

The Geopolitical Implications of a Rekindled Korea-Japan Alliance

-Raisha Jesmin¹

Introduction

The geographical proximity between Korea and Japan once sparked assumptions that the two would be natural partners, but the phrase ‘close in geography, distant in mind’² has come to encapsulate their relations more accurately. The complex yet special nature of Korea-Japan relations, characterized by sporadic bursts of conflict and cooperation, proffers a compelling area of analysis as both countries have embraced new leadership.

Divided by history, how would the two converge? Vibrant democracies and middle powers on the world stage, Korea and Japan, remain linked by strong economic and cultural ties. The turbulent security landscape, with an ascending China on one side and a restive North Korea (DPRK) on the other, also fortifies prospects for greater synergies between the two countries. This commentary will explore the security implications of reviving Korea-Japan relations under the new Korean government led by Yoon Suk Yeol.

Background

For proponents of international relations theories, such as realism, liberalism, and constructivism, the bilateral relations between Korea and Japan are an anomaly. Two countries that are allies of the world's hegemon, the US, and share a common security threat from the DPRK, as well as a potential economic threat from China, should be in a state of bonhomie.³ For liberals, the shared democratic ideals of Korea and Japan, as well as economic interdependence and cultural congruence, should mitigate conflict.⁴ Constructivists allude to socialized norms, values, and identity to understand the patterns of cooperation and conflict between the two, but Korea-Japan relations cannot be captured through a single theoretical lens. A troubled history, coupled with shifting internal and external variables undergird their idiosyncratic dynamics.

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² Yoon, Tae Ryong. "Searching for a new paradigm for Korea-Japan relations." *International Relations Research* (2007), 177.

³ Cooney, Kevin J., and Alex Scarbrough. "Japan and South Korea: can these two nations work together?" *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 35, no. 3 (2008), 173-174

⁴ Park, Cheol Hee. 2009. "The Pattern of Cooperation and Conflict between Korea and Japan: Theoretical Expectations and Empirical Realities." *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 10 (3): 247-65. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1468109909990089>.

Wounds of the Past

The conventional wisdom on Korea-Japan relations stems from a historical approach that highlights historical animosity owing to colonization and territorial disputes as the source of longstanding friction.⁵ Korea was under Japan's sphere of influence between 1910 and 1945, during which Imperial Japan ruled with an iron-fist, having engaged in labor exploitation and sexual slavery. Prior to colonization, Japan also annexed the resource-rich Dokdo/ Takeshima islands located between Japan and Korea, which Korea gained control of in 1954 and presently wields de facto authority over.⁶ This historical antagonism remains a large blot on their relations, as Korea continues to seek redress for its exploited labors and victims of sexual slavery, in addition to being entrapped in a territorial rights battle with Japan over Dokdo/ Takeshima. Although the historical approach is valuable in grasping the conflictual aspect of their relations, it perhaps fails to account for their amicability.



Image: Map Illustrating Korea and Japan, and the disputed Dokdo/ Takeshima Islands (VOA News)

Oscillating between Enmity and Comity

Korea and Japan normalized diplomatic relations under a 1965 bilateral agreement facilitated by the US. The agreement remains controversial today, but it signaled a hopeful moment in history as the two countries tried to reconcile differences. Although there have been intermittent flares of tensions since the agreement, there have also been trends of improved economic and security cooperation. The 1990s was perhaps the apotheosis of their bilateral relations, as a joint declaration by South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung and Japanese Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo established a 'future-oriented' relationship.⁷ During this time, South Korea became Japan's third-largest trading partner, while Japan was South Korea's second-largest, and tourism between the two

⁵ Park, Cheol Hee. "Cooperation coupled with conflicts: Korea-Japan relations in the post-Cold War era." *Asia-Pacific Review* 15, no. 2 (2008), 15.

⁶ TASEVSKI, OLIVIA. "Islands of Ire: The South Korea-Japan Dispute." [www.lowyinstitute.org](https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/islands-ire-south-korea-japan-dispute). April 27, 2020.

⁷ "MOFA: Japan-Republic of Korea Joint Declaration a New Japan-Republic of Korea Partnership towards the Twenty-First Century." n.d. [www.mofa.go.jp](https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/korea/joint9810.html). <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/korea/joint9810.html>.

countries exploded.⁸ Security cooperation between the two was dictated by the bellicose North, whose growing nuclear capabilities alarmed their mutual Western ally and demanded united efforts for regional peace and security.

At the turn of the new century, successive South Korean administrations aimed to maintain cordial relations with Japan at the outset of their administrations, only for things to become unstable in the middle or end of the administrations due to historical controversies and diverging strategic priorities in response to threat perceptions.⁹ Relations suffered a major blow between 2015 and 2019, with implications on economic, military, and cultural ties. Under the governments of President Moon Jae-in and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the wounds of history were split open when a Korean court in 2018 ruled that Koreans could sue Japanese companies for damages incurred during the colonial period. Claiming the 1965 agreement had already settled labor compensation issues, Japan erased Korea from its list of most favored trading countries in 2019 and imposed restrictions on exports of chemicals to Korea that were vital for its high-tech industries.¹⁰ Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, fresh faces have emerged on the leadership podiums in both countries and the hope of rekindling relations is once again brought to the fore.

A New Chapter

Conservative Yoon Suk Yeol entered the Blue House in 2022 after one of Korea's most tightly fought elections in recent memory. He has vowed to assume a new foreign policy approach that would seek a 'comprehensive strategic alliance' with the US¹¹, sustain the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific, upscale Korea's contribution in facilitating economic progress and democratization in other Asian countries, and notably, repair ties with Japan. For Yoon, it is important that Korea and Japan stop looking back and once again gear for a 'future-oriented' relationship.¹²

Yoon visited Tokyo in March to meet Prime Minister Fumio Kishida of the Liberal Democratic Party who was appointed as Japan's 100th Prime Minister in 2021. Since relations soured, Yoon's visit marked the first high-level meeting of a Korean president to Japan in twelve years. The visit also came against the backdrop of a deal between the two to remedy the disagreement over the 2018 court ruling. The Yoon-Kishida summit could herald a new dawn of security cooperation driven by escalating concerns of its neighbors, DPRK and China.

⁸ Kim, Kwan-young, Review of Japan and Korea: A Turbulent History. *Lehigh University*, 1999. <https://www.lehigh.edu/~rflw1/courses/1999/spring/ir163/Papers/pdf/kwk2.pdf>.

⁹ Park, Cheol Hee. "Cooperation coupled with conflicts: Korea-Japan relations in the post-Cold War era." *Asia-Pacific Review* 15, no. 2 (2008), 29.

¹⁰ Ross, Monique. 2019. "Nervous about the US and China? Here's Another Sour Dispute That Could Shake Our Region." *ABC News*, September 15, 2019. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-09-16/japan-korea-trade-war-history-and-colonialism/11492558>.

¹¹ "Rising Anti-China Sentiment in South Korea Offers Opportunities To Strengthen US-ROK Relations - Center for American Progress." 2022. *Center for American Progress*. August 3, 2022. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/rising-anti-china-sentiment-in-south-korea-offers-opportunities-to-strengthen-us-rok-relations/>.

¹² Yeo, Andrew. 2023. "South Korea-Japan Rapprochement Creates New Opportunities in the Indo-Pacific." *Brookings*. March 17, 2023. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2023/03/17/korea-japan-rapprochement-creates-new-opportunities-in-the-indo-pacific/>.



Image: South Korea's President Yoon Suk Yeol with Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida at the Prime Minister's Official Residence in Tokyo, Japan, March 16, 2023. Reuters.

Dealing with the North

Since the ‘sunshine policy’, successive South Korean governments, particularly Moon’s government, had attempted to boost inter-Korean relations, but Yoon has chosen to be less obliging in response to North Korean provocations. With intensifying DPRK military buildup, evidenced by its recent nuclear and missile tests, Korea and Japan may likely deepen security ties. Prior to his visit to Tokyo, President Yoon emphasized that cooperation with Japan will be critical in responding to the DPRK, and expressed that he would restore an intelligence-sharing pact between the two countries for information on the North’s weapons activities.¹³ The intelligence-sharing pact, known as the General Security of Military Information Agreement, was at risk of being scrapped in 2019 amid tensions between the two countries.

The China Conundrum

Yoon has taken a more hawkish stance than his predecessor Moon, whom he accused of appeasing Chinese interests at the expense of Korean national security following the 2017 THAAD crisis.¹⁴ Yoon, however, has also called for ‘high-level strategic dialogue’¹⁵ with China and believes that durable Korea-Japan relations are critical for strengthening economic ties with China, particularly regarding technological cooperation on supply chains.¹⁶ Both Korea and Japan lean on China for economic support, but Korea is dependent on China to a greater degree. While Japan under Kishida has adopted an assertive posture towards China due to its activities in the Indo-Pacific that

¹³ Choi, Soo-Hyang, and Josh Smith. 2023. *Reuters*

¹⁴ In 2017, South Korea deployed a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile defense system to meet American demands for protection of American troops stationed in Pyeongtaek. China retaliated against the deployment, claiming it would be used for American spying and jeopardize regional security, and imposed sanctions on Korea.

¹⁵ Center for American Progress. 2022.

¹⁶ Smith, Josh. 2023. “Analysis: China, North Korea Loom Large as South Korea and Japan Try to Make Amends.” *Reuters*, March 15, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/china-north-korea-loom-large-south-korea-japan-try-make-amends-2023-03-15/>.

contradict the rules-based order, the economic leverage China has on Korea means Yoon cannot simply decouple from China. Korea also needs China, the North's economic lifeline, to act as a broker between the two to address the North's mounting nuclear arsenal. Nevertheless, Korea is unlikely to fully compromise its security for economic interests and may seek to buffer against an ambitious China by boosting security (and economic) ties with Japan.

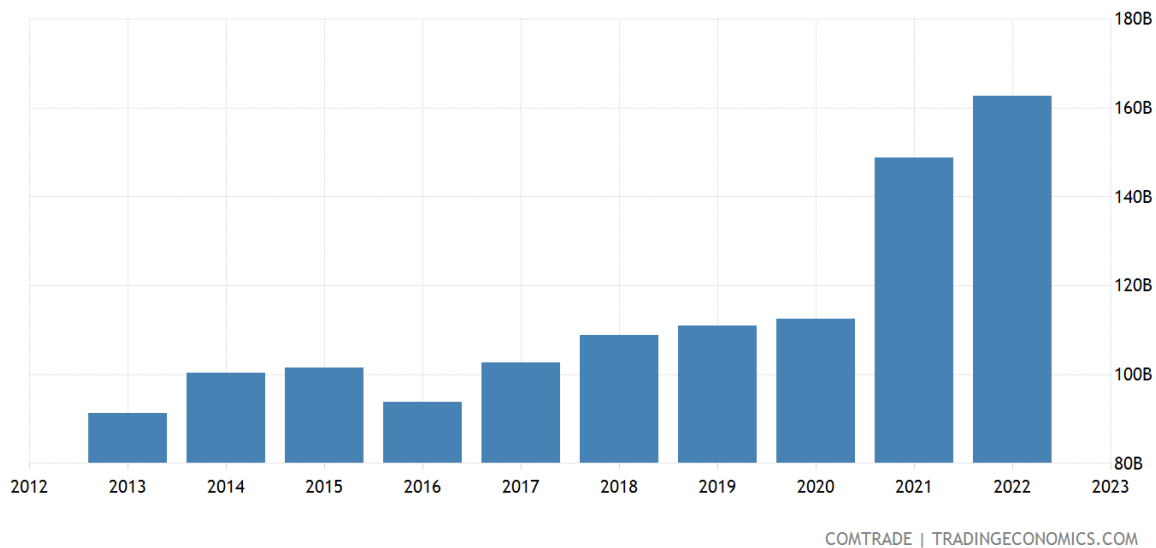


Figure 1: *China Exports to South Korea totaled US\$162.62 Billion during 2022, according to the United Nations COMTRADE database on international trade (Trading Economics).*

Trilateral Cooperation

A common denominator between Korea and Japan has been America. The dire need for trilateral security cooperation has long been high on Washington's agenda, particularly in context of its renewed Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), owing to the DPRK's nuclear threat and the Chinese ascendancy. Warmer bilateral relations between Korea and Japan would enable the formation of a stronger trilateral alliance between the three states, allowing the US to position itself more comfortably in the Indo-Pacific.

Trilateral cooperation has already been greatly bolstered as evinced by the signing of a trilateral joint agreement between the three states in Phnom Penh in 2022.¹⁷ This joint agreement would function to assess impending threats through data sharing and allow for improved deterrence against North Korea's saber-rattling. As the US occupies itself with other pressing interests, such as the Russia-Ukraine war, it would rely on Korea and Japan to cooperate closely to better address the belligerent DPRK.

¹⁷ "Phnom Penh Statement on US – Japan – Republic of Korea Trilateral Partnership for the Indo-Pacific." The White House. The United States Government, November 17, 2022. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/11/13/phnom-penh-statement-on-trilateral-partnership-for-the-indo-pacific/>.

In terms of China, trilateral cooperation may prove to be more challenging due to diverging stances. For the US, China's expanding tentacles in the Indo-Pacific necessitate deepened security ties between Korea and Japan. Japan, while condemning China's assertive behavior in the East and South China Seas and Taiwan, still values business and economic linkages with China, hence will attempt to improve relations with it and contain it simultaneously. Korea has included China as a key partner in its IPS and distanced itself from the Taiwan issue by stating that it wishes for 'peace and stability' in the Taiwan Strait without making explicit references to China.¹⁸ For Japan and Korea, victims of great power politics, it will not be about choosing between China and the US, rather about navigating their foreign policies, which should include minimizing their economic dependence on China without sacrificing other domestic and global interests. More dialogue between Korea, Japan, and the US is required to reach a consensus on their approach to China.

The Importance of Public Opinion

Political leadership is alone insufficient to restore relations between the two in the long run. History may remain a lingering wound among the public, affecting political outcomes and any rapprochement between the two nations. Survey data over different periods indicate an unwavering anti-Japanese sentiment among South Koreans. In a 2019 survey, 45.5% of South Koreans answered that they would support their hostile neighbor and 15.1% would support their former colonial ruler if a theoretical war broke out between DRPK and Japan.¹⁹ Recently, following Yoon's new compensation plan in response to the 2018 court ruling, which will compensate South Korean victims of forced labor through Seoul-backed funds rather than payments from responsible Japanese companies, public outrage erupted, with nearly 60% opposing the plan.²⁰ Conflicts emanating from history become heavily politicized in both countries and are exploited by political actors for their agendas, and therefore demand pragmatic initiatives from both sides.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Kishida and Yoon are set to meet again at a G7 Summit in May, and only time will tell if the flames of rekindled relations can remain ablaze. The following recommendations may be valuable as they march forward:

Tend to Past Wounds: The burden of history may never become lighter, and this must be acknowledged by both leaders for sustained bilateral relations. They should engage in measures that give victims proper compensation, settle contending interpretations of the past, and offer

¹⁸ Foreman, Hanna, and Andrew Yeo. 2023. Review of Promise and Perils for the Japan-South Korea-US Trilateral in 2023. *The Diplomat*. 2023. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/01/promise-and-perils-for-the-japan-south-korea-us-trilateral-in-2023/>.

¹⁹ O'Connor, Tom. "In a North Korea-Japan War, More South Koreans Would Back Kim Jong Un: Poll." *Newsweek*. Newsweek, November 6, 2019. <https://www.newsweek.com/north-korea-japan-war-south-kim-1470235>.

²⁰ Thomas Cynkin. 2023. "Are South Korea-Japan Relations Finally Getting Back on Track?" *Atlantic Council*. March 27, 2023. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/are-south-korea-japan-relations-finally-getting-back-on-track/>.

appropriate memorials and education for coming generations²¹ to assuage the public and cushion against possible domestic political challenges that could undermine bilateral progress.

Need for Japanese Reciprocity: While the Yoon administration has already openly expressed and taken tangible steps to rejuvenate relations with Japan, intentions and efforts for reconciliation must also be reciprocated by his Japanese counterpart. Kishida should schedule a visit to Korea and hold more official and frequent security consultations with Yoon.

Accelerate Trilateral Cooperation: The US should continue encouraging stable relations between its two allies as they are imperative to balance against China and deter the North. The US may consider inviting Korea to the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), but this may not be received well by China. To reduce economic dependence on China, Korea and Japan need greater economic backing from the US.

Resume Multilateral Negotiations: Korea acknowledges China's pivotal role in handling the North and possibly bringing about denuclearization. To maintain peace and stability in the Korean peninsula, it would be worthwhile for Korea to prompt relevant parties (including China, Japan, and the US) to resume the stalled six-party talks or engage in similar multilateral dialogues.

²¹ "What's Behind Japan and South Korea's Latest Attempt to Mend Ties?" n.d. *United States Institute of Peace*. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/03/whats-behind-japan-and-south-koreas-latest-attempt-mend-ties>.