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Managing Japan- South Korea Tensions

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Introduction

Fifty years after the establishment of official diplomatic relations between Japan and South Korea, continued animosity between the United States' two Northeast Asian allies remains a problem for Washington, hampering its ability to deal with the challenges posed by North Korea, China, and a host of nontraditional security threats. Mutual suspicion and mistrust between Tokyo and Seoul, fueled by disputes over territory and history, jeopardize the Barack Obama administration's rebalance to Asia, which seeks to strengthen "minilateral" partnerships among Asian allies and partners. The ongoing, and in some areas worsening, tensions between Seoul and Tokyo constrain Washington's influence in East Asia by limiting joint contingency planning and trilateral coordination for crisis management as well as the ability to address the challenge of China's rise. As North Korea expands its nuclear and missile capabilities and as China pushes to expand its influence in East Asia, often at the United States' expense, an increasing number of U.S. policy analysts are calling on the United States to shed its long-standing reluctance to intervene more forcefully in Japan-South Korean disputes despite the risks of doing so. U.S. policymakers have a number of options for facilitating closer bilateral cooperation between Tokyo and Seoul, as well as trilateral cooperation among Tokyo, Seoul, and Washington. Although more forceful intervention in Japan-South Korea relations carries risks to the United States, the costs of nonintervention are rising.

The Evolution of Japan-South Korea Relations Since 1965

Compared with other fraught bilateral relationships, the list of grievances between Japan and South Korea is not particularly long, but it has remained largely unchanged since the two sides signed their Treaty on Basic Relations in 1965, normalizing their relationship. Tokyo and Seoul continue to feud over a set of small South Korean-controlled islets, called Dokdo by Koreans and Takeshima by the Japanese. Furthermore, the South Korean government argues that the Japanese government has not adequately acknowledged and apologized for Imperial Japan's actions during the first half of the twentieth century, especially during the Japanese empire's colonization of the Korean Peninsula from 1910 to 1945. Tokyo's handling of the issue of "comfort women," who were forced to provide sex to Japanese soldiers under the Imperial military's system of "comfort stations," has been particularly fraught.

Not only is acrimony over these matters increasing, but leaders in both countries are also unwilling or unable to prevent the disagreements from spilling over into other areas of the bilateral relationship. Opinion polls indicate that majorities in both countries view the other country negatively.¹ These sentiments make it more difficult for leaders to improve the relationship and have contributed to a zero-sum dynamic in which many media outlets and interest groups regard compromise as akin to betrayal of their country's national interests.²

That said, since the normalization of ties fifty years ago, the Japan-South Korea relationship has undergone considerable expansion and integration. Tokyo and Seoul now cooperate across a myriad of fields, including coordination on North Korea, joint disaster-relief planning, and overseas development assistance. U.S. alliances with Japan and South Korea have also evolved since the mid-to-late 1990s to focus on global, regional, and nontraditional security issues.³ Japan and South Korea cohosted the 2002 FIFA World Cup, and Japanese and Korean pop-culture trends—including TV shows, music, and food—regularly sweep from one country to the other. The two populations also have far greater exposure to one another than they did in 1965. For example, until 2013 in Korea and 2015 in Japan, each country was the largest source of visitors for the other—only recently surpassed by China—with thousands of Japanese and South Koreans entering and leaving each other's country every day.

Nevertheless, greater contact has also fostered mistrust and suspicion between Tokyo and Seoul, a dynamic that has deepened under the current leadership of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and South Korean President Park Geun-hye. Since the two leaders assumed office in late 2012 and early 2013, respectively, relations have deteriorated to the point of "mutual abandonment," according to one Korean analyst.⁴ Although there have been some signs of improvement in recent months—including the first Abe-Park summit in early November—in general, neither government has been willing to channel enough political capital to fundamentally improve relations.

Why Japan-South Korea Relations Matter to the United States

Tokyo and Seoul's partial estrangement from each other affects U.S. interests in a number of ways.

OPPORTUNITY COSTS

U.S. policymakers expend considerable effort trying to prevent, contain, and settle disagreements between two U.S. allies. The opportunity costs of these efforts are significant. Diplomatic time and energy spent reacting to flare-ups of Japan-South Korea tensions could be channeled more productively. Chronic friction between Japan and South Korea reduces the influence of Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul in East Asia by causing the trilateral relationship to operate less efficiently and expansively than it would otherwise and by creating opportunities for China and North Korea to exploit differences among the three. Additionally, these tensions periodically create problems for Washington in situations where Tokyo or Seoul believes that the United States is not doing enough to change the other country's behavior.

THE DANGER OF A NAVAL CLASH

Tokyo and Seoul's inability to find a lasting *modus vivendi* for managing, let alone resolving, their dispute over Dokdo/Takeshima jeopardizes trilateral cooperation and Northeast Asia's stability, both of which are important U.S. goals. Few observers believe that the Japan-South Korea territorial disagreement will erupt into a military conflict, but it should not be ruled out completely.⁵ In 2006, South Korea and Japan narrowly avoided a clash between their coast guards over the disputed islets. Open conflict, particularly if any lives were lost, could cripple, if not rupture, U.S.-Japan-South Korea relations. Furthermore, if either country developed methods for mining the methane hydrate deposits that some surveys have discovered in surrounding waters, the islets' importance would increase significantly, adding to regional instability and unpredictability.⁶

LOST OPPORTUNITIES FOR POLICY COORDINATION ON NORTH KOREA

In addition to preventing conflict, closer relations between Japan and South Korea would also expand the range of options for dealing with North Korea. This is arguably the area where the most cooperation currently is occurring. U.S., South Korean, and Japanese officials meet frequently to discuss North Korea in an informal, ad hoc version of the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group that convened routinely in the late 1990s. However, U.S. officials have, for years, pushed for greater integration and institutionalization of the three countries' efforts. South Korea has rejected formal efforts to significantly integrate intelligence-sharing with Japan, limiting the three countries' abilities to identify and respond to threats from Pyongyang, plan for and implement various North Korean contingencies, and coordinate diplomatic efforts. A trilateral arrangement reached in

December 2014 to share classified intelligence on North Korean missile and nuclear threats is considered by many defense analysts to be far less extensive than the types of cooperation that could be achieved.⁷

The strength of Japan-South Korea relations also directly affects a major component of Washington and Seoul's shared North Korea strategy: convincing Chinese leaders that they have more to gain from pressuring Pyongyang than from supporting it. Cementing greater bilateral and trilateral cooperation among the United States, South Korea, and Japan could signal to China that North Korea's behavior is causing the Northeast Asian security environment to move in ways that run counter to China's long-term goals.⁸

LOST OPPORTUNITIES FOR GREATER POLICY COORDINATION ON CHINA

North Korea is one of many areas where U.S. policymakers seek to influence Beijing's behavior. Closer Tokyo-Seoul relations could create new opportunities for the United States, Japan, and South Korea to place pressure on and provide incentives for Beijing to play by the rules of the established liberal order in East Asia and adopt policies more amenable to the three countries' positions on issues such as naval and airborne freedom of navigation and access. China seeks to prevent greater U.S.-Japan-South Korea cooperation, viewing the expansion of the U.S. alliance system as further evidence of a U.S.-led encirclement of China. Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul emphasized trilateral cooperation at a December 2010 trilateral foreign ministerial meeting that convened during a high point in Japan-South Korea relations. The meeting materialized in response to a North Korean artillery attack against South Korea's Yeonpyeong Island the month before and may have played a role in China's efforts to rein in North Korea's behavior. The three top officials' joint statement mentioned discussions on issues that transcend the Korean Peninsula, including freedom of navigation, maritime security, and democracy promotion.⁹ The subsequent deterioration in Japan-South Korea relations prevented the three sides from following through on the statement's call for more "joint endeavors" on these issues.

Such trilateral coordination is not the same as forming an anti-China front. A true containment strategy would entail mobilizing military and economic tools of statecraft to isolate China, something that no country sees as desirable even if it were practical. South Korean policymakers, in particular, want to avoid such a development, as they almost certainly need Chinese support for unification to occur on South Korea's terms. Rather than seeking to contain China, greater trilateral cooperation is a way for the United States, Japan, and South Korea to expand their options in dealing with Beijing in those areas where China's actions infringe on their interests and to bring China to play by the rules of the existing order in East Asia. Conversely, a poor relationship between Tokyo and Seoul "inhibits America's capacity to shape China's rise in constructive ways," and creates opportunities for Beijing to divide the three countries, thereby weakening each individually and reducing its options in its bilateral relations with Beijing.¹⁰

THE OPPORTUNITY FOR A NEW ORDER IN NORTHEAST ASIA

China's rise is fundamentally altering the calculus of all players in Northeast Asia. For instance, the trend is one of Abe's justifications for relaxing Japan's seven-decade-old prohibition on participating in

collective self-defense activities, a move that could pave the way for the Japanese military to play a greater role in Asian and global security. Perceptions among regional leaders that the United States' relative power is declining, along with related questions about the credibility of U.S. security commitments in East Asia, reflect a regional tectonic shift. On the Korean Peninsula, Pyongyang's improving missile and nuclear capabilities, along with Park's focus on the benefits of reunification, are leading policymakers and analysts to think more deeply about possible reunification scenarios. At the societal level, Japan's population—already the world's oldest—is shrinking and South Korea's is not far behind, leading to a likely diminution of the material capabilities of both countries and consequently altering the regional order over the next ten to twenty years.

Amid this regional uncertainty about the future, mistrust between Japan and South Korea is likely to lead each country to take actions that undermine, rather than reassure, the other's security concerns unless their relations are fundamentally improved. These tensions were on display during an October 2015 meeting of the two countries' defense ministers in Seoul, the first trip by a Japanese defense minister to South Korea in more than four years. The two sides reportedly disagreed over whether Japan would ask permission from South Korea before launching military operations in North Korea, creating a political firestorm in Seoul. Deeper coordination among Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul could help reassure Japan and South Korea about each other's intentions in the event of turmoil on the Korean Peninsula and Korean reunification, thereby increasing the chances that a reunified Korean Peninsula would decrease tensions in Northeast Asia. For Tokyo, such reassurances could lessen concerns that a reunified Korea would pose a threat to Japan. For Seoul, better Japan-South Korea relations could provide insights into Tokyo's support for the reunification process as well as increase the chances that Japan will provide financial and diplomatic help with reunification in a manner that serves Seoul's interests. In short, as scholars Brad Glosserman and Scott A. Snyder argue, better bilateral relations can provide mutual reassurance as each country gains deeper insights into the goals, capabilities, and strategies of the other.¹¹ This in turn, could lead to a more secure region by not only reducing the chances that a fundamental shift in Northeast Asia's system will inflame Japan-South Korea tensions but also increasing the chances that Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul can develop common strategies for shaping the region's future.

Possible Roles for the United States

The United States has several options to manage Japan-South Korea relations. Washington could avoid interfering in the relationship or it could actively seek to reshape it.

NONINTERFERENCE OPTION

One option for the United States is to minimize its involvement in Japan-South Korea disputes. This approach makes sense if one believes that the two countries' common security and economic interests will help contain any bilateral flare-ups. There are also considerable risks if the United States inserts itself more directly between Japan-South Korea disputes, including the possibility that doing so could damage Washington's relationship with one or both allies. These obstacles, combined with the stubborn nature of the disagreements, led Japanese scholar and former Ambassador Kazuhiko Togo in 2011 to conclude reluctantly that the United States in general should adopt a "noninterference policy."¹²

However, there are three drawbacks to this approach. First, it leaves the bilateral relationship more vulnerable to an external shock. For instance, an outbreak of military conflict between Japan and China over their territorial dispute in the East China Sea could lead to expectations in Japan of South Korean diplomatic support, something that Seoul likely would be hard-pressed to provide. The damage to Japan-South Korea relations would be far more serious if such an event were not preceded by the resolution or mitigation of existing bilateral tensions.

Second, the nonintervention approach is unlikely to change the prevailing domestic dynamic in either country; compromise is politically risky for both sides.¹³ It remains unclear whether the rise of anti-Korean sentiment in Japan is a temporary phenomenon. If not, Japanese leaders' interests in improving and expanding relations with Seoul may decrease. As Seong-hyon Lee argues, the two countries could drift further apart over time.¹⁴

Third, even if Japan-South Korea cooperation expands, the mutual mistrust between the two countries—at times flaring into animosity—might persist. If the past fifty years have not repaired the wounds in this relationship, there is no guarantee that the next few decades will. One of the striking revelations of expanded bilateral cooperation over the past fifteen to twenty years is that increased cooperation and contact have *not* helped build confidence between the two countries. Instead, greater interaction and attempts at cooperation between the two governments appear to have raised expectations; when the other side disappoints, the anger and sense of betrayal are greater.¹⁵

This is precisely the dynamic that seems to explain at least some of the dramatic downturn in relations in 2012. Hopes in both countries had been raised by the 2008 election of South Korean President Lee Myung-bak, who placed a priority on improving relations with Tokyo, and the 2009 victory of the Democratic Party of Japan, which likewise wished to solidify Japan-South Korea relations and was more willing to express contrition over the past than the displaced Liberal Democratic Party. When the expected breakthrough in relations failed to materialize, it not only signaled that the relationship had not improved, but the relationship may have even *worsened* because

of the sense of betrayal on both sides. This dynamic arguably set the stage for Lee's unprecedented August 2012 visit to Dokdo/Takeshima, which plunged the two countries into a deeper state of antipathy.

Regardless, a pure noninterference approach has never been applied and the United States remains a factor in Japan-South Korea relations, both for its own reasons and because Japanese and South Korean officials have sought U.S. assistance in dealing with each other.¹⁶ Moreover, as analyst Ralph Cossa has written, the United States has become "part of the extended battlefield" between the two countries in recent years. Both the Japanese and South Korean governments have tried to influence individual U.S. states' textbook requirements, U.S. congressional resolutions regarding Northeast Asian history, and U.S. cities' and towns' efforts to erect statues commemorating the suffering of the comfort women.¹⁷ The costs of Japan-South Korea animosity are rising, causing many observers to question whether a diplomatic strategy of avoidance would be sustainable.¹⁸

INTERVENTION OPTIONS

Since Japan-South Korea relations took a turn for the worse in 2012, a growing number of analysts, including some former U.S. policymakers, have urged the United States to intervene to improve relations.¹⁹ The United States could pursue four strategies. They are not mutually exclusive; each can be used in combination with the others. Glosserman and Snyder's ambitious "grand bargain" proposal to reshape the Japan-South Korea relationship, for instance, envisions the United States incorporating elements of all four options. These strategies could help Japan and South Korea resolve their disputes over history and territory or at least manage these tensions so that disagreements cause minimal disruption to other areas of the relationship.

Role Model

Several observers have called on the United States to address its own role in the Northeast Asian historical events, particularly during and immediate after World War II, that trouble Japan and South Korea. One option is a U.S. presidential visit to the peace park at Hiroshima or Nagasaki, or some other U.S. acknowledgement of the suffering caused by the atomic bombings that brought an early end to World War II. Such gestures, as Glosserman and Snyder argue, could undermine the appeal of Japanese historical "revisionists" denials of the actions committed during the first half of the twentieth century, including those committed during the occupation of the Korean Peninsula.²⁰ Another option is that the United States could reveal more information about the U.S. decision-making process in the aftermath of World War II, especially regarding the decision not to determine the sovereignty of the Dokdo/Takeshima islets in the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty that formally ended the Allies' war against Japan.²¹ By doing so, the United States could show South Korean and especially Japanese leaders how to deal with a state's past transgressions.²² Historian Alexis Dudden argues that the United States' openness over how Washington treated Dokdo/Takeshima from 1945 to 1952 could better position the United States to gain the credibility needed to help resolve or at least dampen the territorial dispute.²³ Arguably, such a step also could pave the way for U.S. policymakers and academics to press for a revision of the portrayal of South Korea and Japan's shared histories in textbooks, especially the depiction of Imperial Japan's behavior during the twentieth century.

However, opening up the U.S. role in the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute runs the risk of upsetting either or both parties, particularly the South Korean public for whom attachment to Dokdo has assumed a quasi-religious tenor. If done without careful orchestration among the three governments, unilateral action could inflame the dispute and create antipathy toward the United States.²⁴ Similarly, a presidential visit to Hiroshima or Nagasaki almost certainly would require joint planning with the Japanese government—perhaps including a visit by Japanese prime minister to Pearl Harbor—to minimize the possible damage caused by the emotions unleashed in the United States and Japan. This may be one reason Glosserman and Snyder embed their recommendations on the atomic bombings and Dokdo/Takeshima as part of their broader grand bargain, which would involve a series of steps all three countries would take. Significantly, Glosserman and Snyder recommend that Japan relinquish its claims to the islets, a step that appears unlikely but may be necessary for the success of any U.S. revelations about Washington’s role in the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute. At a minimum, the United States would presumably need assurances from Japan and South Korea that their governments would try to tamp down any uproar by expressing their support and understanding of the U.S. actions. Additionally, the United States should make clear that such steps do not mean it is taking sides; rather, the United States should emphasize its goal is to help Japan and South Korea to resolve or better manage the dispute.

Referee

Another option for the United States is to call attention to violations by Japan and South Korea of what U.S. policymakers believe are the unwritten rules of good behavior between the two U.S. allies. Acting as a kind of referee can take the form of private or public exhortations. These messages can be used preventatively to avoid certain outcomes—such as when the United States asked Abe not to visit Yasukuni Shrine in the fall of 2013—or after an undesirable outcome has occurred, such as the statement from the U.S. embassy in Tokyo that Washington was “disappointed” in Abe after the prime minister visited the shrine in December of the same year.²⁵ Individually and collectively, members of Congress have played this role, such as when the House of Representatives passed the 2007 “comfort women resolution” (H.Res. 121) largely in response to statements and actions by Abe and nationalist Japanese groups. Although less direct, U.S. officials publicly voiced their concerns over Lee’s surprise visit to Dokdo/Takeshima in 2012. In all cases, the message was clear: a repeat of these actions and statements would damage U.S. interests and, consequently, relations with the United States.

The referee role need not be solely accusatory. The United States can recognize and, in some cases, reward certain moves. For example, Abe’s avoidance of especially flagrant words and actions since his Yasukuni visit, combined with his public emphasis on upholding previous governments’ statements about World War II and the comfort women, arguably made it possible for Abe to address a joint meeting of Congress in April 2014, the first Japanese prime minister to do so.²⁶ In South Korea’s case, the United States could encourage more public recognition and appreciation of Japan’s productive actions on history issues, something that many Japanese and U.S. observers say has often been missing in South Korean leaders’ handling of relations with Japan. Coming the day after Abe’s statement marking the seventieth anniversary of the end of World War II, Park’s August 2015 Liberation Day speech expressed her disappointment in Abe’s statement but also called attention to the fact that Abe upheld previous Japanese governments’ apologies.²⁷ Park’s magnanimity—at least to the ears of many U.S. observers—appears to have played a role in facilitating the November 2015 China-Japan-South

Korea summit in Seoul, the first such meeting in three and a half years, which was accompanied by the first formal summit meeting between Abe and Park.

A referee is primarily a minimalist role designed to prevent and contain actions and words that could worsen bilateral relations. These moves are often effective. Since the Obama administration expressed disappointment with his visit to Yasukuni, Abe has avoided the most high-profile actions that would indicate his support for Japan's historical revisionists. Likewise, Park has taken a relatively restrained stance on the Dokdo/Takeshima issue. The knowledge that the United States would look unkindly on more flagrant actions appears to have worked as a restraining force on both Abe and Park.

Although it may be necessary for the United States to play this role to manage Japan-South Korea tensions, a referee strategy has proven insufficient to helping resolve the underlying sources of the tensions, resulting in a one-step-forward, one-step-back diplomatic pattern. The generally reactive nature of the referee approach means that even if steps are taken to head off a brewing dispute, it may be too late to contain the domestic forces that have already been roused. Therefore, if the United States seeks to reduce the chances that such disputes metastasize, it will need to develop more proactive strategies for bridging the gaps between Tokyo and Seoul.

Mediator

Another option is for Washington to use the broad support it enjoys in both Tokyo and Seoul to mediate between the two sides. The goal would be to help the two sides resolve one or more disputes or to craft a framework in which disputes are less likely to become politicized and spill over into other areas of the relationship. Some analysts have proposed that the United States appoint a high-level envoy to help the two nations, as the United States did for Ireland and Great Britain in mediating a peace deal in the 1990s. Playing such a role would require a formal invitation from both countries.²⁸ However, Washington could work behind the scenes to persuade the two governments to take this step. One strategy might be to focus a special envoy's task on one or two issues, such as the comfort women, in which the United States has expressed the greatest interest and where the path forward is clearest.²⁹

While mediation offers the possibility of great rewards, it also carries significant risks. U.S. mediation efforts may not resolve the differences between Japan and South Korea. Perceived failure could damage U.S. relations with either or both countries, as well as U.S. credibility in the region. More direct intervention in the comfort women dispute, for instance, would almost certainly anger many members of the Abe government who deny or downplay the Imperial Japanese military's role in the system of sexual exploitation. It is perhaps for this reason that U.S. officials, including Vice President Joseph R. Biden in December 2013, have explicitly rejected a mediation role.³⁰ However, the counterargument is that the downsides of nonintervention have increased over the past five years due to the deterioration in Japan-South Korea relations at a time when the United States needs trilateral cooperation more than ever to deal with the shifts in Northeast Asia's strategic environment. For these reasons, U.S. policymakers should take a fresh look at whether mediation is becoming not only more viable but also more necessary. Track 2 dialogues among academics and nongovernmental experts—occasionally elevated to Track 1.5 level by including government officials—could be useful venues to explore opportunities for an expanded U.S. role.

Commissioner

The United States could also try to improve Japan-South Korea relations by doubling down on trilateralism and expanding institutions and forms of cooperation. In playing the role of a kind of commissioner of U.S.-Japan-South Korea cooperation, the United States could seek to end what Korean scholar Cheol Hee Park calls the “awkward” Japan-South Korea partnership by having their governments, elites, and media focus on areas of common interest rather than points of tension.³¹ The U.S.-organized March 2014 Obama-Abe-Park summit in The Hague is an example of using trilateral settings to reorient the two countries’ priorities. Glosserman and Snyder’s recommendation to hold routine trilateral summits and “2+2+2” meetings of foreign and defense ministers also fits this model. If nothing else, such meetings could serve as an important signaling effect, sending a message to bureaucrats and the public regarding the three leaders’ support for trilateralism. In addition, these meetings could identify and publicize the ways trilateral cooperation advances each country’s individual regional and global interests. At the less public level, the three countries could increase working-level trilateral cooperation and discussions over a range of issues.³²

The recently concluded Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement among the United States, Japan, and ten other countries could provide another opportunity for the United States to deepen Japan-South Korea relations. Since late 2013, South Korea has indicated its interest in eventually joining TPP, a desire Park made clear during her October 2015 visit to Washington.³³ South Korea and Japan opened free trade agreement (FTA) talks in 2003, but they stalled in 2004, largely due to difficulties in the overall relationship. Negotiations have yet to reopen. Since South Korea has FTAs with nearly all TPP participants except for Japan, TPP’s biggest effect on South Korea’s trade portfolio would be the effective creation of a Japan-South Korea FTA. Having reached an agreement in October with the current TPP participants, the United States could facilitate South Korea’s inclusion by encouraging Japan to enthusiastically welcome South Korea into TPP. More aggressively pursuing integrated ballistic missile defense systems among the three countries is another example of how the United States could help build collective and individual capacities for preventing and responding to regional crises.

Expanded trilateralism would not preclude flare-ups in disputes over history and territory. Indeed, one of the benefits of playing commissioner is that cooperation could continue even amid bilateral disputes. Even if trilateralism fails to improve bilateral relations between Tokyo and Seoul, this approach could contain the damage unleashed by any disputes by raising the costs of escalation. For example, skipping a routinized trilateral meeting would hurt the relationship with the United States directly, making Seoul and Tokyo more likely to continue their institutionalized cooperation in order to maintain good relations with Washington. In addition, greater trilateralism could provide a forum for Japan and South Korea to continue bilateral discussions when domestic politics do not allow for a standalone meeting. As Glosserman and Snyder explain, trilateralism could provide a hedge against the politicization of bilateral cooperation and the effects of domestic political volatility.³⁴

Deepening trilateral cooperation would require an investment of time and energy from all three governments, and the United States would be responsible for orchestrating the meetings and forums. Therefore, it will not be easy to convince top U.S. policymakers—up to the presidential level—of the importance of prioritizing U.S.-Japan-South Korea cooperation. Making a persuasive case will involve demonstrating not only that the benefits of this investment will pay off but also that the costs of not doing so are growing.

Another potential obstacle would be China's reaction. Although verbal protests from China are probably a foregone conclusion, the question is whether increased U.S.-Japan-South Korea trilateralism would lead to changes in Chinese behavior. Some policymakers, particularly in South Korea, suggest that Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington should avoid taking trilateral moves that alarm Beijing.

On the one hand, China could see these moves as further evidence that the United States is attempting to contain Chinese ambitions and respond by increasing its assertiveness in the South and/or East China Seas. It could become even more difficult to obtain China's cooperation in dealing with North Korea, and China could reverse the gradual drift away from Pyongyang that has characterized the government of Chinese President Xi Jinping thus far. South Korea may be particularly sensitive to Chinese objections for this reason.

On the other hand, it arguably is not in the interests of policymakers in Washington, Tokyo, or Seoul to in essence, "give China a veto" over trilateral actions just because they conflict with China's desires.³⁵ Moreover, convincing Chinese leaders that North Korea's behavior is causing regional dynamics to shift unfavorably could encourage Beijing to increase pressure on Pyongyang.³⁶ Expanded U.S.-Japan-South Korea cooperation could also pressure Beijing to continue its recent re-embrace of China-Japan-South Korea trilateralism—as Presidents Obama and Park called for during their October 2015 summit—which had stalled, largely due to Chinese reluctance.

Conclusion

The options for intervention in Japan-South Korea relations are not mutually exclusive. Over the past decade, the United States occasionally has played the role of a referee and sometimes a commissioner. However, neither role appears to have been undertaken as part of the proactive, concerted strategy that a growing number of U.S. analysts are arguing is needed to help expand Japan-South Korea cooperation. In order to implement a new approach, leaders in all three countries should make the Japan-South Korea relationship a higher priority. However, forceful U.S. involvement is almost certain to be necessary to produce results, given the mutual mistrust between Tokyo and Seoul. Although wading directly into the morass of Japan-South Korea tensions carries risks, the changes in Northeast Asian international relations are driving up the costs of letting the relationship between the two most important U.S. allies in Asia stagnate or deteriorate further. A failure to create the conditions for more robust Japan-South Korea cooperation and deeper U.S.-Japan-South Korea trilateralism will hinder U.S. ability to deal with North Korea, respond to the challenges posed by China, and plan for a future Northeast Asia that is more democratic, peaceful, and stable.

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Endnotes

1. According to the most recent Genron–East Asia Institute survey, over 70 percent of South Koreans hold unfavorable views of Japan, while over half of Japanese view South Korea unfavorably. The Japanese numbers are notable because they have been on the rise since mid-2012, when South Korea’s then President Lee Myung-bak made the first visit by a South Korean president to Dokdo/Takeshima. Anti-Korean sentiment is particularly notable among the more conservative factions of Japan’s ruling Liberal Democratic Party. *The 3rd Japan-South Korea Joint Public Opinion Poll (2015), Analysis Report on Comparative Data*, The Genron NPO and the East Asia Institute, May 2015, http://www.genron-npo.net/pdf/forum_1505_en.pdf.
2. For a useful analysis of the domestic forces and conflicting perceptions of national identity that often prevent Japanese and South Korean leaders from compromising with one another, 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).
3. Cheol Hee Park, “Getting Away or Getting In? U.S. Strategic Options in the Historical Controversy between Its Allies,” in *U.S. Leadership, History, and Bilateral Relations in Northeast Asia*, Gilbert Rozman, ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
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