

The U.S.-Japan Alliance and Rapid Change on the Korean Peninsula

Proceedings from a Pair of Conferences

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Preface

Few areas of the world are more geostrategically important to the United States and Japan than the Korean Peninsula. Whether it is the U.S. alliance with the Republic of Korea (ROK; South Korea); Japan's sometimes cooperative, sometimes tense relationship with the ROK; or the difficult, fraught, and sometimes frightening relations both the United States and Japan have with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK; North Korea), the issues at stake involve questions of trade and economic exchange, culture, history, territory, war, and peace. Since 2017, a series of unprecedented shifts in the relationships between Tokyo and Seoul have shaken up the traditional trilateral security cooperation between the United States, Japan, and South Korea that is focused on deterrence of North Korea. At the same time, novel approaches to U.S. contact with North Korea have explored whether there is any possibility of denuclearization through summit-level diplomacy, even as Pyongyang's conventional military threat has continued to evolve in new and dangerous ways.

To better understand how these rapid changes on the Korean Peninsula are affecting the United States, Japan, and the U.S.-Japan alliance, the RAND Corporation organized a pair of conferences on the U.S.-Japan alliance and the two Koreas at its Santa Monica, Calif., headquarters on March 2–3, 2020. On the afternoon of March 2, former U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Korea (2009–2011) and President and Chief Executive Officer of the Korean Economic Institute of America Kathleen Stephens gave a keynote address on the topic of “The Importance of the U.S.-Japan Alliance for the U.S.-Korea Alliance,” after which Yasuyo Sakata of Kanda University and Jeffrey W. Hornung of RAND offered remarks on issues related to the U.S.-Japan alliance and South Korea. The following morning, March 3, Gen. Vincent K. Brooks (U.S. Army, retired), former Commanding General, U.S. Forces Korea, Combined Forces Command, and United Nations Command, spoke on the topic of “The U.S.-Japan Alliance and the North Korea Threat,” after which Akutsu Hiroyasu of Japan's National Institute of Defense Studies and Soo Kim of RAND spoke to their perceptions of the evolving North Korean threat. Following the seminars, Sakata, Hornung, Akutsu, and Kim submitted conference papers, which are compiled in these proceedings.

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Summary

Over the past several years, the U.S.-Japan alliance has faced a rapidly shifting set of circumstances on the Korean Peninsula, with deteriorating Japan–Republic of Korea (ROK; South Korea) ties accompanied by an accelerating threat from the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK; North Korea), even as the Kim Jong Un regime has engaged in first-ever direct negotiations with the United States. These conference proceedings explore how changes on the Korean Peninsula are seen by observers in Japan and the United States.

As Yasuyo Sakata argues, the general trend in Japan-ROK relations has been toward worsening views of South Korea in Japan, something she argues should be seen as a key policy concern for the United States, given its alliances with both countries. Jeffrey W. Hornung notes that the issues that divide Japan and South Korea can be categorized in a series of “baskets” that have traditionally included territorial disagreements, issues related to history, and problems of reconciliation. Troublingly, tensions are now expanding into new spaces, including the realms of security, the economy, and diplomacy, even as the regional security environment has been rapidly worsening and U.S. policy has been asking more of allies and partners, both individually and collectively. This expansion could complicate contingency response and could carry implications for deterring North Korea and meeting the challenge of a more assertive China.

Turning to the North, Akutsu Hiroyasu notes the increasingly “existential” threat that the DPRK poses to Japan, pointing in particular to the rapid increase in the number, types, and ranges of ballistic missiles the North has tested, as well as the regime’s growing and diversifying nuclear arsenal. In response, Japan has enhanced its focus on ballistic missile defense, considering (but ultimately canceling) a pair of Aegis Ashore batteries and mulling “counter-strike” capabilities that could (in theory) enable Tokyo to hit an adversary missile on the launchpad before it is fired or to strike other targets, such as command and control nodes or logistics that would support adversary military operations. Soo Kim closes these proceedings by examining how the Korean People’s Army (KPA) wields not only nuclear weapons and ballistic missile delivery systems but also cyber tools and conventional military capabilities that augment its coercive power. While the KPA is sometimes caricatured as a rusting and bulky force populated with decrepit 1960s-era Soviet and Chinese hardware, the reality is that although this is true for some aspects of its static defense forces, the North’s military has been selectively modernized to focus on certain key mission sets (most notably, rocket, artillery, mortar, and missile fires and special operations forces). To counter the evolving challenges posed by the North, the United States will need to coordinate closely with its allies and strive to ensure that they cooperate with each other as much as possible while avoiding any major breakdowns in ties that Pyongyang would seek to exploit.

Acknowledgments

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Abbreviations

AOIP	ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BMD	ballistic missile defense
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
DPRK	Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea)
EAI	East Asia Institute (Seoul, South Korea)
EAS	East Asia Summit
FOIP	Free and Open Indo-Pacific
GSOMIA	General Security of Military Intelligence-Sharing Agreement
ICBM	intercontinental ballistic missile
JMSDF	Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force
KPA	Korean People’s Army (North Korea)
MOD	Ministry of Defense (Japan)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDPG	National Defense Program Guidelines (Japan)
NDS	National Defense Strategy
NSP	New Southern Policy
NSS	National Security Strategy
ROK	Republic of Korea (South Korea)
SDF	Self-Defense Forces
SLBM	submarine-launched ballistic missile
UN	United Nations

Introduction

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For the United States, probably no area in the world includes stronger partners or greater national risks than Northeast Asia. Although the rising threat posed by an aggressive, revisionist China has captured the attention of many analysts in recent years, the situation on the Korean Peninsula is equally alarming. Whereas China is a long-term, geostrategic competitor across all issue areas, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK; North Korea) represents a set of discrete but potentially equally consequential challenges, including cyberattacks and cybertheft, conventional war, and even the use of nuclear weapons. To deter and, if necessary, defeat these threats, the United States stations 28,500 military personnel in the Republic of Korea (ROK; South Korea), where it maintains a Combined Forces Command with ROK Armed Forces and operates United Nations (UN) Command. Nearby, the 50,000 U.S. military personnel stationed in Japan constitute an additional set of capabilities in theater, together with the commitment of Japan to serve as the UN Command–Rear area in a Korea contingency.

Although it is often poorly understood in Korea (and in Japan), the defense of the ROK relies heavily on support from Japan. This is because Japan (1) hosts approximately 50,000 U.S. forces, many of which would flow to Korea in the event of a renewal of hostilities, (2) would be the staging ground for additional follow-on U.S. forces, (3) hosts UN Command–Rear bases associated with the UN mission in Korea, and (4) is the most likely site for noncombatants looking to be extracted from Korea in the event of a contingency.

The United States, one of the primary targets of North Korea's cyber and weapons of mass destruction capabilities, therefore relies on and requires its allies to cooperate closely to deter, detect, defend against, and defeat threats emanating from North Korea. Yet since 2012 (and, especially, since 2017), the Japan-ROK relationship has been roiled by tensions relating not only to traditional disagreements over territory, history, and reconciliation but also increasingly over economic, security, and diplomatic issues. As ties have worsened dramatically with the Moon Jae-In administration's refusal to block court efforts to force Japanese firms to compensate survivors of forced labor during the period of Imperial Japan's colonial occupation of Korea, the United States first quietly and then publicly expressed its opposition to South Korea's plans to withdraw from its General Security of Military Intelligence-Sharing Agreement (GSOMIA) and called on its allies to focus on building a stable, cooperative, and future-oriented relationship.¹

¹ A GSOMIA arrangement structures points of contact and protocols for a pair of partner nations looking to define an agreed-upon set of procedures for the sharing of military intelligence. It is important to understand that such an arrange-

Despite the importance of Japan-ROK ties to both the United States and South Korea, the Washington-Seoul relationship has seen tensions emerge in recent years. Washington is engaged in an extended negotiation with Seoul over how much South Korea should contribute to offset the costs of hosting U.S. forces and has accepted greater friction with Seoul over this issue while hinting at a willingness to consider downsizing U.S. presence in the South. At the same time, Washington has stepped back from its traditional leadership role on negotiations with Pyongyang, giving Seoul an opportunity to explore whether a new relationship with Pyongyang could lead to denuclearization and peace, an approach that led to a series of high-profile meetings between Kim Jong Un, Moon Jae-In, and Donald Trump but nothing in the way of substantive complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization. Indeed, while negotiating with the United States and ROK, the DPRK has carried out massive cyberattacks against targets in the South; tested new, advanced conventional military capabilities; and continued to violate UN Security Council Resolutions by testing banned ballistic missile technologies.

In light of these rapid changes in Japan-ROK ties and their implications for U.S., ROK, and Japanese national security, as well as the rapidly growing and evolving threat posed by North Korea's development of military capabilities, RAND convened a pair of conferences on March 2–3, 2020, at its Santa Monica, Calif., headquarters to bring together prominent former U.S. diplomats and military officers and leading Japanese and American experts on Japan, the ROK, and North Korea. On the first day, former U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Korea (2009–2011) and current President and CEO of the Korean Economic Institute of America Kathleen Stephens delivered keynote remarks on the importance of the U.S.-Japan alliance for the U.S.-ROK alliance. Then Yasuyo Sakata of Kanda University and Jeffrey W. Hornung of RAND delivered presentations on Japanese and American perspectives on the importance of the ROK to regional security and the Japan–South Korea relationship. On March 3, Gen. Vincent Brooks, former Commanding General, U.S. Forces Korea, Combined Forces Command, and UN Command, offered his thoughts on the U.S.-Japan alliance and the continuing threat posed by North Korea. This was followed by presentations from Akutsu Hiroyasu of Japan's National Institute of Defense Studies and Soo Kim of RAND, who gave detailed assessments of North Korea's strategic ambitions and its efforts to develop military power in support of those goals. After the conference, Sakata, Hornung, Akutsu, and Kim submitted papers that captured their remarks and the feedback they received from the conference. The following chapters in these proceedings explore the issues discussed in this chapter in greater depth and offer opinions and analysis from leading American and Japanese experts who spoke at the conferences RAND organized on these subjects.

Chapter Summaries

In Chapter Two, Yasuyo Sakata of Kanda University examines the importance of Korea-Japan relations from the perspective of Japan. Employing a methodologically rich set of data sources, she uses speeches by then-Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, public opinion survey data gathered by a leading Japanese nonprofit in partnership with a prominent South Korean think

ment does not compel, but merely facilitates, the sharing of such sensitive data, which occurs exclusively at the discretion of the nation in possession of the information and looking to share. This is sometimes misunderstood or misrepresented on the South Korean side.

tank, and a close reading of several years of key Japanese policy documents to track the evolution of Japan's views of the ROK. As Sakata argues, the general trend has been toward worsening views of South Korea in Japan, something she argues should be seen as a key policy concern for the United States, given its alliances with both countries. Noting the development of growing tensions between Tokyo and Seoul, she argues for an "activist" U.S. approach to alliance management, focused in part on finding ways for the ROK to fit into the shared U.S.-Japan goal of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). Finally, the United States, she argues, should be cognizant of the important role it can play in encouraging dialogue and reconciliation between these two key partners on such issues as intelligence-sharing pacts and operational defense ties while urging both sides to work bilaterally to resolve their disagreements over history, education, and territory quickly, constructively, and with a focus on their shared interests and the need for future cooperation.

In Chapter Three, Jeffrey W. Hornung of RAND picks up the issues that divide Japan and South Korea and presents his views on how these matter for the United States and what steps it can consider taking in response to the deterioration in Tokyo-Seoul ties. He begins by laying out a series of "baskets" into which the major disagreements can be grouped. Traditionally, these included "territorial" disagreements over the Liancourt Rocks (Korea, which administers the islets, refers to them as Dokdo; Japan calls them Takeshima); "historical memory" issues related to Imperial Japan's colonization of Korea from 1910–1945, including such issues as the "comfort women," history textbooks, and the Yūshūkan museum and Yasukuni Shrine; and "reconciliation" difficulties, including official Japanese apologies (some Koreans overlook them, while others see them as insincere or not going far enough), unfriendly remarks by other Japanese officials that open issues back up, and the perception among many in Japan that Koreans will never forgive and move on or that they consistently move the goalposts on Japan. More troubling, Hornung argues, is the fact that tensions are expanding beyond these traditional areas into new baskets, including the realms of security, the economy, and diplomacy. In the background of all this, he notes, the regional security environment has not remained static but has instead been rapidly worsening; at the same time, key U.S. national policy documents suggest Washington is expecting more from its allies and partners, both individually and collectively. The implications for U.S. national security could come in at least three areas, he notes, pointing to the negative impact on deterrence of North Korea, the complications that poor Tokyo-Seoul ties could present for contingency response, and the difficulties these issues pose for shaping the choices of a China that is increasingly emerging as a peer competitor. Although the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) crisis has not served as a spur to prompt the two countries to set aside their differences and focus on the common threat of the pandemic, it is not too late for Tokyo and Seoul to work together to present a shared response that helps lead the region towards recovery, a goal the United States should support and work to realize.

In Chapter Four, Akutsu Hiroyasu of Japan's National Institute of Defense Studies turns attention to the problem of North Korea and develops the theme of the increasingly "existential" threat that the DPRK poses to Japan. Noting that Pyongyang's intentions appear aggressive to Tokyo and that it has refused to meaningfully address any of Japan's three key concerns—its development of ballistic missiles, its acquisition of nuclear weapons, and its failure to account for abducted Japanese citizens—Akutsu describes a worsening sense of threat about North Korea in Japan. In particular, he points to the Kim Jong Un regime's rapid increase in the number, types, and ranges of ballistic missiles the North has tested and draws attention to the

DPRK's expanded nuclear arsenal, which has been tested more regularly and at larger yields in recent years. In response, Japan has enhanced its focus on ballistic missile defense (BMD), considering (but ultimately canceling) a pair of Aegis Ashore batteries and mulling "counterstrike" capabilities that could (in theory) enable Tokyo to hit an adversary missile on the launchpad before it is fired or to strike other targets, such as command and control nodes or logistics that would support adversary military operations. Japan has also tightened cooperation with the United States and, as Akutsu argues, should take steps to ensure that the GSOMIA that links Japan to South Korea remains in place as a key asset helping maintain situational awareness about the North Korea threat.

Picking up on the theme of North Korea's military threat, Soo Kim of RAND describes, in Chapter Five, how the Korean People's Army (KPA) wields not only nuclear weapons and ballistic missile delivery systems but also cyber tools and conventional military capabilities that augment its coercive power. Whereas many observers focus on the regime's weapons of mass destruction, the North's cyber capabilities are an extremely important tool and should not be overlooked, because they have helped the regime survive through bank heists, data ransoming, and intimidation when it might otherwise have been more hard-pressed. At the same time, observers must give grudging respect to the 1.5 million regular forces of the KPA, who vastly outnumber the regular forces fielded by the ROK (600,000), U.S. Forces Korea (28,500), U.S. Forces Japan (50,000), and Japan Self-Defense Forces (SDF; 247,000). Although the KPA is sometimes caricatured as a rusting and bulky force populated with decrepit 1960s-era Soviet and Chinese hardware, the reality is that although this is true for some aspects of its static defense forces (which would struggle to project power at a distance for any sustained period), the North's military has been selectively modernized to focus on certain key mission sets (most notably, rocket, artillery, mortar, and missile fires and special operations forces). To counter the evolving challenges posed by the North, the United States will need to coordinate closely with its allies and strive to ensure that they cooperate with each other as much as possible while avoiding any major breakdowns in ties that Pyongyang would seek to exploit.

Finally, Chapter Six highlights some of the key issues that have arisen since the chapters were drafted, highlighting additional important themes that go beyond those presented at the conferences and in the papers for consideration and future analysis by policy researchers interested in understanding the questions facing decisionmakers and national security analysts in the United States, Japan, and elsewhere.

Changing Japan-ROK Relations and Implications for U.S.-ROK-Japan Strategic Cooperation: A Japanese Perspective

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For the United States and Japan, when it comes to dealing with the Korean Peninsula, much of the attention is on the North Korean nuclear problem. Unfortunately, that too often means that managing Japan's relations with the ROK gets neglected or taken for granted. This is a problem because Japan–South Korea ties in recent years have rapidly become uneasy, rocky, and unnecessarily volatile.

Although the primary responsibility for managing Japan–South Korea relations lies with Tokyo and Seoul, it is also a policy concern for the United States. Japan and South Korea are two key U.S. allies that are necessary to maintain the balance of power in Northeast Asia and in the broader Indo-Pacific region, and they are indispensable to dealing with the North Korea problem, as part of U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral security cooperation.

If viewed as a triangle, the U.S.-Japan and U.S.-ROK alliances constitute the first two pillars of the triangle, with Japan–South Korea relations as the third, complementary arm that links the two alliances. The trilateral framework was a “virtual alliance” or “quasi-alliance,” as Victor Cha and other experts have called it, during the Cold War and the post–Cold War years of the 1990s.² But since the 2000s, trilateral cooperation has faced challenges from within and without: domestically, with the rise of progressive/liberal politics in South Korea, and strategically, with the rise of China, which has overshadowed the North Korea issue at times.³

Japan–South Korea diplomatic relations have had their ups and downs, but when push came to shove, the United States has often intervened to manage the relationship in support of its strategic interests. Examples of U.S. intervention include such signature moments as the normalization of Japan–South Korea diplomatic ties in 1965 and, more recently, the comfort women issue that arose between the Park Geun Hye and Shinzo Abe administrations in 2015.

¹ The author has requested that her name be rendered following Western traditions, personal name (Yasuyo) followed by family name (Sakata), with a note clarifying this for readers not familiar with Japanese names.

² Victor D. Cha, *Alignment Despite Antagonism: The U.S.-Korea-Japan Security Triangle*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999; and Ralph A. Cossa, ed., *U.S.-Korea-Japan Relations: Building Toward a “Virtual Alliance,”* Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1999.

³ For an overview of contemporary Korea-Japan relations, see Brad Glosserman and Scott A. Snyder, *The Japan-South Korea Identity Clash: East Asian Security and the United States*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. On defense relations, see Yasuyo Sakata, “ROK-Japan Defense Security Cooperation in the US-ROK-Japan “Virtual Alliance”: Evolution and Prospects,” *New Asia*, Vol. 23, No. 4, 2017.

The latest diplomatic row erupted in 2018, between the Moon Jae-in and Abe administrations. It started with the South Korean Supreme Court ruling on wartime Korean laborers in October 2018, followed by the Japanese government's decision to tighten export controls vis-à-vis South Korea for "security" reasons in July 2019, and culminated with the South Korean government's declaration of its intent to terminate the Japan-ROK GSOMIA in August 2019. For the first time since 1965, a bilateral row over a "history" issue had spilled over, affecting both economic and security ties, two sanctuaries which had previously been protected from political bickering.

For months, the Trump administration stood by and watched tensions escalate without taking action, but it finally intervened in late 2019 to save GSOMIA, which it deemed an integral piece of trilateral security cooperation. The Moon administration agreed to "halt" the termination of GSOMIA in exchange for Japan restoring the status quo ante on export controls. Export control talks resumed in December 2019, followed by a summit meeting between Prime Minister Abe and President Moon on the sidelines of a China-Japan-ROK trilateral summit in Chengdu the same month; no substantial progress has been made since that time. The ongoing COVID-19 global health crisis has done little to improve bilateral ties; with no exit strategy in sight, Japan–South Korea relations remain stalemated.

In this chapter, I examine the changing Japan–South Korea relations from the Japanese perspective to address the following question: Does South Korea matter to Japan? In characterizing the Japanese perspective, I will draw on three key sources: Prime Minister Abe's policy speeches, public opinion surveys (most notably, an opinion poll conducted by the Genron NPO–East Asia Institute [EAI] Joint Japan-Korea poll, taken annually since 2013), and an assessment of the changing strategic dimensions of the bilateral relationship as reflected in official Japanese foreign policy documents. With respect to this last category, an analysis of Japan's strategic policy documents shows that Japan has made an Indo-Pacific shift centered on the FOIP concept. This has led to a reordering of security partnerships, a greater degree of strategic divergence with South Korea, and a perceived downgrading of South Korea's importance to Japan. Finally, I provide concluding comments on what kind of role and policy the United States should take in facilitating Japan-ROK and U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral cooperation.

Policy Speeches by Prime Ministers Abe and Suga

The Prime Minister's policy speeches at the beginning of Diet sessions set the tone for foreign policy. Regarding Japan–South Korea relations, there are several keywords or phrases used in Prime Minister Abe's policy speeches that are reflected in the annual Ministry of Foreign Affairs' *Diplomatic Bluebook* and the Ministry of Defense's (MOD's) *Defense of Japan*. These include "most important neighbor," "shared values and interests," and "future-oriented relationship." These are terms adapted from the 1998 Japan-ROK *Joint Declaration*, a historic document that serves as a template for the contemporary bilateral relationship. Over the years, those keywords have appeared and disappeared from the Prime Minister's statements, reflecting the Prime Minister's view of the state of the bilateral relationship at the time.

For example, the Park Geun-hye years (2013–2017) saw a series of ups and downs in ties. Prime Minister Abe's policy speech of January 2013 started out with all the keywords:

The Republic of Korea is Japan's most important neighboring country, which shares fundamental values and interests, such as freedom and democracy . . . There are difficult issues that lie between Japan and Korea, but we will cooperate toward building a future-oriented partnership for the 21st century.⁴

However, as the comfort women issue grew more contentious, the keywords disappeared from the Prime Minister's policy speeches, and South Korea was not even mentioned in Prime Minister Abe's policy speech in 2014. In 2015, the 50th anniversary of Japan-ROK normalization, only the phrase "most important neighboring country" was used. After the comfort women agreement was signed in December 2015 with support from the Obama administration behind the scenes, and once GSOMIA was signed in November 2016, all the keywords reappeared in the Prime Minister's policy speech in the Diet in January 2017:

The Republic of Korea (ROK) is our most important neighbor with which we share strategic interests. We will work to deepen the cooperative relationship between us for a new era with a future-oriented perspective by building on the international agreements between our two nations and on our mutual trust.⁵

With the inauguration of the Moon administration in May 2017 after the abrupt impeachment of President Park, the relationship grew substantially more contentious. Although Moon tried to be pragmatic in the beginning, Moon appeared (to the conservative Abe) to be fundamentally challenging basic values over the historical issues, such as his criticisms of the 2015 comfort women agreement and his refusal to intervene in the Supreme Court ruling on wartime laborers. At the same time, Moon appeared to be breaking with Japan over strategic interests, such as a reframing of East Asia as the "Indo-Pacific" and adopting a different, more conciliatory approach to China and North Korea. He also seemed intent on downgrading ROK-Japan bilateral and U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral defense cooperation. As a consequence, Abe's policy speech in the Diet in November 2017 focused on the North Korea crisis and a strong reaffirmation of the U.S.-Japan alliance, and the ROK was briefly mentioned within the context of regional cooperation and the Japan-China-ROK trilateral summit.⁶ In January 2018, as the period of heightened tensions between the United States and North Korea subsided and the Pyeongchang Olympics were about to begin, Abe attempted to engage South Korea while discreetly addressing the comfort women issue. In his January 22, 2018, remarks opening the new Diet session, the Prime Minister described Japan as interested in a "future-oriented" relationship with South Korea but declined to describe it as a neighboring country with which Japan shared common values and interests:

With President Moon Jae-in of the Republic of Korea (ROK), we will work to deepen the cooperative relationship between us for a new era with a future-oriented perspective

⁴ Prime Minister's Office of Japan, "Policy Speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the 183rd Session of the Diet," January 28, 2013. Japanese text translated by the author.

⁵ Prime Minister's Office of Japan, "Policy Speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the 193rd Session of the Diet," January 20, 2017a.

⁶ Prime Minister's Office of Japan, "Policy Speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the 195th Session of the Diet," November 17, 2017b.

by building on the international agreements between our two nations and on our mutual trust.⁷

Japan–South Korea relations tumbled to an all-time low from late 2018 to late 2019. A South Korean Supreme Court ruling on wartime laborers in October 2018 demanded compensation from Japanese companies. In December 2018, an ROK Navy vessel locked its fire-control radar on a Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) patrol craft, further souring relations. Abe’s policy speeches in 2019 reflected this turmoil. In January 2019, the traditional passage describing Japan–South Korea relations was completely omitted from the speech, and South Korea was only mentioned in the context of the North Korean nuclear issue, with Japan described as working in “close cooperation with the United States, the Republic of Korea, and other members of the international community.”⁸ In his remarks to the Diet in October 2019, Abe described the ROK as “an important neighboring country” and called on Seoul to honor “the commitments between the two countries, in accordance with international law,” an allusion to the wartime laborers issue.⁹

After the GSOMIA crisis wound down in November 2019, a bilateral leaders’ summit between Abe and Moon was held on the sidelines of the China-Japan-Korea trilateral summit in December 2019. Following this, all the essential keywords for Japan–South Korea relations reappeared in Abe’s speech on January 20, 2020 (emphasis added):

The Republic of Korea is *naturally* our *most important neighbor*, which *shares fundamental values and strategic interests* with Japan. It is for exactly that reason that we sincerely expect the ROK to uphold promises made between our countries and build *future-oriented* Japan-ROK relations.¹⁰

This passage was a sign of movement toward the normalization of bilateral relations, but it was nuanced. With the phrase “naturally” [*ganraiz*] inserted, the passage can be interpreted to mean that the ROK can and should be the “most important neighbor” of Japan but is not quite yet. Abe reemphasized the importance of the ROK upholding its “promises,” an allusion to the “history” issues, albeit in a mild tone. The COVID-19 crisis that emerged from spring 2020 onward, however, steered developments away from continued progress or substantive dialogue, in particular as the two sides disagreed over how to handle reducing travel from each other during the pandemic.

On August 28, 2020, Abe suddenly announced his resignation for health reasons, and his longtime Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga succeeded him as Prime Minister on September 16. Abe’s legacy over seven years left a deep mark on Japan’s foreign policy: the return of Japan as a player in global strategic diplomacy, the strengthening of the U.S.-Japan alliance, numerous steps to manage and counterbalance the rise of China, the elevation of the FOIP

⁷ Prime Minister’s Office of Japan, “Policy Speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the 196th Session of the Diet,” January 22, 2018.

⁸ Prime Minister’s Office of Japan, “Policy Speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the 198th Session of the Diet,” January 28, 2019a.

⁹ Prime Minister’s Office of Japan, “Policy Speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the 200th Session of the Diet,” October 4, 2019b.

¹⁰ Prime Minister’s Office of Japan, “Policy speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the 201st Session of the Diet,” January 20, 2020.

concept, and the development and deepening of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue group (or “the Quad”) with the United States, Australia, and India. By contrast, Japan–South Korea relations proved to be one of the most contentious relationships Abe dealt with and remain unfinished business that he passes along to his successor.

In his first policy speech to the Diet on October 27, Prime Minister Suga laid out his basic stance toward South Korea. He expressed his hopes to “restore sound Japan-ROK relations” but also vowed to maintain a firm stance regarding the issue of forced Korean wartime laborers, emphasizing “Japan’s principled positions” based on the 1965 normalization treaty that constitutes the foundation of postwar Japan-Korea relations. Whether Prime Minister Suga and President Moon can find a political solution remains to be seen, but it is in the interests of both sides to at least manage the situation so that bilateral relations will not further deteriorate. Toward that end, there has been a flurry of political envoys between the two countries since early October 2020, and restrictions on business travel have been relaxed.

However, returning to a two-track approach (i.e., separating historical issues from security issues) may prove difficult, even though Japan and South Korea need to engage each other in the strategic dimension. Here, the United States can and should play a more assertive role to prod the two allies to cooperate and get back on a common strategic trajectory, not only on the North Korea issue but also with respect to the broader Indo-Pacific context. If the United States can provide a strong and consistent message regarding the strategic context for the two allies, it would give more impetus for the leaders of Japan and South Korea to cooperate. The 2020 Genron NPO-EAI joint opinion poll showed that Japan-Korea relations are still “important,” though there are gaps to be addressed. Thus, U.S. reengagement on Japan-Korea relations and steps to restore inter-alliance relations should be one of the priority issues for the Biden administration.

Public Opinion

How do Japanese view South Korea, and how do South Koreans view Japan? Here, I will highlight some questions from a joint opinion poll conducted annually by the Genron NPO in Tokyo and the EAI in Seoul. This poll is one of a kind, conducted by two independent think tanks with cumulative data from 2013. The data are taken from the latest poll in June 2019 (hereafter referred to as Genron NPO-EAI Joint Poll 2019),¹¹ which was conducted *prior to* the export control issue that erupted in July 2020.

Are Japan–South Korea Relations Important?

There has been a big change in opinion trends in both Japan and South Korea over the period 2013–2019. For Japanese respondents, South Korea is still important, but those who answered “yes” decreased from 73.6 percent in 2013 to 50.9 percent in 2019.¹² Although about 50 per-

¹¹ The 2019 poll was taken from May to June 2019: In Japan, male and female respondents were over 18 years old; in South Korea, male and female respondents were over 19 years old. There were about 1,000 responses from each country. For further details on the polling methods, see Genron NPO and East Asia Institute, *The 7th Japan-South Korea Joint Public Opinion Poll (2019): Analysis Report on Comparative Data*, June 2019, p. 2.

¹² Genron NPO and East Asia Institute, 2019, p. 11, Graph 9 (“Is the Japan-Korea relationship important now? [Change over 7 years]”).

cent still view South Korea as “important,” those who responded “no” increased by 200 percent, from 7.1 percent in 2013 to 21.3 percent in 2019.¹³ The confrontational nature of the historical issues of comfort women and wartime laborers have negatively affected Japanese opinions toward South Korea. By contrast, South Korean opinion toward Japan has improved. Those who responded “no” increased just over three percentage points, from 6.0 percent in 2013 to 9.2 percent in 2019, but those who answered “yes” increased ten percentage points, from 74.0 percent to 84.4 percent over the same period.¹⁴ This question reveals the toughening of Japan’s views on South Korea during these years.

Why Are Japan–South Korea Relations Important?

Japanese and South Korean respondents offer differing reasons for their assessments of each other’s importance. For Japanese respondents, South Korea is important due to its geographical proximity (first), shared cultural traits (second), common security interests as another U.S. ally (third), and economic interdependence and trade (fourth and fifth, respectively).¹⁵ For South Korean respondents, economic and trade interests took the top priority slots, followed by geographical proximity (third), Asian cultural affinity (fourth), and common security interests as U.S. allies (fifth).¹⁶ For both countries, “common values” (i.e., democracy) ranked low (sixth), with less than 10 percent of respondents in each country naming common values as a key factor.¹⁷

Why do common values rank so far below such factors as geography and shared Asian culture? Probably because the term *common values* evokes ideas about historical issues, such as comfort women, wartime laborers, and (more broadly) territorial issues, such as the Takeshima/Dokdo islets, more than it calls to mind a common democratic regime type. These issues involve human rights and/or international law, including interpretation of the 1965 normalization treaty. More effort is necessary to engage each other in dialogue to define common values as mature democratic societies.

How Do Japanese and Koreans View Their Neighbor’s Alliance with the United States for Their Own Security?

A majority of Japanese and South Koreans see each other’s alliance with the United States as “necessary” for their own security. The U.S.-ROK alliance is beneficial for Japan’s security, and the U.S.-Japan alliance is beneficial for South Korean security. Despite a higher interest in economy over security in terms of the value of Japan–South Korea relations, South Koreans are more security-conscious in terms of the U.S. alliance. About 60 percent of South Koreans reported supporting the U.S.-Japan alliance, while only about 40 percent of Japanese respondents felt similarly about the value of the U.S.-ROK alliance.¹⁸ This is probably due to the state of armistice on the Korean Peninsula and South Koreans conducting allied military exercises

¹³ Genron NPO and East Asia Institute, 2019, p. 11, Graph 9.

¹⁴ Genron NPO and East Asia Institute, 2019, p. 11, Graph 9.

¹⁵ Genron NPO and East Asia Institute, 2019, p. 12, Graph 10 (“Why is the Japan-Korea relationship important?”).

¹⁶ Genron NPO and East Asia Institute, 2019, p. 12, Graph 10.

¹⁷ Genron NPO and East Asia Institute, 2019, p. 12, Graph 10.

¹⁸ Genron NPO and East Asia Institute, 2019, p. 28, Graph 26 (“Do you think that the other country’s military alliance with the United States is necessary for your country’s own national security?”).

at a national scale annually with reinforcements from U.S. Forces Japan. On the other hand, there are those with minority opinions who do not see each other's alliance as necessary. Here, adverse opinion in South Korea is double that of Japan, with 20.7 percent of South Korean respondents thinking the U.S.-Japan alliance is not helpful, while only 11.2 percent of Japanese surveyed said the same of the U.S.-ROK alliance.¹⁹ This shows a higher degree of political sensitivity on the South Korean side. Another interesting point is that about 10 percent on each side did not know that the other country had an alliance with the United States.²⁰

How Do Japanese and South Koreans View U.S.-ROK-Japan Trilateral Military/Security Cooperation?

Despite the difficulties in their bilateral relationship, about 40 percent of Japanese and 70 percent of South Korean respondents supported U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral cooperation.²¹ South Koreans displayed a higher level of security-consciousness compared with the Japanese, perhaps because Japanese view trilateral cooperation as a risk by which Japan might get entangled in a Korea contingency. This suggests that Japanese may not see as much benefit in trilateral cooperation as South Koreans do.

How Do Japanese and South Koreans View Bilateral Defense Cooperation?

A major incident affecting Japan-ROK defense cooperation occurred in late December 2018, when, according to Japan's MOD, a South Korean navy ship locked its fire-control radar on a JMSDF P1 aircraft conducting patrol activities in the Sea of Japan.²² The ROK's Ministry of National Defense denied this claim and although consultations were conducted, the issue was ultimately shelved without agreement on what actually occurred to avoid a further deterioration in bilateral ties.²³ This incident between the two militaries, however, deeply damaged the trust that had been built between the Japanese and Korean navies for over 20 years since the first bilateral search-and-rescue exercises in 1999.

The June 2019 Genron NPO-EAI poll addressed the radar lock-on incident and showed conflicting opinions on both sides: About 60 percent of Japanese and South Korean respondents believed the legitimacy of their own government's claims, and none of the Japanese respondents considered the South Korean government's claim to be legitimate.²⁴ But when asked whether Japan and South Korea should pursue defense cooperation, the poll showed that about 53 percent in Japan and about 65 percent in South Korea still supported bilateral

¹⁹ Genron NPO and East Asia Institute, 2019, p. 28, Graph 26.

²⁰ Genron NPO and East Asia Institute, 2019, p. 28, Graph 26.

²¹ Genron NPO and East Asia Institute, 2019, p. 29, Graph 26 [sic] ("Do you agree or disagree with strengthening of Japan-South Korea-United States trilateral military-security cooperation?").

²² Ankit Panda, "Japan Releases Audio of Alleged Radar Lock-On Incident with South Korean Warship," *The Diplomat*, January 22, 2019.

²³ Panda, 2019. See also the final report and statement issued by the Japan MOD. The Japan MOD strongly protested against the ROK's claims but also was careful not to cut bilateral defense relations (Japan Ministry of Defense, "Regarding the Incident of the ROK Naval Vessel Directing Its Fire-Control Radar at an MSDF Patrol Aircraft," final position, January 21, 2019b).

²⁴ Genron NPO and East Asia Institute, 2019, p. 26, Graph 24 ("Which government's claim is legitimate over the radar lock-on incident?").

defense cooperation.²⁵ About 40 percent on each side favored some degree of caution in engaging the other, however, favoring such steps as improving communication and restoring trust before resuming cooperation.²⁶ A final 15 percent on each side was completely opposed to such engagements.²⁷

Public Opinion After July 2019: The Export Control and GSOMIA Issues Lead to Additional Setbacks

The Genron NPO-EAI poll is conducted annually in May, and results are announced in June.²⁸ The 2019 polls showed that public opinion had definitely been affected by the downturn in Japan–South Korea relations, but the polls also showed that support for the bilateral relationship based on geographical, cultural, economic, and security interests remained resilient. With regard to security, the alliance with the United States is a key factor for both countries in continuing their bilateral security cooperation. Furthermore, even though the radar lock-on incident of December 2018 was a big setback for Japan–South Korea defense relations, a majority still support continued cooperation by first going back to the basics through mutual trust-building.

After the 2019 Genron NPO-EAI poll, a dispute over export controls broke out in July 2019 that was tied primarily to Japanese allegations that South Korea was failing to prevent sensitive Japanese technologies that were exported to South Korea from leaking across the border into North Korea. This incident had a direct effect on public opinion in South Korea. As the Genron NPO-EAI poll showed, Japanese opinion toward South Korea was on the downward trend, from 70 to 50 percent, but South Korean opinions toward Japan were on an upward trend, from 70 percent to 80 percent.²⁹ The export control debacle negatively affected South Korean public opinion toward Japan, however. Mismanagement and miscommunication on both sides, the sudden allegations by the Abe cabinet, and the overreaction from the Moon administration, contributed to the toughening of South Korean opinions toward Japan. South Koreans perceived Japan’s export control measures as all-out economic war targeting South Korea, which led to a “Boycott Japan” campaign in which popular Japanese products, such as Uniqlo clothing and Asahi beer, were targeted.³⁰ Tourism was also hit badly. This was a big economic blow to provincial cities and areas in Japan that depend on tourist income.³¹

In response to the actions of the Moon administration and South Korean society’s support for the boycott of Japanese goods, Japanese public opinion toward South Korea turned more negative. In October 2019, the results of the annual Cabinet survey on national opinion were released, revealing that just 26.7 percent of respondents indicated they held “warm”

²⁵ Genron NPO and East Asia Institute, 2019, p. 28, Graph 25 (“Do you think that Japan and South Korea should pursue defense cooperation?”).

²⁶ Genron NPO and East Asia Institute, 2019, p. 28, Graph 25.

²⁷ Genron NPO and East Asia Institute, 2019, p. 28, Graph 25.

²⁸ June is the anniversary month of the Japan-ROK diplomatic normalization treaty signed on June 22, 1965.

²⁹ Genron NPO and East Asia Institute, 2019, p. 11, Graph 9.

³⁰ “Tsuyomaru Boycott Japan: shohisha wa 0.01% Nihon san genzairyo made mitsukedasu [Boycott Japan strengthening: consumers even target products with 0.01% Japan-origin materials],” *Joongang Ilbo*, August 3, 2019.

³¹ “Boycott Japan kara ni kagetsu, tsuzuku yoha: Nihon no keizaikai wa touwaku, Kankoku zaikai kara douchou no koe [Two Months Since Boycott Japan, Aftereffects Continue: Japanese and Korean Business Circles Voice Concerns],” *Joonggang Ilbo Economist* (Japanese translation from *Weekly Toyo Keizai*), October 12, 2019.

feelings toward South Korea.³² This was an all-time low since the first poll was conducted in 1978 and a drop of 12.7 percentage points from the previous year. By contrast, those who indicated they did not view South Korea favorably rose to 71.5 percent, an all-time high and an increase of 13.5 percentage points over the results in 2018.³³ Asked whether they thought “progress in Japan–South Korea relations is important for both countries as well as for the Asia-Pacific region,” 57.5 percent said “yes,” a 12.3 percentage-point drop compared with 2018, while 37.7 percent said “no,” an increase of 11.9 percentage points over the previous year.³⁴

Even in the more liberal *Asahi Shimbun* poll taken in September 2019, unfavorable or neutral opinions toward South Korea increased substantially, with just 13 percent indicating “yes” to the question “do you like South Korea,” while 29 percent said “no” and 56 percent answered “neither.”³⁵ Perhaps even more telling, the *Asahi* survey revealed broad support for the Abe administration’s tough position toward South Korea, with 48 percent indicating approval compared with 29 percent who disapproved and 23 percent who offered no opinion.³⁶ But behind these tough opinions, there were concerns. When asked whether they were concerned about a diplomatic backlash from South Korea negatively affecting economic and cultural interests, 53 percent said “yes” and 41 percent answered “no.”³⁷ Additionally, *Nikkei Shimbun*’s monthly polls from October to December 2019 showed that 69 percent to 70 percent of respondents answered that there was no need for Japan to hurry to improve relations with South Korea and that the government should not make diplomatic compromises over such issues as GSOMIA or the export control.³⁸

The summer 2019 diplomatic debacle triggered a deep deterioration in bilateral relations, probably the worst downturn since normalization in 1965. The spillover into not only economic and security circles but also public opinion was notable. The negative effect on South Korean opinion, which had been on an upward trend, was a particularly noteworthy setback.

The Strategic Dimension

Turning to the strategic dimension in Japan–South Korea relations, there have been several important paradigmatic shifts in how Japan views South Korea. The historical issues are among the reasons that Japan and South Korea are drifting apart, but they are not the only reasons; there are also factors attributable to differences in strategic outlook. Most notable in this respect are the differences the two sides hold over the best approach to dealing with North Korea and, even more important, their diverging strategic approaches to managing relations

³² “Kankoku ni sitasimi wo kanjiru kako saitei 26%, seifu yoron chousa [Feel Affinity for South Korea Marked 26%, an All-Time Low: Government Poll],” *Asahi Shimbun*, December 20, 2019; and Shohei Kanaya, “Japanese Sentiment on South Korea Sinks to 41-Year Low,” *Nikkei Asian Review*, December 21, 2019.

³³ “Kankoku ni sitasimi wo kanjiru kako saitei 26%, seifu yoron chousa,” 2019; Kanaya, 2019.

³⁴ “Kankoku ni sitasimi wo kanjiru kako saitei 26%, seifu yoron chousa,” 2019.

³⁵ The poll was taken on September 14–15, 2019 (“Kankoku kirai, nendai agaru hodo ooi keikou, Asahi yoron chosa [Don’t Like South Korea, Increases by Generation, Asahi Poll],” *Asahi Shimbun*, September 17, 2019).

³⁶ “Kankoku kirai, nendai agaru hodo ooi keikou, Asahi yoron chosa,” 2019.

³⁷ “Kankoku kirai, nendai agaru hodo ooi keikou, Asahi yoron chosa,” 2019.

³⁸ Nikkei, Nikkei Opinion Poll Archives, October, November, December 2019, accessed October 14, 2020.

with China. This has been an issue for over a decade between Japan and South Korea, and the gaps have not been bridged successfully, despite efforts made by both sides.³⁹

Since 2017, the policy debate in Tokyo has evolved from the question of how to design policy toward China to efforts to design a common regional strategy centering around the goal of FOIP, a concept embraced by both Japan and the United States. South Korea has been ambivalent about the FOIP concept, seeking to avoid antagonizing China. Two strategic documents of the Abe Cabinet, Japan's *National Security Strategy* (NSS)⁴⁰ of December 2013 (hereafter NSS-2013) and the *National Defense Program Guidelines* (NDPG)⁴¹ of December 2018 (hereafter NDPG-2018) reflect how South Korea's position has changed in Japan's national security strategy.

Japan's Shift to the Indo-Pacific and Reassessment of South Korea as a Security Partner

The "Indo-Pacific" concept was embraced by Prime Minister Abe since his first Cabinet in 2006 and has been jointly promoted with the United States and the other members of the Quad: Australia and India. The concept was pursued in the second Abe Cabinet beginning in 2013, in tandem with the Obama administration's pivot or rebalance to Asia. In sync with the Trump administration's Indo-Pacific concept in its December 2017 NSS,⁴² the Abe administration made a clear shift to place the Indo-Pacific concept as a top priority in its national security strategy since 2018.

In Abe's policy speech to the Diet in January 2018, he introduced the FOIP concept (emphasis added):

Japan will work together with countries with which we share fundamental values such as freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. We will work hand-in-hand with the United States, as well as Europe, ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] members, Australia, India, and other countries to ensure the peace and prosperity of this region stretching from Asia and the Pacific Rim to the Indian Ocean. A vast expanse of sea stretches from the Pacific Ocean to the Indian Ocean. Since ancient times the people

³⁹ A notable government-related example is the Japan–South Korea New Era Joint Research Project (chaired by Professor Masao Okonogi of Keio University and Professor Ha Young-Sun of Seoul National University), which was commissioned by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan and the ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs and conducted a joint study from 2009 to 2013. The New Era project supported strategic cooperation on China in its policy proposal: Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 「日韓新時代」のための提言 –共生のための複合ネットワーク構築– [*Recommendations for a New Era for Japan and South Korea: Building a Complex Network for Coexistence*], Japan-Korea New Era Joint Research Project (First Term), October 2010; and Republic of Korea, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, A New Era for Korea-Japan Relations: Seven Tasks for Bilateral Cooperation, Second Term Joint Research Project for a New Era for Korea-Japan Relations, December 24, 2013. See also Ken Jimbo, Ryo Sahashi, Sugio Takahashi, Yasuyo Sakata, Masayuki Masuda, and Takeshi Yuzawa, *Japan's Security Strategy Toward China: Integration, Balancing, and Deterrence in the Era of Power Shift*, Tokyo: Tokyo Foundation, October 2011, in which Japan–South Korea strategic cooperation is addressed.

⁴⁰ Government of Japan, "National Security Strategy," English version, provisional translation, December 17, 2013.

⁴¹ Japan Ministry of Defense, *National Defense Program Guidelines for FY 2019 and Beyond*, English version, provisional translation, December 18, 2018b. The NDPG is a guide for MOD's defense procurement, but the 2018 NDPG is tantamount to a new National Security Strategy document with the introduction of new concepts, such as "cross-domain" defense and FOIP.

⁴² White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington, D.C., December 2017, pp. 45–47.

of this region have enjoyed affluence and prosperity from this large and free body of water. Freedom of navigation and the rule of law form their bedrock. We must ensure that these waters are a public good that brings peace and prosperity to all people without discrimination into the future. To this end we will promote *the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy*.⁴³

The FOIP concept was integrated into the NDPG-2018, and this led to the reassessment, or what some pundits called “downgrading,” of South Korea as a security partner. By contrast, in the pre-FOIP era, South Korea was listed as the *first* security partner in the “Asia-Pacific” in the NSS-2013 (emphasis added):

The Japan-U.S. Alliance is the cornerstone of Japan’s security. Likewise, for the U.S., the Alliance has served as the core of its alliance network with the countries in the region, *including the Republic of Korea (ROK), Australia, Thailand and the Philippines*. In this context, the Japan-U.S. Alliance has been serving as the foundation for the U.S. strategy in the Asia-Pacific region. Japan will strengthen cooperative relations with countries with which it shares universal values and strategic interests, such as *the ROK, Australia, the countries of ASEAN, and India*.⁴⁴

In the NSS-2013, South Korea’s value as a security partner was defined as follows (emphasis added):

ROK is *a neighboring country of the utmost geopolitical importance* for the security of Japan. Close cooperation with the ROK is of great significance for peace and stability of the region, including in addressing North Korean nuclear and missile issues. For this reason, Japan will construct *future-oriented* and multilayered relations and strengthen the foundation of security cooperation with the ROK. In particular, *trilateral cooperation among Japan, the U.S. and the ROK* is a key framework in realizing peace and stability in East Asia. Japan will strengthen this trilateral framework, including in cooperation on North Korean nuclear and missile issues.⁴⁵

However, in the NDPG-2018, the focus shifted to Indo-Pacific regional cooperation, with bilateral security and defense cooperation expected to be realigned in support of the FOIP concept (emphasis added):

In line with *the vision of free and open Indo-Pacific*, Japan will strategically promote multifaceted and multilayered security cooperation, taking into account the characteristics and situation specific to each region and country. As part of such efforts, Japan will actively leverage its defense capability to work on *defense cooperation and exchanges which include joint training and exercises, defense equipment and technology cooperation, capacity building assistance, and interchanges among military branches*. Japan will also contribute to addressing global security challenges. In implementing these initiatives, *Japan will position the Japan-U.S. Alliance as its cornerstone and will work closely with countries that share universal values and security interests*, through full coordination with its diplomatic policy.⁴⁶

⁴³ Prime Minister’s Office of Japan, 2018.

⁴⁴ Government of Japan, 2013, p. 20.

⁴⁵ Government of Japan, 2013, p. 23.

⁴⁶ Japan Ministry of Defense, 2018b, p. 15.

In line with FOIP, Australia, India, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) were the first three entities listed as partners with specific progress in defense cooperation measures. For example, 2 + 2 foreign and defense ministerial consultations, joint training and exercises, and defense and technology cooperation were mentioned; with ASEAN, joint training and exercises, defense and technology cooperation, and capacity-building assistance were mentioned. South Korea was listed as the *fourth* partner, with little progress to note in defense cooperation as compared with other countries. But the need for continuing U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral cooperation was highlighted. The NDPG-2018 noted,

With the Republic of Korea (ROK), Japan will promote defense cooperation in a broad range of fields and strive to establish the foundation for collaboration. Japan will also continue to strengthen trilateral cooperation among Japan, the ROK and the United States to maintain peace and stability in the region.⁴⁷

The 2019 edition of the MOD's defense white paper reflected the NDPG-2018. In a map depicting security cooperation in FOIP, titled "MOD/SDF's Efforts for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy," South Korea was not mentioned.⁴⁸ According to a *Kyodo News* report, Japanese officials do not publicly mention the "lowering" of South Korea's status, but an MOD source said, "in effect, it means a downgrade."⁴⁹

Although strategic calculations mainly affected Japan's moves to reevaluate South Korea's position in Tokyo's foreign policy, it cannot be denied that some individual incidents also deeply affected the views of South Korea held by Japanese defense authorities. Two incidents severely damaged Japan-ROK naval relations in late 2018. In October 2018, two months prior to the NDPG-2018, an incident occurred whereby the ROK Navy requested the JMSDF not to display its naval ensign, commonly known as the Rising Sun Flag, during the Cheju-do international fleet review, which led the JMSDF to withdraw⁵⁰; since then, it has become politically difficult for JMSDF ships to participate in ROK Navy-hosted events. Shortly thereafter, the radar lock-on incident of December 20, 2018, further complicated matters.

Despite these tensions, South Korea is still considered Japan's fourth-most-important security partner under the Indo-Pacific strategy, as well as its most important neighbor and partner in Northeast Asia.

Strategic Alignment in the Indo-Pacific? Japan and South Korea as the Missing Link

The strategic gap between Japan and South Korea is problematic for the United States and the Indo-Pacific Strategy. The Indo-Pacific concept is shared by the United States, Japan, Aus-

⁴⁷ Japan Ministry of Defense, 2018b, p. 16.

⁴⁸ Japan Ministry of Defense, *Defense of Japan 2019*, provisional translation, 2019a, p. 356, Figure III-3-1-4.

⁴⁹ Keita Nakamura, "Japan 'Downgrades' South Korea in Annual Defense Report," *Kyodo News*, September 27, 2019.

⁵⁰ Daniel Hurst, "Facing 'Rising Sun' Flag Row, Japan Withdraws from International Fleet Review," *The Diplomat*, October 12, 2018.

tralia, India, and ASEAN (ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific [AOIP]).⁵¹ South Korea has not used the term *Indo-Pacific* as a strategic concept, but it has been carefully inching closer to or aligning with the Indo-Pacific concept. For example, in the Moon administration's NSS, the closest policy concept to the Indo-Pacific is the New Southern Policy (NSP).⁵² It is the southern leg of the "New Economic Vision for the Korean Peninsula," reaching southward to ASEAN and India (maritime Asia) in contrast with the New Northern Policy, which connects with North Korea, Russia, and China (continental Asia).

The logic behind South Korea's stance on the Indo-Pacific and the NSP is explained by Professor Choe Won-gi of the Korean National Diplomatic Academy and head of the Center for ASEAN-India Studies.⁵³ South Korea's stance on the U.S. Indo-Pacific discourse has been "deliberately ambiguous" because "Seoul is particularly concerned about being pressured or forced to take a side in the ongoing U.S.-China rivalry" and "it does not want to give a wrong signal either to China or the U.S."⁵⁴ However,

as a security ally of the U.S. for the last 70 years, Seoul is more than willing to cooperate with the Indo-Pacific strategy in areas where it feels comfortable while making sure to maintain good relations with China on issues like North Korea . . . With the NSP as the ROK's new regional initiative, Seoul is open and willing to cooperate with any regional initiatives of key countries, be it the US's Indo-Pacific strategy, China's Belt and Road Initiative, or India's Act East Policy.⁵⁵

Instead of siding with the United States and Japan (or the Quad), South Korea is attempting to take a "middle-power" approach and forge ties with ASEAN. Choe has argued that the "ROK hopes to build a middle-power partnership with ASEAN" and that the ROK "welcomes the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and is ready to search for common ground between the NSP and the AOIP."⁵⁶ At the November 2019 ASEAN-ROK Commemorative Summit in Busan, President Moon and his ASEAN counterparts announced a Co-Chairs' Statement in which ASEAN welcomed "[the] ROK's commitment under its New Southern Policy to further strengthen relations with ASEAN" and

[the] ROK's support for the *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific*. Along this line, we encouraged that the *Outlook*, adopted at the 34th ASEAN Summit (June 2019), be used as a guide in promoting possible cooperation within the existing future initiatives of ASEAN and its external partners, including the ROK.⁵⁷

⁵¹ ASEAN, "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific," June 23, 2019a; and Amitav Acharya, "Why ASEAN's Indo-Pacific Outlook Matters," *East Asia Forum*, August 11, 2019.

⁵² Blue House, *National Security Strategy*, Seoul, Republic of Korea, December 2018, p. 57.

⁵³ The Center for ASEAN-India Studies was established on February 1, 2018, to promote the New Southern Policy (Republic of Korea, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Opening Ceremony of Center for ASEAN and Indian Studies to Take Place on February 1," press release, unofficial English translation, January 31, 2018).

⁵⁴ Choe Wongi, "Why South Korea Wants to Tie in with ASEAN," *ASEANFocus*, No. 6/2019, December 2019, p. 13.

⁵⁵ Wongi, 2019, p. 13.

⁵⁶ Wongi, 2019, p. 12.

⁵⁷ ASEAN, "Co-Chairs' Statement of the 2019 ASEAN-Republic of Korea Commemorative Summit: 'Partnership for Peace, Prosperity for People,'" Busan, Republic of Korea, November 26, 2019c.

South Korea has also cautiously moved to link its NSP with the FOIP strategy pursued by the United States. In March 2019, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha noted in their joint statement that “[b]oth sides expressed their commitment to cooperation across the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy and the ROK New Southern Policy” and acknowledged cooperation on “U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral cooperation.”⁵⁸ In June, President Moon acknowledged this link at a summit press conference with President Trump:

The Asia-Pacific region is a core region for peace and prosperity for both countries. Under the regional cooperation principles of openness, inclusiveness, and transparency, I believe (the) New Southern Policy and the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy can find common ground.⁵⁹

Finally, in November 2019, on the occasion of the 14th East Asia Summit (EAS) in Bangkok, the United States and ROK linked their strategies together in an official policy document, the U.S. State Department’s FOIP Vision report, *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision*.⁶⁰ The report noted (emphasis added),

The U.S. vision and approach in the Indo-Pacific region aligns closely with Japan’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept, India’s Act East Policy, Australia’s Indo-Pacific Concept, the *Republic of Korea’s New Southern Policy*, and Taiwan’s Southbound Policy.⁶¹

U.S. and South Korean diplomats followed up with agreements at the senior working level. A joint fact sheet, titled “ROK and United States Working Together to Promote Cooperation between the New Southern Policy and the Indo-Pacific Strategy,” was produced on the sidelines of the EAS to supplement the U.S. FOIP report.⁶² The joint fact sheet highlighted areas of U.S.-ROK cooperation, such as

- energy (e.g., Public-Private Economic Forum, Commercial Dialogue, Energy Dialogue, Asia EDGE [Enhancing Development and Growth through Energy])
- infrastructure and development finance (e.g., infrastructure finance, private sector investment, smart cities)
- the digital economy (e.g., 5G and ASEAN, cybersecurity)
- good governance and civil society (e.g., U.S. Indo-Pacific Transparency Initiative, ROK-ASEAN initiatives)
- efforts to ensure peace and security (e.g., Pacific Islands assistance, capacity-building and maritime enforcement, global health).⁶³

⁵⁸ U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, “Secretary Pompeo’s Meeting with Republic of Korea Foreign Minister Kang,” April 1, 2019. (The meeting was held in Washington, D.C., on March 29, 2019.)

⁵⁹ U.S. Embassy and Consulate in the Republic of Korea, “Remarks by President Trump and President Moon of the Republic of Korea in Joint Press Conference,” Seoul, Republic of Korea, June 30, 2019.

⁶⁰ U.S. Department of State, *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision*, November 4, 2019.

⁶¹ U.S. Department of State, 2019, p. 8.

⁶² U.S. Embassy and Consulate in the Republic of Korea, Office of the Spokesperson, “The Republic of Korea and United States Working Together to Promote Cooperation Between the New Southern Policy and the Indo-Pacific Strategy,” fact sheet, November 2, 2019a.

⁶³ U.S. Embassy and Consulate in the Republic of Korea, Office of the Spokesperson, 2019a.

After the EAS, the ROK-U.S. Senior Economic Dialogue held in Seoul reiterated the bilateral commitment to promote “strategic economic partnership” and cooperation between the U.S. and Korean policy strategies.⁶⁴ Areas of cooperation such as development, infrastructure, science and technology, digital connectivity, energy, and smart cities were highlighted.

The remaining task for strategic alignment on the Indo-Pacific is for Japan and South Korea to synchronize their views on the region. During fall 2019, the United States, Japan, and South Korea were embroiled in the GSOMIA crisis and, as a consequence, missed an opportunity to focus on their common interests in the Indo-Pacific. It would make strategic sense to link Japan’s FOIP and South Korea’s NSP, much as the United States and ROK or ROK and ASEAN have done. Japan and South Korea are already indirectly connected through the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy and ASEAN’s AOIP because both countries endorsed the 14th EAS Chairman’s Statement.⁶⁵ The remaining step would be for Japan and South Korea to renew steps for strategic cooperation. To do so, Japan and South Korea must overcome bilateral obstacles.

Conclusion

An overview of Japanese views of Japan–South Korea relations, as reflected in political leaders’ speeches, public opinion polls, and strategic outlook documents, shows how Japan and South Korea have drifted apart. Japan and South Korea have focused narrowly on bilateral disputes at the cost of losing sight of the bigger strategic picture. This is a serious problem, not only for Japan and South Korea but for the United States (as an ally of the two countries) and the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy.

This analysis focused on the Japanese perspective, but the South Korean perspective needs to be analyzed to better understand the dynamics of the relationship. In terms of its strategic identity, South Korea is both a U.S. ally with responsibilities and a middle power with a strategic outlook that does not align perfectly with the outlooks of Japan and the United States. Nonetheless, strategic coordination is possible. Rather than demanding total strategic convergence, strategic coordination would be the smarter way to pursue cooperation among the three countries.

In this light, what should the United States do to facilitate Japan–South Korea cooperation and U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral cooperation?

First, the United States should start by adopting an active approach to alliance management, working hard to maintain a healthy state of affairs in the U.S.-Japan and U.S.-ROK alliances. The U.S. alliance is a key factor that holds Japan and South Korea together, as shown in policy statements and public opinion polls. In this regard, the recent handling of U.S.-ROK alliance issues (specifically, the defense cost-sharing issue) is worrisome for Japan.

Second, the United States should seek to facilitate strategic alignment on the concept of the Indo-Pacific. Japan–South Korea cooperation is the missing link in the Indo-Pacific strategy. Japan and South Korea missed an opportunity to link their strategic visions in 2019 while the United States and ROK pursued linkage of their strategic concepts (FOIP and the NSP).

⁶⁴ U.S. Embassy and Consulate in the Republic of Korea, Office of the Spokesperson, “Joint Statement on the 4th ROK-U.S. Senior Economic Dialogue,” November 6, 2019b.

⁶⁵ ASEAN, “Chairman’s Statement of the 14th East Asia Summit,” Bangkok, Thailand,” November 4, 2019b.

ASEAN's AOIP helped to expand the Indo-Pacific toward a broader platform, as acknowledged in the EAS in November 2019. Therefore, Japan and South Korea are already linked indirectly in the Indo-Pacific. U.S. officials should continue to engage Japan and South Korea toward alignment on strategic concepts and cooperation projects based on the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, such as infrastructure and development assistance, digital governance and economy, cybersecurity and maritime security, capacity-building assistance, and (particularly amid the COVID-19 pandemic) global health.

Finally, the United States should encourage and facilitate Japan–South Korea dialogue and cooperation. At present, Tokyo and Seoul are stuck in a frustrating circle of negative issue linkage politics involving wartime laborers, export controls, and threats to abandon GSOMIA. The United States should judiciously prod the two allies to undo the knot in their relationship. Although the wartime laborers issue (and the comfort women issue) should be dealt with bilaterally between Japan and South Korea, the United States should keep watch to prevent it from spilling over into economic and defense relations by reminding the allies about the importance of strategic cooperation. In the economic realm, the United States should be more vigilant about the Japan–South Korea row over export control, since it has implications for the economic component of the Indo-Pacific strategy, such as global supply chains and digital industries and technologies. In the defense realm, the United States, as a military ally, should actively encourage trilateral cooperation vis-à-vis North Korea, work to encourage the mending of Japan-ROK defense ties and the rebuilding of trust (e.g., preventing incidents at sea, promoting exchanges through various military exercises and dialogues), and work to keep the termination of GSOMIA off the table. As former U.S. Forces Korea Commander General Vincent K. Brooks said, “it is not the volume of communication between the two countries that is most important. It is the conduit or channel for direct communication that is most important.”⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Gen. Vincent K. Brooks, personal communication to author, March 9, 2020.

Getting Japan–South Korea Relations on Track: A Vital U.S. Interest

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The United States has five treaty allies in the Indo-Pacific region but only two in Northeast Asia. Japan, a formal treaty ally since 1951, hosts approximately 57,000 forward-deployed U.S. military personnel, including the only forward-deployed carrier strike group.¹ South Korea, an ally forged on the battlefield during the Korean War, has been a U.S. ally since 1953 and hosts roughly 26,000 permanently stationed U.S. military personnel.² Through these alliances, the United States forward deploys approximately 80,000 U.S. military personnel, making these countries critical partners in a volatile region. Flanked by China, North Korea, and Russia, these democratic allies are important U.S. partners in a region dominated by otherwise dangerous regimes.

Yet these two U.S. allies are often at odds. For its part, although Washington recognizes the difficult history between Seoul and Tokyo, it has largely remained neutral in their disputes. This position became untenable in late 2018 with the sudden eruption of bilateral tensions over history-related issues that went on to spill over into the diplomatic, economic, and security domains in ways that directly affected U.S. interests. In this chapter, I review the most-prominent issues and argue that they carry negative implications for the United States that require Washington to play a more active role in helping manage tensions so as to focus on areas of common concern and cooperation.

Japan–South Korea Bilateral Relations

Bilateral relations between Japan and South Korea after World War II have rarely been warm, but the two sides have generally managed to get along. Despite the two countries sharing a long history, bilateral ties have often bogged down over issues stemming from Japan's colonization and occupation of the Korean Peninsula (1910–1945). These issues are best understood by

¹ The current security treaty was revised and signed in 1960. The number of personnel (57,094) is current as of 2019. By service: 2,516 Army, 20,733 Navy, 12,757 Air Force, 21,070 Marine Corps, and 18 Coast Guard (Defense Manpower Data Center, "Number of Military and DoD Appropriated Fund (APF) Civilian Personnel Permanently Assigned," December 31, 2019).

² The treaty came into effect in 1954. The number of personnel (26,643) is current as of 2019. By service: 18,113 Army, 366 Navy, 7,946 Air Force, 217 Marine Corps, and 1 Coast Guard (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2019).

differentiating among three main baskets of concerns: competing territorial claims, issues of historical memory, and efforts aimed at reconciliation.

One basket is a territorial dispute over the Liancourt Rocks in the Sea of Japan. South Korea (which calls them Dokdo) occupies them, while Japan (which calls them Takeshima) claims them. Claims-making by both sides has risen in recent years, with the issue taking on greater priority since the mid- to late-2000s, especially in the wake of an August 2012 visit to the disputed islands by then-ROK President Lee Myung Bak. Both governments have dueling narratives on their foreign ministry websites and statements emphasizing their sovereignty claims.³ In recent years, South Korea has initiated military exercises designed to train for the defense of the territory from a Japanese invasion, even though Japan has never indicated a willingness to employ force to assert its claim.⁴

The second basket can best be characterized as issues related to memory: i.e., how issues related to Imperial Japan's occupation of the Korean Peninsula and wartime behavior are remembered in both countries. For South Korea, offers sent from and visits by Japanese politicians to Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo always disrupt ties because war criminals are enshrined there, including 14 Class-A war criminals since 1978.⁵ Ceremonial offerings and visits to the shrine by Japanese politicians are seen as efforts to glorify Imperial Japan's history. The Yūshūkan (or war history museum) that is housed on the same grounds presents an even greater lightning rod because its exhibits present Japan as the victim in 19th and 20th century events.⁶ The counterargument in support of such offerings and visits is that Yasukuni was built to enshrine those Japanese who devoted their lives to building modern Japan; in this view, visits to Yasukuni are a natural way to pray for those who lost their lives in the service of the country.⁷ A second historical dispute is how Japanese and Korean history textbooks treat both the prewar and postwar periods. For South Korea, a frequent complaint is that Japanese textbooks whitewash Imperial Japan's actions (making scant reference to the comfort women issue, for example) and downplay the suffering the Japanese colonial authorities inflicted on Koreans.⁸ For Japan, the major criticism of South Korean textbooks is that they stoke anti-Japanese sentiment and promote a misleadingly negative narrative of Japan through an overly heavy emphasis on Imperial Japan's colonization of Korea while giving relatively little emphasis

³ Republic of Korea, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Dokdo, Beautiful Island of Korea," webpage, undated; and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Japanese Territory: Takeshima," webpage, July 30, 2014.

⁴ Choe Sang-Hun, "South Korea Launches Military Exercise for Islets Also Claimed by Japan," *New York Times*, August 25, 2019.

⁵ Yonhap News Agency, "S. Korea Expresses 'Deep Concerns' over Abe's Offering to Controversial War Shrine," *Korea Herald*, August 15, 2019a; and "S. Korea Protests Japanese Officials' Visit to Controversial War Shrine," Yonhap News Agency, April 20, 2018.

⁶ James Fallows, "Stop Talking About Yasukuni; The Real Problem Is Yūshūkan," *The Atlantic*, January 2, 2014.

⁷ Madison Park, "Yasukuni Shrine Visits: Japan Honoring the Dead or Insulting the Neighbors?" *CNN*, December 26, 2013; Tōru Hashimoto, "靖国神社参拝よりも大事なこと [The Thing More Important Than Visiting Yasukuni Shrine]," *President Online*, August 22, 2018; and "日本人が靖国参拝して何が悪い! [What Is Wrong with Japanese Visiting Yasukuni Shrine?!]" editorial, *iRonma*, undated.

⁸ Jeff Kingston, "South Korea's New State Textbook 'Corrects' History," *Japan Times*, November 7, 2015; and Howard W. French, "Japan's Refusal to Revise Textbooks Angers Its Neighbors," *New York Times*, July 10, 2001.

to the past seven decades of Japan's postwar experience as a democratic nation that has sought to live at peace with its neighbors.⁹

The third basket of issues is the most difficult, in that it relates to issues of reconciliation, such as apologies, compensation, and disagreements over what is considered “resolution” or “sincerity” of effort. In 1965, Japan and the ROK signed a Treaty on Basic Relations, which normalized relations, as well as a separate claims agreement that provided the ROK with \$500 million in compensation for Japan's past behavior.¹⁰ Additionally, the Japanese government has issued dozens of apologies at different levels of authority, including statements made by the Chief Cabinet Secretary, the Prime Minister, and even the Emperor. Some of these apologies related to the totality of Imperial Japan's behavior over the course of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, while others were specific to a given issue. Of these apologies, the most well-known are the 1995 Murayama Statement addressing Imperial Japan's wartime actions broadly and the 1993 Konō Statement, which specifically addressed comfort women.¹¹ In addition to apologies, the Japanese government has worked to arrange to compensate victims of Imperial Japan's actions. Steps taken in this regard include arranging the Asian Women's Fund and the establishment of the Reconciliation and Healing Foundation, both of which were established to provide monetary payments to former comfort women, with the latter being specific to South Korean victims. Japan's position is not only that it has apologized but that all issues concerning property and claims (including by comfort women) were settled by the 1965 agreements; subsequent agreements and efforts augment the 1965 agreement.

For South Korea, there is a reluctance on the part of some South Koreans to recognize these Japanese apologies for Imperial Japan's actions. Additionally, influential figures in and out of the South Korean government have, at various times, either questioned the sincerity of Japan's efforts at reconciliation or argued that these are incomplete, claiming that Tokyo still fails to acknowledge “the illegal and criminal nature of its colonial rule over Korea.”¹² Some of the difficulties in bilateral ties stem from the nature of the 1965 Treaty itself. Although President Park Chung-hee agreed to normalize relations with Japan in exchange for hundreds of millions of dollars in compensation for Japan's past actions, his government did not disburse the money “to any actual victims, instead earmarking the funds for industrial projects.”¹³ From Seoul's perspective, the treaty is therefore more of a political deal than a sincere effort to resolve Japan's colonial actions. Critics of the 1965 normalization treaty also argue that it left many key issues unaddressed, among them Japan's legal liability for colonial rule, the comfort

⁹ Jeong Seon Lee, “「反日」プロパガンダの道具と化す韓国の歴史教科書 [Korean History Textbooks Turning into a Means of Anti-Japanese Propaganda],” *MSN News*, January 13, 2020; “韓国の歴史教科書 全体の4割が20世紀以降、日帝支配に重点 [Korean History Textbooks, 40-Percent Focus on Imperial Japanese Rule, 20th Century and Beyond],” *News Post Seven*, October 7, 2019; and Tomoko Kanno, “どうなってる？日本、韓国の教科書から「歴史認識の相違」を考える [What's Happening? Thinking About 'Differences in Historical Awareness' in Japanese and Korean Textbooks],” *Shūkan Asahi*, November 27, 2019.

¹⁰ Japan and the Republic of Korea, Treaty of Basic Relations, Tokyo, No. 8471, June 22, 1965b; and Japan and the Republic of Korea, Agreement on the Settlement of Problems Concerning Property and Claims and on Economic Co-Operation (with Protocols, Exchanges of Notes and Agreed Minutes), Tokyo, No. 8473, June 22, 1965a.

¹¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Statement by Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama, ‘On the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the War's End,’” August 15, 1995; and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Statement by the Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono on the Result of the Study on the Issue of ‘Comfort Women,’” August 4, 1993.

¹² Sarah Kim, “50 Years After Korea-Japan Pact, Some Issues Won't Go Away,” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, June 22, 2015.

¹³ Elliot Silverberg and Andrew Injoo Park, “East Asia's Alliances Are Falling Apart,” *Foreign Policy*, January 3, 2020.

women issue, compensation for Koreans exposed to the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, payment for forced Korean laborers, sovereignty over the Liancourt Rocks, and the settlement of issues of compensation to victims of Japan's colonial rule, including the right to file claims for damages against Japan.¹⁴

Friction is the consequence of these differing views of what constitutes genuine reconciliation or an obligation to forgive if an apology is sincerely offered. Some in South Korea feel that Japanese expressions of remorse are mere pro forma apologies, while many across Japan are frustrated at what they perceive as South Korea repeatedly asking for apologies and compensation or a sense that Seoul is moving the goalposts with respect to what should be considered a final resolution of the two countries' difficult history. For example, in May 2017, President Moon indicated his intention to reverse course on a 2015 bilateral comfort women agreement that both sides agreed had "finally and irreversibly" resolved the comfort women issue.¹⁵ In November 2018, Seoul announced it would dissolve the Reconciliation and Healing Foundation, the organization established under the 2015 agreement that was meant to compensate former Korean victims with 1 billion yen (approximately US\$9 million) from the Japanese government.¹⁶ Because Tokyo regards Seoul as having promised that the 2015 agreement would settle the issue once and for all, Seoul's decision to reverse course was widely seen as "proof of Seoul's unreliability as a negotiating partner."¹⁷ For the Moon administration, the 2015 agreement was unsatisfactory because the victims who the foundation was supposed to compensate did not participate in the negotiations and cannot therefore be said to have been fairly represented by the Park Geun-hye administration that concluded the arrangement.

Spreading into Other Domains

Because of the challenges each of these three baskets of historical issues presents, bilateral ties between Japan and the ROK have never been particularly warm. What has changed in the 2018–2019 period of bilateral friction is that the two countries' disagreements spilled over into other domains that typically are isolated from historical disputes, including the security, economic, and diplomatic realms.

Tensions in the military realm were the first of these new arenas for dispute. The armed forces of Japan and the ROK have tended to interact regularly and professionally, even during periods of increased bilateral frictions, though these interactions have always been somewhat limited. For example, the navies of South Korea, Japan, and the United States have carried out joint ballistic missile detection and tracking exercises on five occasions since June 2016,

¹⁴ Kim, 2015.

¹⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Japan-Republic of Korea Relations: Announcement by Foreign Ministers of Japan and the Republic of Korea at the Joint Press Occasion," December 28, 2015; and Jonathan Cheng, "New South Korean Leader Casts Doubt on 'Comfort Women' Deal with Japan," *Wall Street Journal*, May 11, 2017.

¹⁶ The foundation was engaged in a program that offered 100 million won (about 9 million yen, or \$83,450) to each former comfort woman or 20 million won to her bereaved family (Hajimu Takeda, "Giving No Notice, S. Korea Closes Foundation for Comfort Women," *Asahi Shimbun*, July 5, 2019; and Yi Hye-in and Kim Jin-wu, "Dissolution of the Reconciliation and Healing Foundation According to the Wishes of the Comfort Women Victims," *Kyungbyang Shinmun*, November 22, 2018).

¹⁷ Silverberg and Park, 2020.

held joint search and rescue exercises annually, and arranged five meetings between the three countries' joint chiefs of staff since July 2014.¹⁸ Therefore, many observers were caught off guard in 2018 and 2019 by the rapid growth of tensions in the military sphere between Seoul and Tokyo. These started with a dispute in late 2018 over whether a JMSDF vessel flying the service's Rising Sun Flag (旭日旗) would be welcome at a Korean naval review, ultimately leading the Japanese side to withdraw. Tensions continued to mount later that year and were on full display when a spat erupted regarding a South Korean naval vessel locking its radar on a Japanese reconnaissance plane in December 2018. During a routine patrol in Japan's exclusive economic zone, a Japanese P-1 maritime patrol aircraft observed two ROK vessels and several smaller boats off the coast of Japan.¹⁹ The ROK claims its ships were providing rescue activities for North Korean boats in international waters.²⁰ According to Japan, its aircraft tried to communicate with the ROK ships but received no response and therefore continued to monitor the activity. At this point, however, Japan claims one of the ROK ships irradiated the P-1 with fire-control radar (typically, the last step before weapons release).²¹ The ROK denied this, stating that the P-1 attempted to interfere with the ROK's humanitarian activities by flying dangerously low.²² The ROK also claimed that Japan's attempts at communicating were "unintelligible."²³

As dangerous as this event was, a more significant disruption of bilateral security ties occurred when South Korea announced it was going to end its participation with Japan in GSOMIA, an intelligence-sharing agreement the two sides signed in November 2016. Prior to GSOMIA, a 2014 Trilateral Information Sharing Agreement with the United States allowed Japan and the ROK to share information with each other by passing it via the United States; GSOMIA was a substantial improvement in that it enabled direct-channel information-sharing. On August 22, 2019, Seoul announced it would allow GSOMIA to expire in November 2019.²⁴ The announcement led to rare and substantial public criticism from Washington (discussed later), with Seoul eventually suspending its decision to implement its withdrawal from the arrangement just hours before it was set to expire.²⁵

In addition to the military domain, the deterioration of bilateral relations spread into the economic domain. In 2018, a series of rulings by South Korea's Supreme Court ordered Japanese firms to compensate Koreans who were used as forced labor during the colonial occupation of the Korean Peninsula, arguing that nothing in the 1965 treaty or claims agreement

¹⁸ Park Byong-su, "South Korea's 'Three No's' Announcement Key to Restoring Relations with China," *Hankyoreh*, November 2, 2017.

¹⁹ Japan Ministry of Defense, 2019b.

²⁰ Maeng Su-Yeol, "Ministry of National Defense Demands Japan 'Apologize for Its Threatening Flight Toward South Korean Destroyer, and Stop Distort . . .,'" Ministry of National Defense, Republic of Korea, January 22, 2019.

²¹ Japan Ministry of Defense, 2019b, pp. 1–2.

²² Su-Yeol, 2019.

²³ Su-Yeol, 2019.

²⁴ Yonhap News Agency, "S. Korea to Scrap Military Info-Sharing Pact with Japan," *Korea Herald*, August 22, 2019b; and Kim Gamel, "South Korea to Withdraw from Military Intelligence Sharing Pact with Japan over Trade Dispute," *Stars and Stripes*, August 22, 2019.

²⁵ Min Joo Kim and Simon Denyer, "Under U.S. Pressure, South Korea Holds Off Ending Intelligence Pact with Japan," *Washington Post*, November 22, 2019; and Lee Haye-ah, "U.S. Welcomes S. Korea's Decision to Suspend GSOMIA Termination," Yonhap News Agency, November 23, 2019.

prevented individuals from seeking redress. These rulings angered Japan, since Tokyo's understanding was that all colonial-era grievances were settled "completely and finally" as part of the 1965 treaty and claims agreement. With no changes in the court's ruling and the possibility that the court could order the liquidation of assets held by Japanese firms in Korea to pay the compensation, Japan retaliated. First, it removed Seoul from its favored trading partner list and imposed a stricter screening process on exports of three key chemicals that South Korean electronics firms need to produce semiconductors and smartphone display panels.²⁶ Then, shortly after Seoul announced its intention to withdraw from the GSOMIA arrangement, Japan removed the ROK from a white list that ensured the South enjoyed minimum export controls on more than 1,000 critical items. Officially, Japan denied any link between these steps and the South Korean court ruling; instead, Tokyo cited concerns over Seoul's controls on materials that can be used for conventional weapons and weapons of mass destruction.²⁷ The ROK followed suit the following month, removing Japan from its own preferred trading list.²⁸ Korean citizens, encouraged by strong condemnations of Tokyo by the Moon administration, arranged boycotts of Japanese goods and services in Korea and canceled most planned travel to Japan, leading Japanese companies to experience deep reductions in their exports to and business in the ROK.²⁹

Finally, the two sides' bilateral disagreements have negatively affected the diplomatic domain. For example, the ROK's 2018 defense white paper dropped its traditional reference to the ROK and Japan as being countries that share the basic values of liberal democracy and market-based approaches to economics. Then, during an annual policy speech in January 2019, Abe omitted any reference to South Korea when describing Japan's diplomacy in Northeast Asia, a marked change from past speeches on this topic.³⁰ The diplomatic rift sharpened further during this period: While every other leader in Northeast Asia was actively meeting one another and was involved in diplomacy with North Korea, Japan held no formal bilateral meetings with its neighbors, apart from Prime Minister Abe's meetings with President Trump.³¹ This led prominent Japanese observers of the country's foreign affairs to worry that Japan was being "left outside of the mosquito net [蚊帳の外]," relying solely on the United States to advocate its interests.³² Although efforts by South Korea and the United States to advance denuclearization with North Korea through diplomacy have proven fruitless, Japan's exclusion from the talks was arguably a result of Tokyo's bilateral dispute with Seoul.

²⁶ Satoshi Sugiyama, "Japan and South Korean Export Control Officials Meet in an Endeavor to Restore Trust," *Japan Times*, December 16, 2019.

²⁷ Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, Japan, "輸出貿易管理令の一部を改正する政令が閣議決定されました [An Order to Revise a Portion of the Export Trade Control Order Was Approved by the Cabinet]," August 2, 2019.

²⁸ Heekyong Yang, "South Korea Removes Japan from Fast Track Trade 'White List,'" Reuters, September 17, 2019.

²⁹ Justin McCurry, "South Korean Boycott of Japanese Goods Hits Beer and Carmakers," *The Guardian*, September 4, 2019.

³⁰ Prime Minister's Office of Japan, 2019a.

³¹ Jeffrey W. Hornung, "Success with North Korea Still Needs Japan," *Japan Times*, June 20, 2018.

³² Ukeru Magosaki, "安倍首相は完全に「蚊帳の外」だった板門店の米朝首脳会談 [Summit Put PM Abe Completely Outside of the Mosquito Net with Panmunjom's U.S.-North Korea Summit]," *Nikkan Gendai*, July 5, 2019.

Strategic Context

This ongoing dispute between two U.S. allies is not taking place in a vacuum. The 2017 U.S. NSS states that “great power competition [has] returned,” specifically naming China and Russia as competitors.³³ Noting that these two countries “challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity,” the NSS argues that they are “determined to make economies less free and less fair, to grow their militaries, and to control information and data to repress their societies and expand their influence.”³⁴ Combined with their increasing military capabilities, these countries “are contesting [America’s] geopolitical advantages and trying to change the international order in their favor.”³⁵ Although North Korea is not a strategic competitor, it is also a focus of U.S. strategy, described as a “rogue regime” that is “determined to destabilize regions, threaten Americans and our allies, and brutalize their own people.”³⁶ Of particular concern are North Korea’s nuclear weapons and ballistic missile capabilities, which are described as threatening the United States and U.S. allies.³⁷

The message delivered by the NSS is reinforced in the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS), which acknowledges that the United States faces “an increasingly complex global security environment, characterized by overt challenges to the free and open international order and the re-emergence of long-term, strategic competition between nations.”³⁸ In particular, the NDS argues that “[i]nter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security.”³⁹ The NDS warns that the ability of the United States to deter aggression and coercion will weaken if this concern is not effectively addressed.

As these core U.S. policy documents note, America requires diplomatic support from its allies and partners to meet these challenges; the NSS says that “allies and partners must also contribute the capabilities and demonstrate the will to confront shared threats.”⁴⁰ After all, “sustaining favorable balances of power will require a strong commitment and close cooperation with allies and partners because allies and partners magnify U.S. power and extend U.S. influence.”⁴¹ In the Indo-Pacific region, there are no greater allies than Japan and the ROK; because of their proximity and shared exposure to these threats, it is in their strategic interest to cooperate. Yet despite these stated policy priorities and calls for unity on these shared interests, Japan-ROK relations spiraled downward, hampering Washington’s ability to implement these strategies.

³³ White House, 2017, p. 27.

³⁴ White House, 2017, p. 2.

³⁵ White House, 2017, p. 27.

³⁶ White House, 2017, pp. 2, 26.

³⁷ White House, 2017, p. 26.

³⁸ DoD, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge*, Washington, D.C., 2018, p. 2.

³⁹ DoD, 2018, p. 1.

⁴⁰ White House, 2017, p. 26.

⁴¹ White House, 2017, p. 45.

Implications of Japan–South Korea Tensions for U.S. Security and Interests

It is precisely because of their importance to U.S. strategy that worsening bilateral ties between Japan and the ROK negatively affect U.S. security and interests. Although there is undoubtedly a wide array of security challenges that could be listed that would benefit from greater bilateral Japan-ROK (and trilateral U.S.-Japan-ROK) dialogue and cooperation, there are three areas directly linked to U.S. security and regional posture and one area linked to broader regional stability that deserve highlighting.

The first U.S. interest affected by Japan–South Korea tensions is deterrence of North Korea. North Korea has proven to be a direct security challenge to both of these key U.S. allies, as well as the United States. The focus by Tokyo and Seoul on historical disputes, and not on the shared strategic challenge posed by North Korea, complicates U.S. efforts to deter Pyongyang. Diplomatically, ongoing tensions undermine U.S. efforts to pursue an effective and coherent strategy against North Korea, since successful negotiations and pressure are contingent on trilateral dialogue and communications to build a united front, particularly on such issues as sanctions enforcement.⁴² Militarily, tensions prevent the armed forces of the three countries from pooling their capabilities for collective deterrence. For example, cancellation of the GSOMIA deal would greatly complicate intelligence-sharing between America's two most important Asian allies, undermining all three parties' ability to track, counter, and respond to threats from North Korea. U.S. Ambassador to South Korea Harry Harris publicly criticized Seoul's plans to terminate the GSOMIA arrangement, arguing that

Korea elevated [the forced labor dispute] into the security realm and that security realm affects [the United States]. So, now it affects the U.S. and our ability to defend Korea, and puts our troops at risk.⁴³

Success in deterring North Korea is more likely when the United States and its allies are unified, which is why North Korea seeks to exploit gaps in the U.S. alliance system and drive wedges among the three democracies.

A second area of U.S. interest, also related to North Korea, is the ability to effectively respond to a contingency on the Korean Peninsula. Although the United States would cooperate bilaterally with each of its allies in the event of a burgeoning crisis on the peninsula in such areas as BMD, antisubmarine warfare, and cyber defense, such cooperation would be far more effective if it were coordinated across the three countries rather than merely occurring in parallel. It would prove particularly detrimental in a contingency should the ROK and United States feel compelled to divert critical capabilities from the front lines to rear areas to perform tasks that Japan could easily execute but was performing on a limited scale or not at all because of constraints on defense cooperation imposed by Japan–South Korea tensions.

An even worse scenario is if poor Japan-ROK ties lead Japan to refuse to assist in key areas during the response to a Korean Peninsula contingency. Even though Japan's forces would not be expected to deploy troops to the Korean Peninsula, they have critical roles to play that

⁴² Celeste L. Arrington and Andrew Yeo, "Japan and South Korea Can't Get Along: Why America Needs to Help Its Allies Mend Fences," *Foreign Affairs*, July 31, 2019.

⁴³ Song Sang-ho, "Amb. Harris Says Seoul Elevated History Issue into Security Realm with GSOMIA Decision," Yonhap News Agency, November 19, 2019.

would help the United States in its fight on the peninsula. Such roles and missions could include base protection; BMD; antisubmarine warfare; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; minesweeping; air and maritime refueling; and escort operations. These would all be force multipliers for U.S. forces deploying from Japan if Tokyo assists, but if poor Japan–South Korea relations led Tokyo to decide against assuming these missions (and their attendant risks), it would place a much greater burden on both ROK and U.S. forces, which would have to devote their finite assets to these tasks rather than those at the front line.

Should bilateral relations truly turn poisonous, Japan could make things even more precarious for the ROK by refusing to permit the United States to execute support operations for a Korea contingency from Japan. Japan is home to the UN Command–Rear. In a contingency on the peninsula, the UN Command–Rear is responsible for managing forces flowing into the theater from UN sending states through seven UN and U.S. bases in Japan, according to a UN–Japan status of forces agreement. The status of U.S. forces in Japan, however, is managed by a separate U.S.–Japan status of forces agreement. Should the United States need to flow forces through Japan or deploy its troops in Japan to the peninsula for combat that is not directly related to the defense of Japan, Tokyo’s interpretation of its security treaty with the United States is that the United States would need to engage in prior consultation with Japan.⁴⁴ Should relations between Japan and South Korea deteriorate further, Tokyo may take longer to consult with and agree to U.S. requests, wasting precious time and putting more burden on the ROK. In the extreme, it is even possible (at least conceptually) that Tokyo could decline to take on added risk to help the ROK even if asked to do so by the United States.

The final issue area directly linked to U.S. interests relates to ties with China. If U.S. allies remain divided, it will be more difficult for the United States and its partners to shape the regional environment in ways that can constrain aggressive Chinese actions. Take, for example, the U.S. FOIP strategy. The strategy, built largely to resemble Japan’s FOIP vision, advocates support of the international order and universal values through closer relations with like-minded countries. Guided by the strategy, the United States has been strengthening ties with like-minded partners to push back against China’s growing assertiveness in all domains, including its Belt and Road Initiative. These responses include cooperation with like-minded partners on countering Huawei and Chinese efforts to sell equipment for 5G networks to other countries. In parallel, the United States and Japan have revived the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or “the Quad”), a grouping of several of the region’s key democracies (the United States, Japan, India, and Australia). Although its objectives are still largely ambiguous, the group offers the potential to band together in resisting actions by revisionist powers, such as China.

To date, South Korea is missing from both FOIP and the Quad, despite being a like-minded, democratic state. Instead of signing up for the FOIP approach, South Korea has adopted its own strategy, which consists of the New Northern Policy and NSP. Whereas the New Northern Policy is intended to build stronger economic linkages with countries to the ROK’s north, including Russia, Mongolia, and Central Asian countries, the NSP focuses on countries in Southeast Asia and India.⁴⁵ Although the NSP has commonalities with FOIP, it is not identical, which puts the ROK out of step with U.S. and Japanese efforts. The fact that South Korea is not participating in the Quad further highlights its lack of integration with key

⁴⁴ Hornung, 2018.

⁴⁵ Lee Jaehyon, “Korea’s New Southern Policy: Motivations of ‘Peace Cooperation’ and Implications for the Korean Peninsula,” ASAN Institute for Policy Studies, June 21, 2019.

initiatives intended to shape the future of the region. And Seoul's decision to allow domestic companies to use Huawei equipment for a portion of South Korea's 5G network puts it at odds with both the United States and Japan, potentially setting up long-term implications for South Korea's national security.⁴⁶

The distance of the ROK from these regional initiatives matters. China's actions are a regional concern, and the United States cannot shape Chinese behavior alone. Ongoing tensions between Japan and South Korea make it difficult to maintain any unity of effort among allies aimed at preventing China from expanding its influence or engaging in coercive diplomacy against China, if necessary.⁴⁷ Worse, should the ROK continue to push for reopening and renegotiating issues from the past, China may seek to use these tensions to pressure Japan, thereby "distracting from [Japan's] efforts [to coordinate] with other Asian leaders to fashion a new architecture of free and open economic and security institutions for the Indo-Pacific" that would ultimately benefit the ROK.⁴⁸

Finally, the outbreak of COVID-19 demonstrates the importance of bilateral cooperation in nontraditional security areas for broader regional stability. During the early days of the outbreak, when both Japan and the ROK were struggling to cope with COVID-19 and seeking to implement extraordinary measures in their fight, the two seemed less intent on cooperation. For example, the ROK lashed out at Japan for its decision to quarantine travelers from South Korea. Seoul also objected to Tokyo's decision to revoke some visas already issued to South Korean travelers and to temporarily suspend a visa waiver program that covered short stays by tourists from South Korea, saying that Tokyo's decision was "unreasonable, excessive and extremely regrettable."⁴⁹ It also retaliated by suspending a visa waiver program for Japanese visitors (as well as instituting its own mandatory quarantine for visitors from Japan).⁵⁰ Such actions may play to one's domestic base, but they hinder coordinated approaches that could benefit the region.

There have been glimmers of hope, however, for what bilateral cooperation could look like against a common threat. For example, President Moon used the occasion of his speech commemorating the March First Independence Movement Day to extend an olive branch, saying, "We can respond to unconventional security threats only when we strengthen cooperation, not only with North Korea but also with adjacent countries like China and Japan and nearby Southeast Asian nations."⁵¹ Likewise, an official from South Korea's Health and Welfare Ministry highlighted the need to cooperate with both Japan and China, saying, "As the three countries are so closely interrelated, they are in a position that all can successfully come

⁴⁶ LG Uplus, South Korea's third-largest mobile service provider, uses Huawei equipment in Seoul and the surrounding metropolitan area (Park Chan-kyong, "Using Huawei for 5G in South Korea Presents 'Little Security Risk,'" *South China Morning Post*, June 7, 2019).

⁴⁷ Thomas J. Christensen, *Worse Than a Monolith: Alliance Politics and Problems of Coercive Diplomacy in Asia*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 2011.

⁴⁸ Silverberg and Park, 2020.

⁴⁹ Kelly Kasulis, "South Korea, Japan Butt Heads over Coronavirus Prevention," *VOA News*, March 7, 2020; and "Japan to Restrict Travel to and from China, S. Korea over Virus," *Kyodo News*, March 6, 2020.

⁵⁰ "South Korea Strikes Back by Suspending Visas for Japanese," *Kyodo News*, March 6, 2020.

⁵¹ Republic of Korea, Office of the President, "Address by President Moon Jae-in on 101st March First Independence Movement Day," March 1, 2020.

out of the situation as long as all three countries effectively contain” the spread of COVID-19.⁵² And South Korea is even open to helping Japan, if needed, something that then–Prime Minister Abe indicated would be welcome.⁵³ Although cooperation during the pandemic is not going to resolve their outstanding issues, it could provide a means by which the two countries can begin building trust. Bilateral sharing of information or best practices could serve such a purpose. As two of the region’s strongest democracies that rely on principles of openness and transparency, bilateral cooperation toward the creation of an infrastructure of regional partnerships for responding to the current and future pandemics could help ensure regional stability, an interest for the United States as well as regional countries.

As is evident in the preceding paragraphs, the disunity between America’s two allies damages U.S. interests and priorities. It is therefore in the interest of the United States to help its allies overcome their current challenges. Although the United States has been vocal in this regard, it has nonetheless done very little to try to ameliorate the situation beyond calling for dialogue between its two allies. It is unclear why the United States has chosen to largely remain on the sidelines. Given the serious security implications of poor Japan-ROK ties with regard to U.S. interests, it would benefit the United States to be more mindful of the current state of their bilateral relationship and, when possible, remind its allies of their shared challenges.

Conclusion

It has been argued in the past that Japan and South Korea have tended to set aside their differences and cooperate when U.S. security commitment to the region appears to weaken.⁵⁴ What is troubling now is that, at a time when many regional allies and partners question the level of U.S. commitment to the region, the dispute between Japan and the ROK has nonetheless worsened substantially. Noting that bilateral disputes between Japan and South Korea negatively affect U.S. security and interests, former Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Randall Schriver has argued that Japan and South Korea need to engage in “meaningful dialogue” to “insulate” security matters from other political disputes.⁵⁵ Without this engagement, the security challenges facing the region will continue unabated, to the detriment of the United States, its allies and partners, and regional peace and stability.

⁵² “South Korea Seeks Cooperation from Japan, China in Tackling Coronavirus,” *Kyodo News*, March 20, 2020.

⁵³ “S. Korea Willing to Cooperate with Japan on Coronavirus Responses: Ministry,” Yonhap News Agency, May 1, 2020.

⁵⁴ Cha, 1999.

⁵⁵ Randall Schriver, “The Importance of U.S.-Japan-Korea Trilateral Defense Cooperation,” Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 28, 2019.

Japan's View of the North Korea Security Challenge and How to Meet It

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How does Japan regard the security threat posed by North Korea, and how have its perceptions and security policy changed over time in response to the risks posed by the North? The DPRK has been an intractable policy problem for Japan as far back as the Cold War, though it grew far more troubling in the decades after that conflict concluded. Japan's official policy toward North Korea was set in 2002 and has not changed much since that time because the issues of North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile development have not been resolved.² Officially, as the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs describes it, Tokyo adheres to a consistent policy of "dialogue and pressure" and "action for action" and "strongly urges North Korea to take concrete steps toward the comprehensive resolution of outstanding issues of concern, such as nuclear and missile issues as well as the abductions issue."³ With respect to the abductions issue, the Abe Administration reached the Stockholm Agreement with North Korea in 2014 after Kim Jong Un officially became the supreme leader by taking all of the top positions in the party, the state, and the military in 2013. However, because of North Korea's continued diplomatic prioritization of talking to the United States over dialoguing with Japan, as well as the DPRK's military development and adventurism, there has been no progress on any of the three objectives that Japan's North Korea policy has aimed to solve—nuclear, missile, and abductions issues. Except in 2018, when the Pyeongchang Olympics generated an ostensible opening of diplomatic engagement between North Korea and South Korea (as well as the United States), North Korea has never ceased to develop nuclear, missile, and other offensive capabilities. In March 2020, North Korea test-launched eight short-range ballistic missiles on four separate days in the midst of the global COVID-19 outbreak, and the country launched additional missiles on April 14 on the eve of the 108th birthday of Kim Il Sung and just ahead of South Korea's National Assembly elections.⁴ Thus, as the North Korean nuclear and missile

¹ The author has requested that his name be rendered in traditional Japanese style, family name (Akutsu) followed by personal name (Hiroyasu), with a footnote clarifying this to readers not familiar with Japanese naming patterns.

² Akutsu Hiroyasu, "Japan's North Korea Strategy: Dealing with New Challenges," *Strategic Japan*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 2014.

³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Japan-North Korea Relations: Measures Taken by the Government of Japan Against North Korea," December 2, 2016b; and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Japan-North Korea Relations: Abductions of Japanese Citizens by North Korea," December 28, 2018.

⁴ Oh Seok-min and Choi Soo-hyang, "N. Korea Fires Barrage of Missiles on Eve of Founder's Birthday, S. Korea's Elections," Yonhap News Agency, April 14, 2020.

challenges have worsened, Japan's threat perception from North Korea has grown more dire, leading Japan to enhance its deterrence and denial capabilities and tighten its defense cooperation with the United States in line with *The Guidelines for U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation*.⁵ In this chapter, I explore Japan's shifting response to and views of the North Korea problem, as well as assessments of North Korea's aims.

Missile Launches During the COVID-19 Outbreak: Business as Usual

Despite its claims to have no cases of COVID-19, North Korea has almost certainly been grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic since late 2019, just as other countries have.⁶ Despite the pandemic (or, perhaps, to distract from it), the country tested several new short-range ballistic missiles and artillery rockets in a series of four launch events in March 2020.⁷ These actions were a continuation of the aggressive statements senior figures in Pyongyang made in December 2019 following the statement by President Trump at a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit that month in which he suggested that a military strike on North Korea might be possible.⁸ North Korea also suggested later that month that it would send a "Christmas gift" to the United States by year's end if the United States did not lift its sanctions on North Korea.⁹ This "gift" ultimately was either never sent or was part of a political warfare campaign; it is also possible that it simply took the form of a relatively low-key pair of missile engine tests at the Sohae Satellite Launching Station on the east coast.¹⁰

North Korea declared that it achieved its goal of developing "the state nuclear force" on November 29, 2017, after test-firing a Hwasong-15 intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM); throughout 2018, the regime maintained a de facto freeze on long-range missile launches. However, despite this pause to conduct a temporary diplomatic "peace offensive" in 2018, the country restarted launching short-range missiles and even launched a submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) in 2019.¹¹ Even during the 2018 peace offensive, no concrete or substantial steps were taken by North Korea to denuclearize despite the promises of the regime's diplomats and Kim Jong Un himself, made during the talks between North Korea, South Korea, and the United States.¹² This indicates that North Korea's true intention is to further develop

⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, *The Guidelines for U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation*, April 27, 2015.

⁶ "North Korea's People's Army Suffers More Than 100 Deaths," *Yomiuri Shimbun*, March 29, 2019, p. 7.

⁷ Japan Ministry of Defense, "2020年の北朝鮮による弾道ミサイル発射 [North Korea's Ballistic Missile Launches in 2020]," April 1, 2020a, p. 2.

⁸ Soyoung Kim and Josh Smith, "Trump Says Kim Jong Un Risks Losing 'Everything' After North Korea Claims Major Test," Reuters, December 7, 2019.

⁹ "Vice Foreign Minister in Charge of US Affairs Ri Thae Song's Statement," *Korean Central News Agency*, December 3, 2019.

¹⁰ "A Successful and Grave Test Was Conducted," *Korean Central News Agency*, December 8, 2020; "Another Grave Test Was Conducted," *Korean Central News Agency*, December 14, 2019; and Hillary Leung, "North Korea's 'Christmas Gift' Statement Put the U.S. on Alert Despite No Missile Launch. That May Be the Point," *Time*, December 27, 2019.

¹¹ Missile Defense Project, "North Korean Missile Launches & Nuclear Tests: 1984-Present," *Missile Threat*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 20, 2017, last modified March 25, 2020b.

¹² Democratic People's Republic of Korea and Republic of Korea, Panmunjom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity and Unification of the Korean Peninsula, Panmunjom, April 27, 2018; and U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Thailand, "Joint State-

its offensive military capabilities, buying time by playing at diplomacy to freeze its opponents while trying to extract compromises from them that will further strengthen its hand. Furthermore, Kim indicated his true intentions in December 2019 at a Central Committee meeting of the Korean Workers' Party, declaring an end to the freeze on nuclear tests and ICBM launches.¹³ North Korea's constant missile tests add to the country's military development, and the challenge to Japan's security keeps growing.

North Korean Goals Are the Ultimate Source of Military Threat

To assess military threat, it is essential to see both intention and capabilities. In the case of North Korea, its intentions have been among the most consistent and constant in the world: to develop nuclear weapons and ballistic missile capabilities to deter invasion or coercion, enhance regime legitimacy, and improve Pyongyang's ability to threaten its adversaries. As an authoritative statement, few documents could be clearer than Kim's 2018 New Year's Day address, in which he clearly showed his firm intention to hold onto his nuclear arsenal:

North Korea's nuclear forces are capable of thwarting and countering any nuclear threats from the US, and they constitute a powerful deterrent that prevent it from starting an adventurous war . . . In no way would the United States dare to ignite a war against me and our country. The whole of its mainland is within the range of our nuclear strike and the nuclear button is on my office desk all the time. The United States needs to be clearly aware that this is not merely a threat but a reality.¹⁴

Kim's statement reflects a long-term strategic approach that he inherited from his father (Kim Jong Il) and his grandfather, DPRK regime founder Kim Il Sung.¹⁵ After the end of the Cold War, two common policies between the Kim Il Sung regime and the following Kim Jong Il regime were the construction of a strong and prosperous socialist nation and the termination of America's hostile policy toward North Korea. The Kims have outlined three key aspects to building a strong and prosperous socialist nation: a politico-ideological dimension, military strength, and economic development. The politico-ideological dimension refers to ensuring that North Korea is a strong nation imbued with the *juche* (or self-reliant ethnonationalist) ideology of Kim Il Sung and the *songun* (or "military first") ideology of Kim Jong Il. In terms of military strength, the Kimist leadership envisions a military fully outfitted with a wide variety of conventional and asymmetric military capabilities, backstopped by a credible nuclear deterrent. Finally, in terms of economic development, the Kim vision of a rich, strong nation has consistently been the biggest challenge for North Korea since at least the early 1990s, if not the

ment of President Donald J. Trump of the United States of America and Chairman Kim Jong Un of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea at the Singapore Summit," Sentosa Island, Singapore, June 12, 2018.

¹³ "Fifth Plenary Meeting of Seventh Central Committee of Workers' Party of Korea Held," *Korean Central News Agency*, December 31, 2019.

¹⁴ Kim Jong Un, "New Year Address 2018," *Rodong Sinmun*, January 1, 2018.

¹⁵ For more details, see National Institute for Defense Studies, *The Kim Jong Un Regime and the Future Security Environment Surrounding the Korean Peninsula*, 19th International Symposium on Security Affairs, Tokyo, July 25, 2016; and Akutsu Hiroyasu, "The Security Strategy of North Korea's Kim Jong Un Regime: A Japanese Perspective," in National Institute for Defense Studies, 2016.

mid-1970s. Kim Jong Un has occasionally admitted that the ongoing international economic and financial sanctions that North Korea is under hamper the country's economic development, but the North has never been willing to forgo weapon development in order to pursue economic development. Instead, it has used language focusing on the joint development of both military might and the economy under a policy called *byungjin* (or parallel development).

In addition to these three aspects, Kim Jong Il's regime in its latter days advanced the goal of being "a science and technology giant," and it would seem that Kim Jong Un is also focusing on accomplishing this goal. Since taking power, Kim Jong Un has moved quickly on two interrelated projects: long-range ballistic missile development and space-launch vehicles for Earth observation satellites. Together, these projects constitute the key architectures for command, control, and communications; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; and position, navigation, and timing data, which are necessary if the regime wants to operationalize an ability to put together a survivable second-strike nuclear capability, including an at-sea deterrent. In 2013, North Korea created the Ministry of Atomic Energy Industry to support its development of nuclear weapons and atomic energy; it has also vowed to become a "space giant" and has established a National Aerospace Development Administration.

Furthermore, in his New Year Address on January 2, 2015, Kim Jong Un claimed,

It is a determination and will of our Party to rapidly develop all sectors and build a people's paradise by dint of science and technology. The front of science should forcefully rush ahead in the vanguard of a thriving socialist country building, thereby foiling the enemy's pernicious moves for sanctions.¹⁶

Because science and technology are intimately linked to military and economic might in North Korea, it is possible that some of North Korea's defense expenditures are being routed to spending on science and technology.

Furthermore, the regime's goal of becoming a "strong and prosperous nation" (*kangsong taeguk*) resembles Japan's Meiji-era slogan of seeking to become a "rich country [with a] strong army" (*fukoku kyōhei*). By introducing the *juče* and *songun* ideologies into North Korea's constitution as the two official guiding philosophies of the country in 2016, Kim Jong Un has made clear his regime's political ideology. In addition, the regime proclaimed itself a nuclear weapons state in 2012 and wrote that description into the preamble of its constitution, even as it is obviously intent on further enhancing its nuclear and missile capabilities.¹⁷

An even more important agenda for North Korea after the end of the Cold War has been to pursue an end to what it calls America's "hostile policy." North Korea has articulated a series of goals in connection with this overall ambition. These include replacing the Korean Armistice Agreement with a peace treaty; establishing normalized diplomatic relations with the United States (or at least exchanging liaison offices);¹⁸ eliciting formal, written security assur-

¹⁶ "Kim Jong Un Advances Tasks to Effect Upswing in Building Socialist Economic Giant and Civilized Nation," *Korean Central News Agency*, January 2, 2015.

¹⁷ Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainability, "The DPRK's Nuclear Constitution," NAPSNet Policy Forum, June 13, 2012.

¹⁸ Nautilus Peace and Security Network, "Briefing By State Department Official on U.S.-DPRK Bilateral Meeting," U.S. Mission to the United Nations, March 7, 1997.

ances from the United States;¹⁹ ending sanctions;²⁰ the withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Korea;²¹ ending the U.S.-ROK alliance;²² and extracting large-scale economic and financial assistance, among other steps.²³ In theory, North Korea would like formal recognition as a nuclear weapons state, but it would accept the United States simply treating the country as a de facto nuclear weapons state. Kim Jong Un considered his meeting with President Trump in Singapore on June 12, 2018, to be a success in the sense that he won a written offer from the United States of security guarantees.

North Korea's Nuclear Doctrine

One thing that distinguishes Kim Jong Un from his father and grandfather is his commitment to raising the profile of North Korea's nuclear weapons program and ballistic missile programs, including by elevating the regime's de facto nuclear doctrine. One day after the release of the *byungjin* policy of pursuing simultaneous nuclear weapon and economic development, the Supreme People's Assembly adopted a "Law on Consolidating the Position of Nuclear Weapons State for Self-Defense" on April 1, 2013.²⁴ The law was a critical development and is worth a closer examination. In particular, it specifies the United States as the main target for the regime's nuclear weapons and states that these weapons would be used to retaliate against a U.S. invasion. It vows to continue enhancing the North's nuclear deterrent and retaliatory strike capabilities, both qualitatively and quantitatively. It designates the Supreme Commander of the Korean People's Army (i.e., Kim Jong Un) as the ultimate commander with the authority to order the use of nuclear weapons. It also clarifies the regime's view that it would be justified in using nuclear weapons against U.S. allies as co-belligerents if threatened by U.S. invasion from their territories. It discusses the safe storage and management of nuclear weapons, vows strict compliance with regulations on nuclear safety, and states the need to establish systems and methods for storing and managing nuclear weapons, nuclear weapon technology, and weapons-grade fissile materials to guard against proliferation. Finally, it claims that the regime will pursue nuclear nonproliferation, arms reductions, denuclearization, and safe management of nuclear materials but only after tensions with hostile nuclear-armed states have been resolved (at which point, Pyongyang will be willing to build a world that is free of nuclear weapons).

¹⁹ Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainability, "DPRK Timeline of Recent Events Part 2," Briefing Books DPRK, April 21, 2004.

²⁰ Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainability, "NAPSNet Daily Report 12 August, 1997," August 12, 1997.

²¹ It was reported that North Korea dropped this demand as a precondition to denuclearization, but because the denuclearization talks are deadlocked, North Korea may still hold the demand and could use it according to the situation (Euan McKirdy, "North Korea Drops Withdrawal of US Forces as Condition of Denuclearization, Moon Says," *CNN*, April 19, 2018).

²² Denny Roy, "Misunderstanding North Korea," Honolulu: East-West Center, AsiaPacific Issues No. 133, August 2017.

²³ During the earlier U.S.-North Korea talks after the so-called North Korean nuclear crisis since 1994, the demand of exchanging liaison offices goes back to the talks regarding the Agreed Framework, while ending joint military exercises, completing a peace treaty were often brought up from 1998 to 2000. See, for example, Tae-Hwan Kwak and Seung-Ho Joo, eds., *North Korea's Foreign Policy Under Kim Jong Il: New Perspectives*, Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing, 2009, especially p. 67.

²⁴ "Law on Consolidating Position of Nuclear Weapons State Adopted," *Korean Central News Agency*, April 1, 2013.

A look at these provisions makes it evident that the law satisfies the minimum requirements for a nuclear doctrine. Specifically, the first provision shows that the nuclear deterrent is directed at the United States, the fourth describes the chain of command, the fifth rules out first use, the sixth describes management of nuclear weapons, and the seventh addresses the handling of nuclear materials and nonproliferation of nuclear weapons. The wording of this seventh provision about “systems and methods for storing and managing nuclear weapons, nuclear weapons technology and weapons-grade nuclear materials so as to thoroughly guard against their illegal spread” could indicate that North Korea wants to make this a point for compromise in negotiations with the United States that the regime may anticipate engaging in sometime in the future. If so, it may be that North Korea would vow, at a minimum, that it would not allow nuclear weapons, nuclear-related technology, or weapons-grade fissile materials to leave the country if the United States officially recognizes North Korea as a nuclear-armed state. It is inconceivable at present that the United States would accept this proposition, but that does not dilute the significance of North Korea’s expectations to the contrary. North Korea suggested as much around the time it conducted its fourth nuclear weapons test in January 2016. On the occasion of the regime’s sixth test on September 3, 2017, North Korea’s Nuclear Weapons Institute announced,

Scientists in the nuclear field of the DPRK successfully carried out a test of H-bomb for ICBM in the northern nuclear test ground of the DPRK at 12:00 on September 3, true to the Korean Workers’ Party plan for building a strategic nuclear force.²⁵

The test was conducted under Kim Jong Un’s direct guidance at the site, according to an article from the *Korean Central News Agency* (North Korea’s state news agency).²⁶ A look at the content of that article suggests that it is reflective of the regime’s nuclear doctrine and strategy under Kim Jong Un.

Along with this doctrine, North Korea has increased the number of nuclear and ballistic missile tests under Kim Jong Un’s rule (Table 4.1 and Figure 4.1). Additionally, as Table 4.2 shows, the yields of North Korea’s nuclear weapons have constantly increased.

Table 4.1
Kim Jong Un Has Dramatically Increased North Korea’s Nuclear Tests and Ballistic Missile Launches

Leader	Year	Ballistic Missile Launch	Nuclear Tests
Kim Il Sung	1993	At least once. Nodong toward Japan.	0
Kim Jong Il	1994–2011	16 (1998, 2006, 2009)	2
Kim Jong Un	2012–2020	88	4

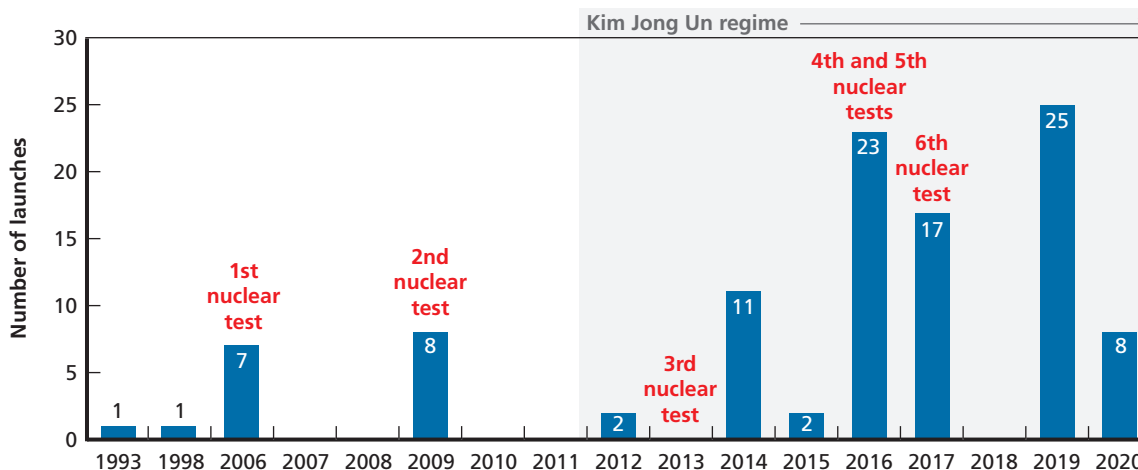
SOURCE: Japan Ministry of Defense, “Recent Missile & Nuclear Development of North Korea,” March 2021, p. 2.

NOTE: The mention of Nodong was added by the author.

²⁵ “DPRK Nuclear Weapons Institute on Successful Test of H-Bomb for ICBM,” *Korean Central News Agency*, September 3, 2017.

²⁶ “Kim Jong Un Gives Guidance to Nuclear Weaponization,” *Korean Central News Agency*, September 3, 2017.

Figure 4.1
North Korea's Ballistic Missile Launches, 1993–2020



SOURCE: Adapted from Japan Ministry of Defense, 2021, p. 2.

As Table 4.2 shows, the sixth nuclear test, which was conducted on September 3, 2017, and which the regime claimed was a hydrogen bomb test, had a yield that was ten times larger than that of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. In reaction to this test, Japanese Defense Minister Onodera Itsunori stated after his teleconference with his U.S. counterpart James Mattis that the September 3 nuclear test

was much larger than past ones, [and] North Korea's continual provocations, [as well as its continuing to ignore] international society's successive cautions, are utterly unacceptable. North Korea's nuclear and missile development is a new level of threat that is more seriousness and imminent to Japan's security [than ever before].²⁷

His view was shared by Mattis, and both officials reaffirmed their mutual commitment to close cooperation as well as trilateral cooperation among Japan, the United States, and South Korea.

Japan's Recognition of the Existential Nature of the North Korea Threat

For Japan, North Korea's weapon developments became more threatening once the DPRK's ballistic missiles began falling in Japan's exclusive economic zone. Prime Minister Abe stated at the 71st Session of the UN General Assembly on September 21, 2016,

North Korea has now manifested itself directly before us as an open threat to peace. What can we do in response? The *raison d'être* of the United Nations is now truly being tested. North Korea launched SLBMs. Immediately after North Korea fired three ballistic missiles simultaneously, each traversing 1,000 kilometers to reach Japan's exclusive economic

²⁷ Japan Ministry of Defense, "Teleconference Between Defense Minister Onodera and U.S. Defense Secretary Mattis," September 6, 2017.

Table 4.2
Development of North Korea's Nuclear Capabilities

	October 2006	May 2009	February 2013	January 2016	September 2016	September 2017 ^a
Magnitude of earthquake (source: CTBTO)	4.1	4.52	4.9	4.85	5.1	6.1
Estimated yield (kilotons of TNT)	0.5–1	2–3	6–7	6–7	11–12	160

SOURCE: Japan Ministry of Defense, 2021, p. 3.

NOTE: CTBTO = Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization

^a North Korea claims this was a successful underground hydrogen bomb test.

zone (EEZ). It is purely a matter of good fortune that no commercial aircraft or ships suffered any damage during this incident.²⁸

Abe's statement indicated that North Korea's missile launches were now recognized as an existential threat to Japan. Japan's MOD and SDF have paid particular attention to a set of concerning overall capabilities that North Korea has fielded in recent years, including advanced, long-range ballistic missiles; more operational capabilities with increased accuracy for saturation attack; advanced capabilities for surprise attack; diversified missile launch vectors, such as lofted trajectory and low-altitude launching; and possible possession of capabilities to miniaturize warheads.²⁹ Additionally, Japanese analysts and officials are concerned about North Korea's

- Taepodong-2 (an ICBM that flies farther than 10,000 km) and its variants
- addition of mobile launchers
- demonstrated ability to fire multiple missiles launched simultaneously or successively from more mobile launchers, which could make existing BMD systems less effective
- development of an SLBM capability
- platform diversification for launching and increasingly rapid and less-visible launches, which make the launches less predictable
- possible use of solid-fuel missiles.³⁰

Personally, I am concerned about North Korea's cruise missile development and continuing development of offensive cyberwarfare capabilities. North Korea has tested cruise missiles several times as coastal defense means, including a test launch in June 2017, but if the development is more directly linked with the development of submarines, the country's SLBMs would be major game-changers and could pose an important challenge to Japan and the United

²⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Japan and the United Nations: Address by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the Seventy-First Session of the United Nations General Assembly," New York, September 21, 2016a.

²⁹ Japan Ministry of Defense, 2021.

³⁰ Japan Ministry of Defense, 2021.

States.³¹ Cruise missiles are not covered by the existing UN sanctions against North Korea, so it is conceivable that North Korea feels even freer to pursue the capability.

As for long-range missiles (including ICBMs), which are mainly directed at the United States and not Japan, Japanese observers worry about the possibility of North Korea using these missiles to isolate Japan from its ally and security partners and threaten the United States. It should be noted that the allies do not necessarily share the common threat perception in terms of missile target range. This is always a point that North Korea strives to take advantage of, since steps by the United States to protect the U.S. homeland might leave Japan or South Korea exposed, providing a potential political seam that Pyongyang can exploit.

Finally, Japan recognizes North Korea's cyber capabilities as a serious threat in light of the substantial damage that North Korea has been able to inflict on South Korea using cyberattacks. North Korea's cyber operations are largely gray-zone threats, in that they target both civilian and defense infrastructure and facilities and are intended to be deniable and unattributed. The Japanese MOD and SDF officially define *cyberattacks* as the abuse of information and communications networks; the use of information systems for unauthorized access, theft, and the falsification or destruction of information; the causing of information systems to cease functioning or to malfunction; or the execution of a malicious program or programs to implement a distributed denial of service attack through cyberspace. Japanese policy recognizes that it remains difficult to identify the sources of cyberattacks and to deter malign actors from perpetrating them. In my view, cyber defense cooperation between Japan and South Korea, in addition to that between Japan and the United States, should be recognized as highly important.³²

Japan's Response to the Growing North Korea Challenge

North Korea has expressed a willingness for complete denuclearization through the Joint Statement of President Trump and Chairman Kim, the Panmunjom Declaration, and the Pyongyang Joint Statement. However, there have been no concrete or substantial steps taken by North Korea to implement its pledges to denuclearize.³³ Thus, North Korea maintains a significant level of nuclear and missile capabilities as well as conventional and asymmetric capabilities (including cyber and special forces) that threaten Japan and its ally and security partners. Despite international financial and economic sanctions, the country is still strongly determined to further develop offensive capabilities. Those capabilities remain problematic at both the regional and international levels.

In response to the security challenges that North Korea poses to Japan, Tokyo has increasingly been striving to enhance its missile defense capabilities in collaboration with the United States to ensure a seamless link between Japan's deterrence and the extended deterrence offered by the United States, as well as to increase cooperation with regional security partners to maintain the stability of the Indo-Pacific. An early introduction of the Aegis Ashore BMD system is much anticipated because the new system would better deal with many of North

³¹ North Korea launched two cruise missiles from Wonsan on April 14, 2020.

³² Japan Ministry of Defense, "Regarding Response to a Cyber Attack," webpage, accessed November 22, 2020b.

³³ Akutsu Hiroyasu, "North Korea's 'One Agreement per U.S. Administration' Approach and the U.S.-North Korea Joint Statement," *NIDS Commentary*, No. 77, June 29, 2018b.

Korea's current and ever-growing capabilities. Obviously, one new technology may not suffice. North Korea is always looking for a way to take advantage of any gaps or seams in any such new technology. One area that we should watch for North Korea to focus its efforts on is low-altitude trajectories of short-range missiles, such as those the North launched several times in 2019; these missiles have raised concerns in Japan and the United States. Alliance cooperation has become more important than ever and should be continually enhanced. In addition, there has been mounting demand in Japan (especially since 2018) for a stand-off missile capability to better deter and respond to North Korea's growing threat to Japan.³⁴ However, full utilization of BMD remains in high demand. For this capability to be maintained, GSOMIA (which enables smooth information-sharing between Japan and South Korea) is essential. But the mechanism has been only barely alive since the bilateral relationship was restrained due to the resurgent political tensions between the two security partners. GSOMIA should be sustained in a more stable manner by improving the bilateral relationship.

Furthermore, bilateral cooperation is increasingly important to deal with North Korea's cyberattacks. The Japanese MOD and SDF established a Cyber Defense Group in March 2014 as a joint unit under the SDF Command, Control, Communications, and Computers Systems Command to monitor information and communication networks and respond to cyberattacks on a round-the-clock basis. With regard to Japan-U.S. cyber defense cooperation, both allies have agreed to develop a system of prompt and appropriate information-sharing and protection of critical infrastructure on which the SDF and U.S. forces rely in the execution of their missions, as stated in the revised Guidelines for U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation and the Joint Statement of the U.S.-Japan Cyber Defense Policy Working Group in 2015. In addition, the United States and Japan have agreed to take steps to ensure the resiliency of individual networks and systems and to implement educational exchanges and joint exercises. Given that Japan's international cyber defense cooperation has extended to the United Kingdom, Australia, Estonia, and NATO at various levels, such cooperation with South Korea should also be feasible and should be pursued urgently.³⁵

Finally, Japan's recent efforts include monitoring North Korea's illegal ship-to-ship transfers.³⁶ Although the number of those illegal cases seems to remain at low levels, North Korea has never stopped those activities because they provide the regime with critical resources to compensate for the losses caused by international sanctions. Fortunately, Japan's efforts have been joined by like-minded security partners, including the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and France. Although Japan-U.S.-ROK trilateral security cooperation and Japan-ROK bilateral security cooperation have been hampered by the current political and diplomatic situation between Japan and South Korea, pursuing and enhancing other bilateral and multilateral cooperative options would continue to be a useful approach for Japan to pursue and would help maintain and enhance the Japan-U.S. alliance by strengthening ties

³⁴ Japan Ministry of Defense, *Defense of Japan 2018*, April 2018a, p. 227.

³⁵ Japan Ministry of Defense, 2020b.

³⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Japan-North Korea Relations: Suspicion of Illegal Ship-to-Ship Transfers of Goods by North Korea-Related Vessels," webpage, February 19, 2020.

among the “spokes” of the U.S.-centered alliance system, as well as among European partners in the Indo-Pacific.³⁷

Conclusion

North Korea under the Kim Jong Un regime has significantly enhanced its nuclear and missile capabilities despite the imposition of a broad variety of international economic sanctions. Japan perceives these developments as highly threatening to its security and has accordingly striven to enhance its missile defense capabilities in tandem with the United States while taking related and necessary measures to reinforce its own deterrence and its ally's extended deterrence. However, the rapid progress of North Korea's weapon development has often outpaced Japan's action. This has posed yet another technological and security challenge to Japan. The challenge is not just Japan's own; it is shared with the United States and other like-minded partners, including South Korea. The persistence of North Korea's nuclear and missile threats is a reminder of the continuing importance of the Japan-U.S. alliance, which must be constantly renewed and improved.

³⁷ For a Japanese view on inviting the United Kingdom and France to engage in regional security activities in the Indo-Pacific, see, for example, Akutsu Hiroyasu, “Options to Update the U.S.-Japan Alliance: Common Strategic Objectives and the Indo-Pacific Strategy,” in Shihoko Goto, ed., *U.S. National Security Strategy: Implications for the U.S.-Japan Alliance*, Washington, D.C.: Wilson Center, 2018a. For a broader study by U.S. experts on the reasons behind and implications of the growing defense cooperation ties among Indo-Pacific allies and security partners of the United States, see Scott W. Harold, Derek Grossman, Brian Harding, Jeffrey W. Hornung, Gregory Poling, Jeffrey Smith, and Meagan L. Smith, *The Thickening Web of Asian Security Cooperation: Deepening Defense Ties Among U.S. Allies and Partners in the Indo-Pacific*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-3125-MCF, 2019.

The North Korean Military Challenge: A U.S. Perspective

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On April, 15, 2012, the centenary of the birthday of North Korea's founding dictator Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Un delivered a speech titled "Let Us March Forward Dynamically Towards Final Victory, Holding Higher the Banner of *Songun*."¹ In the speech—Kim Jong Un's first since succeeding his father Kim Jong Il in late 2011—the young and still inexperienced North Korean leader extolled the achievements of his father and grandfather in erecting a militarily superior state, emphasized the central role of the KPA, and indicated that the DPRK would continue on this "military first" (*songun*) policy under the third generation of Kim rule. Kim also made references to achieving the DPRK's "final victory," or unification under Pyongyang as a single, Kim-led Korea, identifying this as the goal of the regime's military development efforts.

In 2017, the world would once again see North Korean propaganda emphasize the goal of "final victory" over the United States and "reunification under *juche*" (the DPRK's ideology of self-reliance and nationalism).² During the first five years of Kim Jong Un's rule, however, Pyongyang would make significant advances in rendering its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile threat more credible to the United States, Japan, and South Korea. Under Kim Jong Un, Pyongyang would (1) conduct more missile tests than the total number of tests conducted during his father and grandfather's rule combined, (2) carry out the regime's most powerful nuclear test to date, and (3) meet with a sitting U.S. president three times in two years without having first taken substantial steps toward dismantling his country's nuclear weapons program. Given Kim's relatively young age and the remarkable progress he has made in securing his regime's reputation as a nuclear weapons state in less than a decade, it is highly likely that the credibility of Pyongyang's nuclear and missile threat to international security will increase in the years to come, absent any concerted, consistent, and principled campaign by the United States and its allies to discourage and impose costs on North Korea's bad behavior. Critical to Kim's achievement of "final victory" and reunification under the North is the erosion of U.S. influence in the Korean Peninsula and the broader East Asia region. This goal includes the objective of ending the U.S.-ROK alliance and achieving the removal of U.S. forces from South Korea and Japan.

¹ Kim Jong Un, *Let Us March Forward Dynamically Towards Final Victory, Holding Higher the Banner of Songun: Speech Delivered at the Military Parade Held in Celebration of the Centenary of the Birth of Generalissimo Kim Il Sung, April 15, 2012, Juche 101*, Pyongyang: Foreign Language Publishing House, 2012.

² Isaac Chotiner, "What Does North Korea Want?" *Slate*, February 22, 2017; and Sheila Miyoshi Jager, "What Trump Needs to Know About North Korea's History," *Politico Magazine*, August 9, 2017.

Despite North Korea's emphasis on developing its military strength, the country's political isolation and economic policy mismanagement, along with international sanctions, have significantly hampered the Kim regime's ability to maintain a favorable conventional military force balance with the United States and South Korea. As a result, the regime has made limited, selective upgrades to its conventional military capabilities while increasing its investments in asymmetric attack capabilities to counter the superior capabilities of its U.S., South Korean, and Japanese adversaries. At the crux of Pyongyang's asymmetric "self-defense" is its nuclear weapons program, which allows the regime to exercise substantial coercive leverage over Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo despite the gross overall inferiority of its conventional military forces. To buttress the credibility of its coercive threats, the DPRK has developed other forms of coercion, including chemical weapons,³ cyberwarfare,⁴ special operations forces, smuggling networks for illicit goods (such as narcotics and arms),⁵ and other lower-level aggression that fall below the threshold of war.

The DPRK's broadening portfolio of coercive measures has made the elimination of the North Korean threat all the more challenging for the United States and like-minded allies in Japan and South Korea. Meeting the DPRK challenge requires a cohesive national security and defense strategy in addition to greater collaboration and cohesion in the policies of like-minded states. Mindful of this imperative for its adversaries, the Kim regime has consistently pursued a strategy to weaken U.S. influence in the region through tactics geared toward driving a wedge between Washington and its two closest allies in the region.

For Washington, the success of its leverage over Pyongyang hinges largely on the strength and reliability of its alliances with Tokyo and Seoul. In the context of its ongoing competition for regional influence with Beijing, Washington's ability to secure and strengthen relations with other like-minded countries has become especially critical. The U.S.-Japan alliance rests on the common strategic interests of stability, peace, and prosperity and the shared threat perception toward North Korea. Any contingency on the Korean Peninsula will likely involve Japan's assistance and require the transit of U.S. forces and equipment from U.S. bases to Japan. Tokyo is not only a valuable partner in Washington's strategy toward Pyongyang; Japan's shared values with the United States make Japan a steadfast ally in broader U.S.-led global initiatives in peacekeeping, cybersecurity, missile defense, and economics.⁶

³ International Crisis Group, *North Korea's Chemical and Biological Weapons Programs*, Brussels, Belgium, Asia Report No. 167, June 18, 2009a; and John V. Parachini, "Assessing North Korea's Chemical and Biological Weapons Capabilities and Prioritizing Countermeasures," testimony presented before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Trade, and the Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific on January 17, 2018, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, CT-486, 2018.

⁴ Jenny Jun, Scott LaFoy, and Ethan Sohn, *North Korea's Cyber Operations: Strategy and Responses*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies and Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, December 2015; and Kathleen J. McNinnis, Andrew Feickert, Mark E. Manyin, Steven A. Hildreth, Mary Beth D. Nikitin, and Emma Chanlett-Avery, *The North Korean Nuclear Challenge: Military Options and Issues for Congress*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, R44994, November 6, 2017.

⁵ Bruce E. Bechtol, Jr., "North Korea's Illegal Weapons Trade: The Proliferation Threat from Pyongyang," *Foreign Affairs*, June 6, 2018.

⁶ Patrick M. Cronin, *The Cornerstone and the Linchpin: Securing America's Northeast Asian Alliances*, Washington, D.C.: Hudson Institute, October 2019; and Richard L. Armitage and Joseph S. Nye, *More Important Than Ever: Renewing the U.S.-Japan Alliance for the 21st Century*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 2018.

In this chapter, I discuss the limitations of North Korea's conventional military capabilities to explain the Kim regime's rationale and justification for pursuing nuclear and ballistic missile weaponization. I also explore Pyongyang's tools of asymmetric warfare (specifically, its activities in cyberspace). I also discuss North Korea–China relations to underscore Beijing's leverage over Pyongyang and stress the importance of a strong U.S.–Japan–ROK cooperative trilateral relationship to counter the North Korean threat. Finally, I examine several options for Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul to strengthen their trilateral cooperation and, in turn, weaken Pyongyang's nuclear and asymmetric coercive leverage over them.

Pyongyang's Coercive Leverage Options

North Korea's Conventional Military Forces

North Korea has the world's fourth-largest standing military, with over 1.5 million active personnel serving in its armed forces and 600,000 in reserves.⁷ When compared with 50,000 and 28,500 U.S. troops stationed in Japan and South Korea, respectively; 600,000 South Korean troops; and 247,000 Japanese troops, the DPRK has numerical superiority over its adversaries.⁸ Although Pyongyang's armed forces are larger in number than the combined total of ROK and U.S. troops on the peninsula, the North is substantially outclassed in terms of logistics and technology. The North's power projection and defenses suffer from shortages in logistical supplies and still operate using legacy Chinese and Russian hardware from the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. The forward-deployed ground forces of the KPA can mobilize quickly and pose a threat to the North's regional adversaries, especially via their 170mm and 240mm long-range artillery systems.⁹ However, the KPA's other combat capabilities are most frequently employed in scripted exercises and public demonstrations that primarily serve as propaganda for the domestic population and signal as threats to the external audience; these capabilities may leave the KPA ill-prepared to conduct real-world, sustained combat operations. Similarly, the North Korean navy and air force maintain largely technologically inferior models of aircraft and maritime patrol craft, with selective upgrades to surface ships and missile-armed patrol boats and corvettes.¹⁰ The DPRK's special operations forces have constructed several very slender vessels, hovercraft, and *Yugo*- and *Yono*-class mini-submarines for infiltration and surface combat.¹¹

⁷ Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, 2017*, Report to Congress Pursuant to the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2012, U.S. Department of Defense, 2017.

⁸ Republic of Korea, Ministry of National Defense, *2018 Defense White Paper*, 2018; and "Chapter Six: Asia," *The Military Balance*, Vol. 120, No. 1, February 13, 2020.

⁹ D. Sean Barnett, Yvonne K. Crane, Gian Gentile, Timothy M. Bonds, Dan Madden, and Katherine Pfrommer, *North Korean Conventional Artillery: A Means to Retaliate, Coerce, Deter, or Terrorize Populations*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A619-1, 2020.

¹⁰ Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2017.

¹¹ James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, "North Korea Submarine Capabilities," Nuclear Threat Initiative, October 4, 2018; Joseph Bermudez and Beyond Parallel, "North Korean Special Operations Forces: Hovercraft Bases (Part IV)," Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 5, 2018; and Kyle Mizokami, "Everything You Need to Know About North Korea's Navy," *National Interest*, July 22, 2017.

The Nuclear Option

To compensate for the deficit in its conventional military capabilities, the North Korean regime has invested its wherewithal and manpower in the development of its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile delivery systems. Notably, since Kim Jong Un assumed power in 2011, the DPRK conducted more than 100 missile tests, exceeding the number of tests under his father and grandfather combined.¹² Of the regime's six nuclear tests, four were conducted under Kim Jong Un's leadership, with each successive test increasing in yield and magnitude. In September 2017, North Korea conducted its largest nuclear test ever at Punggye-ri, which (according to U.S. intelligence estimates) yielded an explosive detonation ranging between 140 and 250 kilotons.¹³ U.S. nuclear experts have since confirmed that Pyongyang tested an advanced hydrogen bomb.¹⁴ In November 2017, the DPRK successfully tested its Hwasong-15 ICBM with a range of more than 13,000 km, a system probably capable of carrying a nuclear warhead.¹⁵ Critically, this extended range brings Kim closer to attaining his goal of being capable of striking the U.S. mainland with a nuclear-armed ICBM.¹⁶

Although the United States remains the primary target for North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile activities, the Kim regime's shorter-range missile tests also pose a credible threat to its more proximate neighbors. Pyongyang's Scud, Nodong, and Musudan missiles all have ranges that cover Japan and South Korea.¹⁷ The DPRK's most recent missile tests in March 2020 landed near Japan's exclusive economic zone; its August 2017 missile launch also targeted Japanese territory.¹⁸ The intensifying nuclear and missile threat from North Korea has prompted some speculation about the possibility of Japan developing its own nuclear weapons program and has prompted Tokyo to procure more BMD systems for self-defense.¹⁹

Cyber Operations

In addition to its nuclear weapons capabilities, North Korea has in recent years increasingly turned to an arsenal of asymmetric threat capabilities to compensate for deficiencies in its conventional military strength, including a sophisticated offensive cyberwarfare strategy (dubbed the "all-purpose sword") that allows the KPA to "strike relentlessly" and inflict economic harm

¹² James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, "The CNS North Korea Missile Test Database," Nuclear Threat Initiative, March 31, 2020.

¹³ Missile Defense Project, "Missiles of North Korea," *Missile Threat*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 14, 2018, last modified March 4, 2020a.

¹⁴ "U.S. Intel Official: No Doubt North Korea Tested Advanced Device," Reuters, September 3, 2017; and "U.S. Nuclear Commander Assumes North Korea Tested H-Bomb Sept. 3," *CBS News*, September 15, 2017.

¹⁵ Jacob Fromer, "North Korea 'Clearly' Trying to Build Long-Range, Nuclear-Capable Missile: Esper," *NK News*, January 24, 2020.

¹⁶ Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2017.

¹⁷ James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, 2020; Lindsay Maizland and Beina Xu, "The U.S.-Japan Security Alliance," Council on Foreign Relations, August 22, 2019.

¹⁸ "North Korea 'Fires Two Missiles in First Test of the Year,'" *BBC News*, March 2, 2020; and Choe Sang-Hun and David E. Sanger, "North Korea Fires Missile over Japan," *New York Times*, August 28, 2017.

¹⁹ Mark Fitzpatrick, "How Japan Could Go Nuclear," *Foreign Affairs*, October 3, 2019; and Patrick Winn, "Japan Has Plutonium, Rockets and Rivals. Will It Ever Build a Nuke?" Public Radio International, March 14, 2019.

on its adversaries.²⁰ The absence of any established rules of behavior in cyberspace, low attributability and traceability of hackers, and inexpensive operation costs have made cyberwarfare an increasingly attractive instrument for the regime to generate massive revenue and conduct information operations and psychological campaigns against targets worldwide, including the United States, Japan, Malaysia, Bangladesh, South Korea, and Vietnam.²¹ At least some of the revenue generated from North Korea's cyber operations appears to be funneled into channels to develop the regime's nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction program. The North Korean regime-affiliated Lazarus Group was responsible for the 2017 WannaCry ransomware attack that spread across several government, hospital, school, and business computer networks around the world.²² The DPRK's cybercrime operations include attempts to steal more than \$1 billion from financial institutions around the world, including a successful \$81 million heist from the New York Federal Reserve account of Bangladesh's central bank.²³ In January 2018, a group of North Korean hackers stole over \$500 million in cryptocurrency from Coincheck, a Japanese bitcoin exchange.²⁴ North Korea's cyber espionage group APT37, also known as Reaper, hacked into a UN-associated Japanese sanctions enforcement organization.²⁵

Beijing Applies Selective Pressure over Pyongyang

North Korea and its growing arsenal of conventional military and asymmetric capabilities alone—its advancing nuclear weapons capabilities and increasing ballistic missile ranges, as well as its sophisticated cyberwarfare activities, all of which violate international norms and sanctions—pose sufficient challenges to U.S. and allied security. But Pyongyang's on-again, off-again relations with Beijing compound the security dilemma posed to U.S. and allied security and strategic interests. Beijing's political and economic leverage over Pyongyang, if applied consistently and in accordance with international norms, would contribute to U.S.-led concerted efforts to curtail North Korea's nuclear and missile provocations. Yet China has been hesitant to press North Korea too hard over its nuclear program because of the security implications of a nuclear-armed North Korea to Beijing's political interests and because of considerations tied to China's domestic politics and a desire to preserve regional stability and avert an unduly hostile relationship with a nuclear-armed neighbor.²⁶ To be sure, China reacted sternly

²⁰ Mathew Ha and David Maxwell, *Kim Jong Un's "All-Purpose Sword": North Korean Cyber-Enabled Economic Warfare*, Washington, D.C.: Foundation for Defense of Democracies, October 2018; Jun, LaFoy, and Sohn, 2015; McInnis et al., 2017.

²¹ FireEye, *APT38: Un-Usual Suspects*, Milpitas, Calif., 2018.

²² U.S. Embassy and Consulate in the Republic of Korea, "Press Briefing on the Attribution of the WannaCry Malware Attack to North Korea," Washington, D.C., December 19, 2017.

²³ Daniel R. Coats, *Statement for the Record: Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community*, Washington, D.C.: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, January 29, 2019.

²⁴ Crystal Tai, "North Korean Cyberwarfare: As Big a Threat as Its Nuclear Weapons?" *South China Morning Post*, February 25, 2019.

²⁵ Andy Greenberg, "The Toolset of an Elite North Korean Hacker Group on the Rise," *Wired*, February 20, 2018.

²⁶ Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Scott W. Harold, *Through the Looking Glass: Chinese Open Source Assessments of North Korea's Ballistic Missile Capabilities*, Washington, D.C.: Korean Economic Institute of America, September 10, 2020; and International Crisis Group, *Shades of Red: China's Debate over North Korea*, Asia Report No. 179, November 2, 2009b.

to North Korea's 2006 nuclear test by supporting UN Security Council Resolution 1718 to impose sanctions on the Kim regime, and Beijing banned all North Korean coal imports and some petroleum products and textiles in 2017.²⁷ However, Beijing and Pyongyang have continued to maintain a robust trade relationship, with China accounting for almost 90 percent of North Korea's overall trade flows.²⁸ China has also overlooked and aided North Korea's illicit activities, including imports of North Korean sand, illegal ship-to-ship transfers, and smuggling coal from the DPRK, all in clear violation of UN sanctions.²⁹

For China, North Korea serves as an important buffer against the United States and its key allies in Japan and South Korea, as well as a major source of influence over all three, who must seek Beijing's support if they want to successfully pressure the North. At the same time, the North Korean nuclear program poses a threat to China's stability, which is a higher priority for Beijing than efforts to denuclearize Pyongyang.³⁰ Thus, Beijing remains circumspect in handling Pyongyang so as not to pressure its neighbor into taking preemptive measures that could destabilize Beijing and its immediate region.³¹ A nuclear-armed North Korea whose provocations fall slightly below the threshold of actual conflict with little bearing on China's interests and immediate stability preserves a dose of dormant tensions that can be leveraged by Beijing when dealing with Washington.³² This hypothesis was supported by Beijing during the 2019 U.S.-China trade war, when Chinese officials warned that the U.S. imposition of tariffs on Chinese imports could undermine progress in the stalled U.S.-North Korea nuclear negotiations.³³ Similarly, a North Korean regime collapse leading to a U.S.-backed unification of the two Koreas risks a situation in which a U.S. ally shares a border with China and could adversely affect Beijing's ambitions of achieving unification with Taiwan.³⁴

Policy Options for U.S. and Regional Allies

Imposing costs on North Korea's penchant for provocations and impeding Pyongyang from attaining its "final victory" requires a concerted effort by the United States and its regional allies. The United States can strengthen the credibility of its extended deterrent commitments to the region through more-robust, more-consistent, and more-encompassing alliances with

²⁷ Alexia Fernandez Campbell, "The New Sanctions Against North Korea, Explained in Under 500 Words," *Vox*, August 6, 2017.

²⁸ Benjamin Katzeff Silberstein, "China's Sanctions Enforcement and Fuel Prices in North Korea: What the Data Tells Us," *38 North*, February 1, 2019.

²⁹ "70% of North Korea Coal Smuggled to China, Defying U.N. Resolutions," *Kyodo News*, February 12, 2020; and Josh Smith, "North Korea Exported Sand to China in Violation of U.N. Sanctions, Group Says," *Reuters*, March 3, 2020.

³⁰ International Crisis Group, 2009b.

³¹ Shen Dingli, "North Korea's Strategic Significance to China," *China Security*, Autumn 2006.

³² There are, to be sure, downsides for China, most notably North Korea's constant demands for assistance, its embarrassing behavior, the possibility it might initiate a conflict that would bring the United States to China's doorstep, and the steady (if recently diminished, because of enhanced policing on the part of the North) flow of refugees into Northeastern China.

³³ David Wainer, "China Signals U.S. Trade War Risks Undermining North Korea Talks," *Bloomberg*, August 2, 2019.

³⁴ Wang Chenjun and Richard McGregor, "Four Reasons Why China Supports North Korea," *The Interpreter*, March 4, 2019.

Japan and South Korea that unequivocally communicate to the Kim regime that its actions bear political, economic, and diplomatic consequences.³⁵ Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul should strengthen preparedness for regional contingencies through increased defense dialogues and joint exercises.³⁶ Trilateral and multilateral military exercises and dialogues, such as the Rim of the Pacific exercises, the Proliferation Security Initiative, and defense ministerial meetings, serve not only to enhance interoperability and defense readiness but also serve a political purpose in creating diplomatic space and the opportunity for Tokyo and Seoul to strengthen the foundations of their partnership, thereby closing seams that the North seeks to widen and exploit to weaken deterrence. Given the threat of North Korea's ballistic missiles to Tokyo, Seoul, and Washington, the three capitals could also consider resuming trilateral missile defense exercises—the last took place in 2017—to track ballistic missile targets and test their missile intercepting abilities.³⁷

The United States, Japan, and South Korea should also consider strengthening their intelligence collection and analysis capabilities at the government and civilian levels. Whereas U.S. intelligence organizations may have more-advanced technology and collection capabilities, their Japanese and South Korean counterparts may have deeper, more culturally attuned insights and better access to valuable assets on North Korea. Routinized and institutionalized trilateral intelligence cooperation may prove cost-effective in collecting intelligence and gathering and producing higher quality, actionable intelligence products for the three parties. Washington should also continue to stress and demonstrate the importance of existing trilateral intelligence-sharing pacts, such as GSOMIA, so that neither Seoul nor Tokyo uses such commitments as leverage over political and historical controversies.³⁸

Relatedly, the United States should clearly communicate to its regional allies that any strategic dissonance among the three parties would signal opportunities for North Korea to penetrate a wedge in their relationship. Such dissonance not only hurts the parties directly involved, but the collateral damage done to the United States could adversely affect regional security and thereby harm the national interests of the individual countries. Furthermore, a weakened U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral relationship tips the regional balance of power in favor of the China-DPRK-Russia axis, which could lead to instability in the region and the erosion of Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul's shared goal of FOIP, undergirded by rule-of-law societies based on liberal, democratic values and market economics.

³⁵ Terence Roehrig, *Japan, South Korea, and the United States Nuclear Umbrella: Deterrence After the Cold War*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2017.

³⁶ Roy D. Kamphausen, John S. Park, Ryo Sahashi, and Alison Szalwinski, *The Case for U.S.-ROK-Japan Trilateralism: Strengths and Limitations*, Washington, D.C.: National Bureau of Asian Research, February 2018.

³⁷ Missile Defense Project, "U.S., South Korea, and Japan Conduct Three-Day Missile Defense Exercise," *Missile Threat*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 25, 2017, last modified June 15, 2018.

³⁸ Reiji Yoshida and Satoshi Sugiyama, "GSOMIA Survives as South Korea Reverses Decision to Exit Intel Pact with Japan," *Japan Times*, November 22, 2019; and Scott W. Harold, "Why South Korea Should Rethink GSOMIA Withdrawal," *The Diplomat*, November 6, 2019.

Conclusion

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Overall, as the conference keynote speakers' remarks and chapters in these proceedings detailed, the U.S.-Japan and U.S.-ROK alliances are critically important and under growing stress. Not only are North Korean military capabilities advancing rapidly in terms of diversity of platforms, range, lethality, survivability, and difficulty to counter, but tensions in Seoul-Tokyo relations have not been resolved properly and appear set to remain troubled for some time. Moreover, new issues are emerging in the bilateral U.S. alliances that are likely to further complicate the ability of Washington to serve as a bridge across the Seoul-Tokyo divide.

First, as noted in Chapter One, Washington has since 2019 been engaged in a difficult set of negotiations with Seoul over the so-called Special Measures Agreement that defines what South Korea will pay to help offset the cost of hosting U.S. forces. Those talks have dragged on for nearly one year; as of early September 2020, no end is in sight, with the two sides publicly reported to be at least hundreds of millions of dollars apart in their positions.¹ Further complicating U.S.-ROK ties has been the emergence of concerns, especially on the Korean progressive left, that the United States may not be willing to move ahead expeditiously on the transfer of wartime operational control over the ROK armed forces and Combined Forces Command, citing both COVID-19 and the growing threat of North Korea.²

At the same time, U.S.-Japan defense cooperation has hit some bumps, with the June 2020 announcement of Tokyo's plans to suspend procurement of the Aegis Ashore BMD capability. Although some reports have subsequently suggested that the suspension might not ultimately be converted into a cancellation or might be a part of a broader repositioning to focus on a wider variety of threats across both ballistic and nonballistic trajectories, the announcement caught the United States by surprise and induced some questions about Tokyo's thinking with regard to how to counter air and missile threats.³ Other reports have suggested the SDF might take further steps to reimagine its defense strategy, perhaps by moving to cancel the acquisition of three RQ-4 Global Hawk high-altitude, long-endurance remotely piloted intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance platforms, though this has not yet been confirmed.⁴

¹ Song Sang-ho, "S. Korea, U.S. Resume Defense Cost Talks, No Meaningful Progress Yet: Source," Yonhap News Agency, August 20, 2020.

² Park Byong-su, "Why the US Went from Being Responsive to Uncooperative Regarding the OPCON Transfer," *Hankyoreh*, August 12, 2020.

³ Tim Kelly, "Japan May Still Build Aegis Ashore Despite Reports of Cancellation, Source Says," Reuters, July 10, 2020.

⁴ "Japan May Scrap Plans to Buy U.S. Global Hawk Planes," *Japan Times*, August 13, 2020.

Introducing yet further uncertainty, Japanese Prime Minister Abe announced on August 28, 2020, that he would be resigning from his post as a result of a recurrence of his past affliction with ulcerative colitis.⁵ Although it appears likely that his successor, Prime Minister Suga, will pursue policies characterized by substantial continuity, it is nonetheless concerning that Abe, a source of steady engagement with the Trump administration at a time when many U.S. allies found it difficult for their leaders to build personal rapport with the U.S. president, will not be there to shepherd along the U.S.-Japan Special Measures Agreement talks, something U.S. observers had hoped would help smooth the negotiations.⁶

With respect to the tensions in Japan-ROK relations, observers have tended to fault many different factors and actors, with some blaming the Moon administration or South Korea more generally and others assigning greater responsibility to the Abe administration's approach to handling ties with Seoul. As Abe's successor, Suga has already signaled that anyone hoping for a more conciliatory approach that would see Japan take risks for better relations with South Korea is likely to be disappointed.⁷ For its part, the Moon administration, under pressure domestically over a series of scandals and the failure of its pro-engagement policies with North Korea to yield any substantive forward progress on denuclearization, has seen its approval ratings fall into the mid-40s and appears unlikely to respond favorably under such circumstances to calls by the United States or others to work more closely with Japan, which would put it at odds with its core support group on the Korean left. Perhaps reflecting such a calculation, ROK Minister of Defense Jeong Kyeong-doo skipped a trilateral U.S.-Japan-ROK defense meeting in Guam in late August 2020.⁸ Despite the importance of trilateral cooperation, as emphasized by Sakata (Chapter Two) and Hornung (Chapter Three), achieving trilateral cooperation that brings Japan and South Korea together to focus on such goals as deterring North Korea and shaping China's emerging regional profile is likely to remain a challenge for the United States for the foreseeable future.

One of the key reasons why U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral cooperation is so important, as noted by Akutsu (Chapter Four) and Kim (Chapter Five), is the persistence and continuing evolution of the North Korea threat. As both experts noted, this threat is a function of both the North's military capabilities and the regime's intentions. In the months since these conference papers were drafted and submitted, determining the DPRK's intentions and next moves has grown only more challenging, with first Kim Jong Un and then his sister Kim Yo Jong disappearing for several weeks at a time. Some observers have argued that this may simply be a response to the emergence inside North Korea of the COVID-19 pandemic, but others have speculated that Kim Jong Un has suffered a health emergency and/or that the two Kims might be involved in a struggle for leadership.⁹ Irrespective of who is making decisions in North

⁵ Motoko Rich, "Shinzo Abe, Japan's Longest-Serving Prime Minister, Resigns Because of Illness," *New York Times*, August 28, 2020.

⁶ Yuki Tatsumi, "The Tough Road Ahead for U.S.-Japan Host Nation Support Negotiations," *The Diplomat*, January 23, 2020.

⁷ "Secretary Suga Affirms Hardline Stance on Korea-Japan Relations," *Dong-A Ilbo*, September 8, 2020.

⁸ Kim Jin-myung, "Korea Skips Defense Talks with U.S., Japan," *Chosun Ilbo*, August 31, 2020.

⁹ Hyonhee Shin and Mark Hosenball, "South Korea Minister, U.S. Sources, Say Kim May Be Sheltering from Virus," Reuters, April 27, 2020; Jeong Yong-Soo and Shim Kyu-Seok, "Kim Jong-Un Disappears from Public Eye, Again," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, May 20, 2020; and Chad O'Carroll, "Kim Yo Jong Still Missing from High-Level Meetings in North Korea," *NK News*, August 20, 2020.

Korea, the real threat is not a specific individual but rather the North Korean regime itself; for this reason, U.S.-Japan-ROK collaboration will be critical for as long as the DPRK continues to exist.¹⁰

In conclusion, rapid change on the Korean Peninsula may persist for some time, with consequences for the day-to-day, week-to-week, month-to-month, and possibly even year-to-year relationships between the United States, ROK, Japan, and North Korea. In the longer run, it will be important for Washington to focus on encouraging a stable, future-oriented relationship between Seoul and Tokyo that is centered on the common values the two countries share (as noted by Sakata in Chapter Two) and the common threats they face (as noted by Hornung, Akutsu, and Kim in Chapters Three, Four, and Five, respectively). It will also be critical to help cement such cooperation by leveraging Seoul and Tokyo's shared alliances with Washington and their broader commitments to the FOIP concept, whether expressed in exactly such terms or in other language that conveys the same idea (a point Sakata reminds us of in Chapter Two). Even if a given South Korean or U.S. administration seeks to explore dialogue and summitry with North Korea, there can be no slackening of U.S.-Japan-ROK strategic cooperation to deter Pyongyang from aggression. And lurking in the strategic background is, of course, a rising, aggressive China that seeks to achieve the "dream of national rejuvenation" that would lead to Beijing's dominance over the Indo-Pacific if the free nations of that region do not stand together. As the authors in these proceedings argue, for these and other reasons, the U.S.-Japan alliance, U.S.-ROK alliance, and U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral cooperation will remain critical forces for preserving regional peace and security for years to come.

¹⁰ Scott W. Harold and Soo Kim, "For the U.S., South Korea and Japan, It's the North Korean Regime, Not Kim Jong Un Per Se, That Is the Threat," *RealClearDefense*, June 6, 2020.

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