of this matters. Put simply, the relationship does matter, for reasons that fall into two broad categories: the implications of the relationship for managing current security challenges in Northeast Asia, and the potential for any changes in the relationship to affect the security perceptions of other regional actors. Importantly, the perspective of key actors is important: US views of the optimal relationship between South Korea and Japan could be expected to be very different from those of China.

Managing current security issues

The current patchy relationship between Japan and South Korea poses a number of challenges in managing current regional security concerns. First, the relationship is an unpredictable element in a region already featuring a number of unresolved disputes, and where there is recent history of military forces engaging in low-level provocations. In this context, the Japan-South Korea relationship provides another example where a minor miscalculation could escalate. For example, Midford suggests that as recently as 2006, South Korea came very close to using force to 'defend' the Dokdo/Takeshima Islands when Japan wanted to send a survey ship to the region, and only decided against using force when Japan cancelled the deployment.¹⁵ This highlights the fragility of the regional security environment and the potential for what may appear to be minor disputes to escalate into something more serious.

In such an eventuality, it could be expected that the US would intervene quickly to calm the situation. However, this highlights another reason that the Japan-South Korea relationship is important—their respective alliances with the US. Ironically, there are suggestions that their alliances reduce the incentives for cooperation between Japan and South Korea and provide an environment where they have some level of 'freedom from irresponsibility'.¹⁶ As a key external provider of military forces in the region, and with formal military alliances with both Japan and South Korea, the US has significant regional interests. While the current status of the Japan-South Korea relationship may or may not pose direct costs on the US, the patchy relationship certainly does have opportunity costs.

These opportunity costs relate primarily to US interests in adjusting to the re-emergence of China and managing the unpredictable behaviour of North Korea. For example, while there is some cooperation between Japan, South Korea and the US in promoting a common approach to North Korea,¹⁷ Revere and others note that the current state of the relationship detracts from the collective ability to manage common challenges such as North Korea. Revere further notes that the failure to sign the bilateral agreements in 2012 'harmed the fabric of trilateral cooperation

and complicated US strategy for defending Korea' and also that 'North Korea is the ultimate beneficiary of a problematic Japan-ROK relationship'.¹⁸

Others argue that 'without defense cooperation between South Korea and Japan, the US cannot respond effectively to North Korea's nuclear and missile provocations'.¹⁹ This failure to cooperate closely has arguably contributed to the current position of North Korea, which remains an unpredictable and potentially destabilising and aggressive regional actor.

Similarly, from a US perspective, the comparatively-limited security engagement between Japan and South Korea also constrains their capacity to adopt a more unified and coordinated approach to adjusting to the re-emergence of China.²⁰ However, it is important to note that Japan and South Korea also have different threat perceptions of China, which would potentially constrain the adoption of a more coordinated, trilateral approach towards it.²¹

There are other examples of where greater cooperation may be of benefit. In the event, however unlikely, of North Korea launching some form of serious attack against South Korea, Japanese assistance may be valuable in responding to and defeating such an attack. For example, Okazaki suggests that Japanese harbours and airports would be most useful in supporting US naval vessels and aircraft respectively.²² Alternatively (or possibly following such a contingency), Japanese economic resources may be valuable in supporting the re-unification of South and North Korea.²³ Greater bilateral security cooperation in the short term between Japan and South Korea may increase Japan's willingness to support South Korea in such contingencies in future.

The implications of changes to the relationship

While the preceding analysis describes the implications of the current relationship, it is also important to consider the implications if the relationship improves or deteriorates. What would happen if the relationship improved? While there is risk in counterfactual analyses—and it is inherently difficult to predict states' responses under such circumstances—it is hard to see that China would view a closer Japan-South Korea relationship positively.

Indeed, while likely of benefit to the US, China may perceive such an improvement as a US-led move to contain China's regional ambitions.²⁴ In turn, this may provoke a Chinese response, leading to further tension. Similarly, North Korea may also find a closer Japan-South Korea relationship unwelcome, and begin another round of provocative behaviour, with associated challenges.²⁵ Such an outcome may exacerbate regional tensions and inhibit cooperative responses to common security challenges, potentially outweighing any security advantage the US may derive from a closer Japan-South Korea relationship.

Alternatively, what if the relationship deteriorates? Critically, Japan has for a number of years seen South Korea as a key Western security bulwark.²⁶ If Japan was to feel less secure in this element of its defences, one potential corollary is increased Japanese insecurity, an outcome that should also be viewed as a security concern. A Japan that feels less secure has two broad options: either to deepen its alliance with the US, which may not be popular domestically,²⁷ or to increase its defence spending.

This latter outcome is unlikely to be well received by other regional states, as South Korea already views Japan's attempts to secure its trade routes and protect itself in the maritime domain with some consternation. For example, Lee argues that South Korea sees these trends as offering an implicit threat to South Korea's economic and strategic interests.²⁸ In this context, and given the continuing relevance of historical memories for contemporary relationships, there is a significant risk that increased Japanese defence spending would be perceived negatively by South Korea (and China). A Northeast Asia where both South Korea and China felt heightened discomfort with Japan may be a place where the consequences, and perhaps the likelihood, of miscalculation increase, thereby heightening tension and limiting the opportunities for cooperative responses to emerging problems.

A further consequence of a deteriorating Japan-South Korea relationship may be a situation where the US is effectively forced to give preference to one over the other. While potentially an extreme example, such a situation, and the outcomes of this choice, would have a deleterious impact on regional security, particularly since one party would likely feel less secure as a result.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the Japan-South Korea relationship is important to security in Northeast Asia, both in terms of its impact on the management of current regional issues, as well as the implications if the relationship was to improve or deteriorate. Having made this case, it is useful to outline how this may affect regional security in Northeast Asia more broadly.

Managing regional security relationships

The preceding analysis suggests that a large part of the importance of the Japan-South Korea relationship lies in the potential perceptions of other regional actors. In this respect, the US has encouraged closer relations between Japan and South Korea,²⁹ and while this might have benefits for the US in terms of reducing its regional security concerns, China may perceive such a development in a different, and potentially, negative light.

The overall picture this discussion paints is of a complex region featuring a complex set of relationships. Moreover, these relationships are interdependent; that is, changes in one relationship can be expected to affect others in the region.³⁰ In such an environment, the optimal level of security relationships between various states is far from clear and depends, as noted above, on perspective. What suits the US may not suit China or South Korea or Japan. Perhaps one implication is that finding a balance in bilateral relationships that is broadly acceptable to most or, if possible, all regional states may be a goal worth pursuing.

To support this, the US should carefully consider what level of security cooperation between Japan and South Korea is most optimal—and from which perspective—and then consider how best to promote that level of cooperation. However, China should also be careful that it does not act in such a way that inadvertently encourages closer bilateral security ties between Japan and South Korea, to its own disadvantage. China may also benefit from more explicitly recognising that the US can play a stabilising role in security in Northeast Asia.

Japan-South Korea relations

While the discussion above offers some observations for relationships in Northeast Asia at a broad level, there are also some potential steps that may stabilise the Japan-South Korea relationship. Noting the potential for the bilateral relationship to contribute to regional instability, there would be benefit in Japan and South Korea resolving or working together to manage the impact of the major issues, and particularly the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute, that cause tension in their relationship.

While this is far easier to say than to achieve in practice, such an approach would remove one potential cause of regional conflict and thus promote a more secure environment. And while care is needed to avoid a significant deterioration in the relationship, the current, occasionally tense relationship may actually be more of a stabilising factor for regional security than it first appears, and may in fact come close to striking the balance suggested above.

Notes

1 While Russia also extends into this region, participates in the Six-Party Talks, has a territorial dispute with Japan and is a member of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) group, it pursues a comparatively less active security approach in Northeast Asia and so its perspectives are not closely analysed in this paper. Conversely, the US pursues its regional security interests much more actively, and so features prominently in this analysis.

2 On the three main territorial disputes that involve Japan (the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute with China; the Dokdo/Takeshima Islands dispute with South Korea and the Kuril Islands/Northern Territories dispute with Russia), see Seokwoo Lee, 'Japan and the Territorial Disputes in East Asia', *Pacific Rim Law and Policy Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 1, January 2002, pp. 63-146, available at <<http://digital.law.washington.edu/dspace-law/bitstream/handle/1773.1/748/11PacRimLPolyJ063.pdf>> accessed 14 February 2014.

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- 3 Speaking recently, Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop highlighted the importance of this relationship to Australia when she noted that 'it is particularly important that our friends in Japan and South Korea, both, like Australia, allies of the United States, should overcome the current strains in their relationship'. See Julie Bishop, 'US-Australia: the alliance in an emerging Asia', Washington DC, 22 January 2014, available at <http://foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/2014/jb_sp_140122.html> accessed 3 February 2014.
- 4 Importantly, the paper will focus on the implications of the political and military dimensions of the Japan-South Korea relationship as the key aspects of the relationship that affect regional security.
- 5 See David Mutimer, 'Beyond Strategy: critical thinking and the new security studies', in Craig A. Snyder (ed.), *Contemporary Security and Strategy*, Macmillan: London, 1999, p. 77.
- 6 The impact of historical legacies on current Japan-South Korea relations is a common theme in the literature on this relationship. Among many others, see Cheol Hee Park, 'A whirlpool of historical controversies in widening waters of cooperation' in Marie Söderberg (ed.), *Changing Power Relations in Northeast Asia – Implications for relations between Japan and South Korea*, Routledge: Abingdon, 2011, pp. 39-54, and Robert E. Kelly, 'US-Japan Alliance Sparks Korean Grand Strategy Debate', *The Diplomat*, 11 December 2013, available at <<http://thediplomat.com/2013/12/us-japan-alliance-sparks-korean-grand-strategy-debate/>> accessed 4 February 2014. As Park notes, historical issues also affect the Japan-China relationship: see Park, 'A whirlpool of historical controversies in widening waters of cooperation', p. 39.
- 7 For an overview of current issues, see David Kang and Jiun Bang, 'Japan- Korea Relations: more naughty than nice', *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 15, No. 3, January 2014, pp. 111-20.
- 8 See, for example, Choe Sang-Hun, 'South Korea to Sign Military Pact with Japan', *New York Times*, 28 June 2012, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/29/world/asia/south-korea-to-sign-historic-military-pact-with-japan.html?ref=choesanghun&_r=0> accessed 6 February 2014.
- 9 Sheryn Lee, 'Burying the Hatchet? The Sources and Limits of Japan-South Korea Security Cooperation', *Asian Security*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2013, p. 100.
- 10 Kang and Bang, 'Japan-South Korea relations', p. 114.
- 11 This view is supported in Dan Twining, 'The Strategic Implications of Japan's Resurgence', Shadow Government: Notes from the Loyal Opposition, *Foreign Policy* website, available at <http://shadow.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2014/01/16/the_strategic_implications_of_japans_resurgence> accessed 14 February 2014.
- 12 See Park, 'A whirlpool of controversies in widening waters of cooperation', pp. 44-6. In contrast, Lee argues that the pattern of the relationship is situational and limited, and oscillates between cooperation and conflict; Lee, 'Burying the Hatchet?', p. 94.
- 13 See Lee, 'Burying the Hatchet?', p. 93. Lee cites three main reasons for this improved trend: increased instability in North Korea; concern at China's growing military capabilities; and concerns regarding potential US withdrawal from the region.
- 14 On this issue, see Ralph A. Cossa, 'Japan-South Korea Relations: time to open both eyes', Council on Foreign Relations website, 23 July 2012, available at <<http://www.cfr.org/south-korea/japan-south-korea-relations-time-open-both-eyes/p28736>> accessed 4 February 2014. Taylor suggests that one reason for the collapse of the bilateral agreements in 2012 was concerns in South Korea about China perceiving the agreements as part of a US-led containment strategy: see Brendan Taylor, 'Japan and South Korea: the limits of alliance', *Survival*, Vol. 54, No. 5, October-November 2012, p. 94.
- 15 See Paul Midford, 'Historical memory versus democratic reassurance – The security relationship between Japan and South Korea', in Söderberg, *Changing Power Relations in Northeast Asia – Implications for relations between Japan and South Korea*, where the 2006 Dokdo/Takeshima issue is discussed particularly from pp. 80-3. See also Kevin J. Cooney and Alex Scarbrough, 'Japan and South Korea: can these two nations work together?', *Asian Affairs*, Vol. 35, No. 3, 2010, pp. 184-5; and Robert E. Kelly, 'Korea Caught between the US and China', *Newsweek Korea*, 30 October 2013, English translation available at <<http://asiansecurityblog.wordpress.com/2013/10/30/my-essay-for-newsweek-korea-on-the-current-korean-strategy-debate-in-the-media-k-caught-bt-the-us-and-china/>> accessed 4 February 2014.
- 16 See for example, Taylor, 'Japan and South Korea', p. 97; and Kelly, 'Korea'. The phrase 'freedom from irresponsibility' is taken from Victor D. Cha, 'Positive and Preventive Rationales for Korea – Japan Security Cooperation: the American perspective', in Ralph A. Cossa (ed.), *US-Korea-Japan Relations – Building towards a Virtual Alliance*, Center for Strategic and International Studies Press: Washington DC, 1999, p. 83. In a similar vein, Okazaki notes that the respective US alliances allow both states to neglect their

bilateral security relationship: see Hisahiko Okazaki, 'Japan – South Korea Security Cooperation: a view toward the future', in Cossa, *US-Korea-Japan Relations – Building towards a 'Virtual Alliance'*, p. 59.

17 Such as the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (or TICOG), established in 1998.

18 Evans J.R. Revere, 'The United States and Japan in East Asia: challenges and prospects for the alliance', *American Foreign Policy Interests*, Vol. 35, No. 4, 2013, p. 192. In 'Burying the Hatchet?', Lee presents a similar argument about the benefits of increased Japan-South Korea cooperation (p. 101). Michael Green argues that trilateral cooperation (when it has occurred) has been critical to encouraging Chinese pressure on North Korea, supporting the argument that greater cooperation would increase the pressure on North Korea: see Michael Green, 'Japan is Back: unbundling Abe's grand strategy', Lowy Institute: Sydney, December 2013, available at <<http://lowyinstitute.org/publications/japan-back-unbundling-abes-grand-strategy>> accessed 3 February 2014, p14.

19 Victor Cha and Karl Friedhoff, 'Ending a Feud Between Allies', *New York Times*, 14 November 2013, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/15/opinion/ending-a-feud-between-allies.html?_r=0> accessed 6 February 2014.

20 See, for example, Daniel Sneider, 'Japan-Korea Relations: time for US intervention?', NBR Analysis Brief, Washington DC, 6 January 2014, available at <http://www.nbr.org/publications/analysis/pdf/Brief/010614_Sneider_Japan-KoreaRelations.pdf> accessed 4 February 2014.

21 On the differing perspectives between Japan and South Korea on the rise of China, see Taylor, 'Japan and South Korea', p. 95, and Malcolm Cook, 'Northeast Asia's Turbulent Triangle: Korea-Japan-China relations', Lowy Institute: Sydney, January 2014, available at <<http://lowyinstitute.org/publications/northeast-asias-turbulent-triangle-korea-china-japan-relations>> accessed 3 February 2014, p. 8.

22 Okazaki, 'Japan-South Korea Security Cooperation', pp. 58-9. Okazaki also suggests that Japan's anti-submarine warfare resources would contribute to securing South Korea's sea lines of communication.

23 Cooney and Scarbrough, 'Japan and South Korea', p. 187. Given some of the arguments that follow in this paper, it is also worth noting here that the re-unification of Korea would be a sensitive issue in the region and would require careful management of regional security perceptions.

24 Cha, 'Positive and Preventive Rationales', p. 78.

25 Cha, 'Positive and Preventive Rationales', p. 68. The future of North Korea is a key variable in any analysis of Northeast Asian security. Rather than trying to predict what North Korea may do in future, it is sufficient to note that an unexpected change in North Korea may act as something of a 'wild card', whose consequences and implications cannot be readily predicted.

26 Okazaki, 'Japan-South Korea Security Cooperation', p. 57. In his article 'Korea Caught between the US and China', Kelly cites a 19th century Prussian advisor to Meiji Japan referring to Korea as a dagger pointed at the heart of Japan.

27 On Japanese attitudes towards the US military presence in Japan (and in particularly in Okinawa), see Emma Chanlett-Avery and Ian E. Rinehart, 'The United States Military Presence in Okinawa and the Futenma Base Controversy', Congressional Research Service: Washington DC, August 2012.

28 See Lee, 'Burying the Hatchet?', p. 104. Cha and Taylor also note that South Korea would be concerned about any increased Japanese role in the region; see Cha, 'Positive and Preventive Rationales', p. 74, and Taylor, 'Japan-South Korea Relations', pp. 96-7. Cook observes that the 2005 South Korean Defence White Paper did not identify North Korea as a threat and instead justified additional defence spending on the basis of the threat from Japan; see Cook, 'Northeast Asia's Turbulent Triangle', p. 6.

29 See, for example, Joseph Biden, 'Remarks by Vice President Joe Biden on US-Korea Relations and the Asia-Pacific', Yonsei University (Seoul), 6 December 2013, available at <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/12/06/remarks-vice-president-joe-biden-us-korea-relations-and-asia-pacific>> accessed 12 February 2014, where he notes that the region (that is, Northeast Asia) will be more stable and secure if Japan, South Korea and the US are able to improve their relations and cooperation with each other. See also Revere, 'The United States and Japan in East Asia', p. 192; the same approach is also strongly implied in Sneider, 'Japan-Korea Relations'.

30 On the complexities and dynamics of key relationships in the region, see Cook, 'Northeast Asia's Turbulent Triangle'.

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