

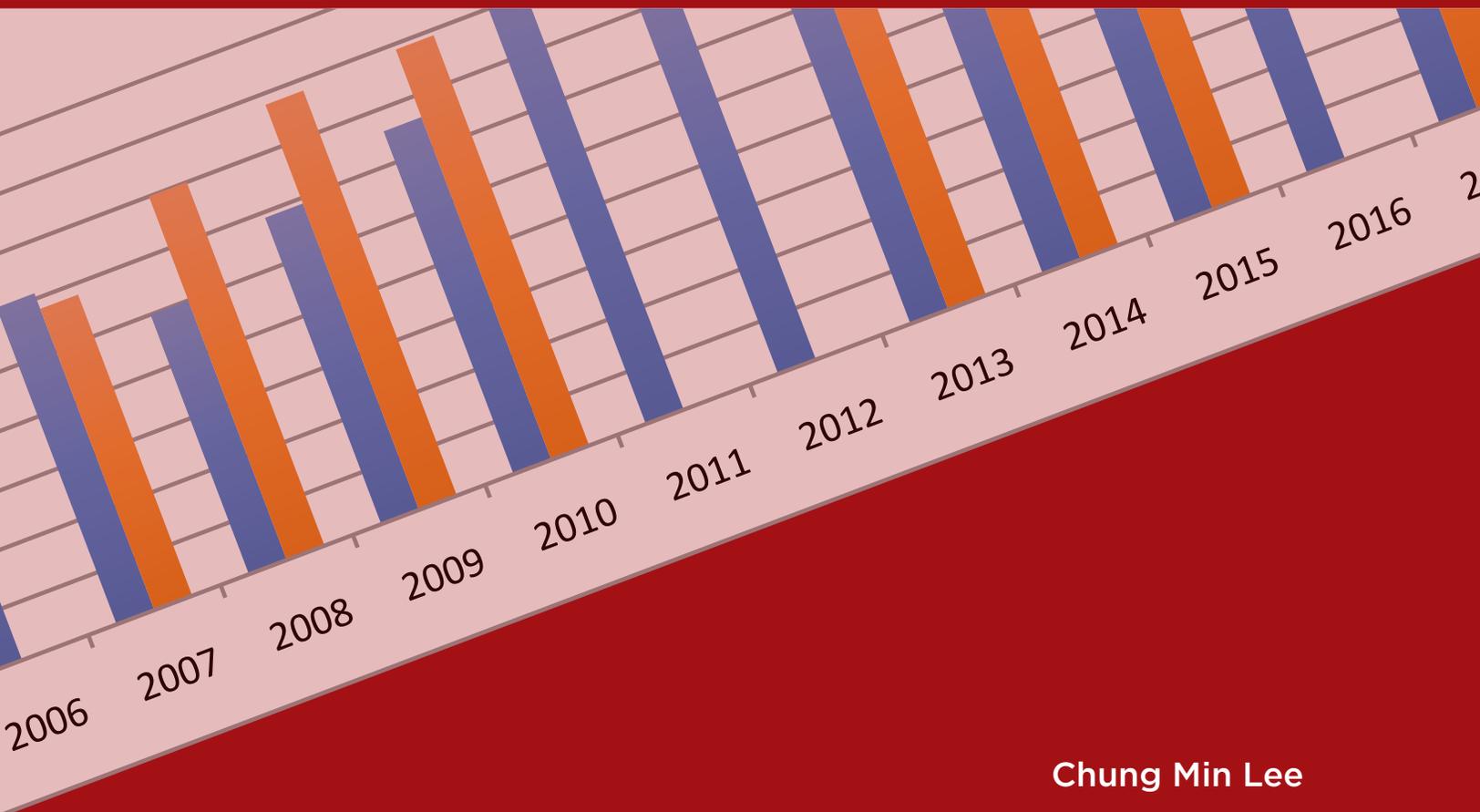


**Atlantic Council**

SCOWCROFT CENTER  
FOR STRATEGY AND SECURITY

# PROSPECTS FOR US-SOUTH KOREAN- JAPANESE TRILATERAL SECURITY COOPERATION

## in an Era of Unprecedented Threats and Evolving Political Forces



Chung Min Lee



# **PROSPECTS FOR US-SOUTH KOREAN- JAPANESE TRILATERAL SECURITY COOPERATION**

## **in an Era of Unprecedented Threats and Evolving Political Forces**

**A Report Prepared for the Atlantic Council  
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# I. The Raison d'Être for US-South Korean-Japanese Trilateral Security Cooperation

The main objective of this report lies in examining the contours, challenges, and opportunities in the all-important US-South Korean-Japanese trilateral security relationship during a period of rapidly evolving geopolitics in and around the Korean Peninsula. The trilateral relationship is more salient than ever in the aftermath of the accelerated nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (hereafter DPRK or North Korea). Although assessing the intensity and depth of trilateral security cooperation or a lack thereof is hardly a new issue, the stakes are arguably the highest since the outbreak of the North Korean nuclear crisis in the early 1990s. China today is incomparably more powerful than it was back in the early 1990s when the People's Republic of China (PRC) was on the cusp of unparalleled economic growth. Even as recently as the early 2000s, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) was in no position to contest US naval presence in the Asia-Pacific. Today, the PRC has built seven artificial islands in the South China Sea that are forward military bases enabling the PLA to project power well into the first island chains. More importantly, the PLA has embarked on its own version of a revolution in military affairs that has already resulted in the most potent Asian military power. Under President Xi Jinping, the PLA has become an increasingly capable military force that has critical consequences for American allies in the region including Japan and South Korea.

North Korea is a state built on layers of contradictions. Its 1.1-million-strong conventional forces look formidable from the outside, but make for a hollowed-out military. To compensate for this reality and the growing technological gap with the military forces of the Republic of Korea (hereafter ROK or South Korea), North Korea has opted to heavily emphasize asymmetrical capabilities including nuclear, ballistic missile, and biochemical weapons. Although politically isolated as never before under Kim Jong-un's rule, and suffering from mounting international sanctions, the Kim family dynasty has not collapsed. Indeed, Kim Jong-un seems to have succeeded in cementing his iron grip on power as evinced by enacting unparalleled purges, including the killing of his uncle and numerous generals and officials, not

to mention the assassination of his older brother Kim Jong-nam in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Fathoming North Korea's motivations is never easy, but despite the outbreak of euphoria in Seoul in the aftermath of recent diplomatic breakthroughs, North Korea's strategy has to be tested and verified from all angles.

## Opportunities and Constraints

The importance of the US-South Korean-Japanese trilateral security partnership cannot be underestimated, though one has to recognize its opportunities as well as constraints. But if these three key allies are not able to forge a united front at a time of unparalleled developments between the two Koreas and between the United States and North Korea, the opportunity costs will be very high. Notwithstanding the urgency of rolling back North Korea's nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) threats that are deemed as existential by the Trump administration, neither is North Korea likely willing to give up its nuclear arsenal. Hence, the *raison d'être* for maintaining the closest of ties between the United States, South Korea, and Japan despite outstanding historical and territorial disputes between Seoul and Tokyo is stronger than ever before. The primary roadblock is the potent force of historical memories, especially in South Korea. At the same time, Chinese pressure on South Korea not to enhance its defense and security ties with Japan and the United States is becoming a critical factor hindering enhanced trilateral security cooperation.

As the North Korean nuclear crisis reaches new heights coupled with changes in key national security officials in the Trump administration and President Xi Jinping's accumulation of power matching that of Mao Zedong, the pace and depth of developments well into 2019 and beyond will test the viability of the trilateral security relationship at multiple levels. China's forays in the South China Sea, the security entente between Russia and China (at least in the short to medium term), and haphazard American leadership vis-à-vis Asia—such as threatening key allies with new tariffs as part of a renegotiating ploy for free trade agreements (South Korea) or using them to take measures that would substantially reduce trade

deficits (Japan) while at the same time asking Tokyo and Seoul to forge a united front with Washington—cannot but affect the shape of trilateral cooperation.

Alliances among democracies work not only because they face common threats and adversaries, but because of shared universal values including freedom and democracy, and understanding that sustainable peace and stability can be maintained and strengthened only on the basis of shared democratic values. All three leaders—Trump, Moon, and Abe—have to satisfy their own political bases while confronting very substantial but also volatile political challenges at home. Maintaining their own political capital, navigating multiple diplomatic initiatives, and crafting a joint strategy despite frictions in each of their respective bilateral ties requires bold, realistic, and coordinated strategies.

### **Understanding the Need for Forward-Looking Leadership**

If they succeed, regardless of the daily headlines and outcomes of multiple summits, they will be able to shape a potential new road map toward rolling back North Korea's growing nuclear arsenal. But even if such an outcome is not likely given that Kim Jong-un is highly unlikely to agree to the complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement (CVID) or the full, final, and verifiable dismantlement (FFVD) that is preferred by the Trump administration on North Korea's nuclear program, maintaining maximum pressure while introducing a new road map for denuclearization can succeed only if the United States, South Korea, and Japan work in unison. North Korea has persistently reneged on its promises to denuclearize, by working on both plutonium and highly enriched uranium (HEU) nuclear warheads, disavowing United Nations (UN) Security Council sanctions as US-led hostile policies, and continuing to increase its stockpile of biological and chemical weapons.

Hence, despite the Moon government's euphoric response to three summits with Kim Jong-un and Kim's three meetings with Chinese President Xi Jinping prior to and after the US-North Korea summit in June 2018, Kim has maintained that denuclearization would occur only under the right circumstances, i.e., when the United States lifts its hostile policy toward North Korea, ensures regime security, and ultimately withdraws US forces from South Korea. In the aftermath of three inter-Korean summits from April to September 2018 and the US-North Korea summit in Singapore in June 2018,

the conditions under which Kim Jong-un will consider denuclearization has entered into a new phase.

As Washington prepares the groundwork for a second summit with Kim Jong-un in early 2019, if Trump is unable to secure an agreement that provides tangible progress rather than the statements of principle that were made after the Singapore summit, he will be criticized for his naivete in dealing with Kim Jong-un. For the Moon administration, jump starting US-North Korea nuclear negotiations is essential to ensuring that inter-Korean détente remains on track. Moon has emphasized that he wants to secure an end-of-war statement and to sign a peace treaty that would replace the current armistice.

The rationale for sustained trilateral security cooperation, however, is complicated by on-going historical divisions between South Korea and Japan. The Moon administration has not discarded the December 2015 agreement on the so-called comfort women issue that was negotiated by the Park Geun-hye administration, but it has watered it down significantly since Seoul currently believes that the 2015 agreement did not adequately meet key requirements. From Tokyo's perspective, however, Seoul seems to be moving the goal posts so that a major agreement that was made with a previous South Korean administration is no longer valid. The possibility of a fundamental breakthrough on the historical issue is highly unlikely in the short to mid-term but it is imperative for Japan and South Korea to consider broader strategic interests that necessitates continuing bilateral cooperation.

Other major issues, such as the on-going US-China trade war and the Trump administration's on again, off again threats to impose tariffs on Japanese automobiles to reduce the trade deficit, run the risk of complicating trilateral security cooperation. As a result, just at a time when the need for seamless trilateral policy coordination is essential, so too are the prospects for major impediments that could constrain the degree to which these three allies can make tangible progress on trilateral cooperation. Overcoming political and economic obstacles between South Korea and Japan and the United States and Japan, not to mention the simultaneous coordination of US-ROK policy toward North Korea, warrants the highest of priorities. But if the political leadership in all three countries choose to maximize domestic imperatives over common strategic interests, prospects for trilateral security cooperation will falter with significant opportunity.

## II. Overview of Trilateral Security Cooperation

Ever since Seoul and Tokyo normalized diplomatic ties in 1965, repairing bilateral ties between Japan and South Korea and fostering a trilateral partnership has been one of the most important elements of US policy toward its two critical allies. But it was not until the early 1990s that meaningful trilateral cooperation, or more equally footed trilateral cooperation, became a reality. This is because even though South Korea's economy began to grow rapidly from the early 1970s, it was not until the 1990s that it became a formidable trading power with growing linkages with the global economy.

Trilateral security cooperation became much more prominent after the Cold War in 1990-91, which coincided with growing evidence of North Korea's nuclear weapons program and acceleration of its ballistic missile capabilities. Over time, the rapid rise of China and the PLA's increasingly sophisticated power projection capabilities and concerns over the sustainability of the Kim family dynasty in North Korea also became issues of common concern. However, South Korea's democratization from the late 1980s, including the rise to power of the progressives beginning with the election of Kim Dae-jung as president in December 1997, resulted not only in domestic political shifts but changes in foreign policy perceptions, priorities, and strategies.

The United States, South Korea, and Japan have cooperated in implementing increasingly tougher UN Security Council resolutions after North Korea's first long-range ballistic missile launch in August 1998 and its first nuclear test in October 2006. Pressure has been maintained internationally, trilaterally, and unilaterally but

amid the UN sanctions, each country in the trilateral alliance has supported domestic laws aimed at dealing with North Korea. These laws are strategic responses that strengthen UN Security Council resolutions. They also signal an opportunity for greater cooperation within the alliance to synchronize legal approaches and responses to North Korea.<sup>1</sup>

Even in the midst of growing sanctions and Kim Jong-un's difficulty in sustaining hard currency earnings, North Korea has continued to evade sanctions, sometimes with implicit support from China and Russia. In February 2018, the Trump administration announced the United States' largest sanctions to date targeting

28 vessels and 27 trading and maritime transport companies linked to North Korea, China, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Panama, the Marshall Islands, Tanzania, and Comoros, along with one Taiwanese individual, according to a list released by the US Treasury Department. The aim is to crack down on ship-to-ship oil transfers used by North Korea to evade United Nations sanctions, cutting off resources for nuclear development.<sup>2</sup>

Applying maximum pressure—even in the midst of the ongoing shuttle diplomacy by all of the key stakeholders—cannot be possible without sustained cooperation and coordination among the three allies. As former US Ambassador to the UN Samantha Powers noted, “while there should be no illusion that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea would now abruptly halt its pursuit of nuclear weapons, multilateral pressure could be effective in bringing Pyongyang back to the table for serious and credible negotiations on denuclearization.”<sup>3</sup>

### Trilateral Cooperation: Perspectives from Three Capitals

The beginning of trilateral security cooperation can be said to have begun with the conclusion of the US-ROK and US-Japanese alliances when the three allies forged common security perceptions. Then as today, the most outstanding security threat emanated from North Korea. Over time, however, and consonant with South Korea's democratization in 1987, threat perceptions began to diverge depending on which government was in power in Seoul, i.e., whether the conservatives or the progressives gained the presidency. Perhaps the biggest divergence over the nature and depth of the North Korean threat occurred during the Kim Dae-jung

1 Sandra Fahy, “Bring Strategic amid Sanctions: The Trilateral United States, Japan and the Republic of Korea Alliance,” in Arthur Alexander, *Pivotal Issues in Korea-Japan-US Relations: Perspectives from Emerging Leaders* (Washington, DC: The Maureen and Mansfield Foundation, 2017), 22.

2 Tsuyoshi Nagasawa, *Nikkei Asian Review*, February 24, 2018, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics-Economy/International-Relations/US-imposes-largest-sanctions-ever-on-North-Korea>.

3 Fahy, “Bring Strategic amid Sanctions,” 24.

and Roh Moo-hyun presidencies (1998-2008) when North Korea was accelerating its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs, which included the testing of the Taepodong long-range missile in August 1998 and the first nuclear test in October 2006.

Since the peaceful transfer of power began in 1987, there have been four conservative presidents (Roh Tae-woo, Kim Young-sam, Lee Myung-bak, and Park Geun-hye) and three progressive presidents (Kim Dae-jung, Roh Moo-hyun, and Moon Jae-in) with sharp differences in the makeup of their domestic constituents, worldviews, and importantly, their respective perceptions of the North Korean threat and how best to mitigate or alleviate it. In the main, the conservative leaders have highlighted the importance of maintaining the US-ROK alliance as the bedrock of South Korea's defense posture and have favored maintaining a hard-line posture on North Korea's nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs.

In contrast, while the progressives have also touted the importance of South Korea's alliance with the United States, they have also supported intensive engagement with North Korea, i.e., through the Sunshine Policy, much more flexible attitudes on North Korea's prevailing strategic goals, fostering closer ties with China, and downplaying or downgrading the importance of South Korean-Japanese security cooperation and more broadly, trilateral security cooperation.

There have been exceptions, such as the landmark meeting between South Korean President Kim Dae-jung and Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi in October 1998, which has been regarded as the high mark in South Korean-Japanese ties. In the joint declaration,

Prime Minister Obuchi expressed keen remorse and apologized for the historical fact that Japan, through its past colonial rule of the Korean Peninsula, imposed great damage and pain on the South Korean people. Appreciating the prime minister's apology, President Kim stressed the importance of mutual efforts to build future-oriented relations by overcoming their unfortunate shared history.<sup>4</sup>

But even though former President Kim poured his efforts into improving South Korean-Japanese ties, there was a growing divide on how Tokyo and Seoul began to perceive North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile threats.

On the Japanese side, the Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP's) near-monopolization of power in the post-World War II era meant a much more consistent security posture. Since the LDP was founded in 1955 with the merger of the Democratic Liberal Party and the Japan Democratic Party, it has maintained power except for the following periods: (1) Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa (former member of the LDP) of the Japan New Party in coalition with various smaller parties from August 1993 to April 1994, (2) Prime Minister Tsutomu Hata (former member of the LDP) of the Japan Renewal Party in coalition with other smaller parties from April 1994 to June 1994, (3) Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama of the Japan Socialist Party in coalition with the LDP, and the New Party Sakigake from June 1994 to January 1996, (4) Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) from September 2009 to June 2010, (5) Prime Minister Naoto Kan of the DPJ from June 2010 to September 2011, and (6) Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda of the DPJ from September 2011 to December 2012. Yet the total years in power of non-LDP prime ministers has been under seven and two of those prime ministers—Hosokawa and Hata—were former members of the LDP.

As a result, little deviation has occurred in Japan's perception of the North Korean threat, which began to form in earnest after North Korea's Taepodong long-range missile flew over Japanese airspace in August 1998. Especially since Prime Minister Shinzo Abe gained power for the second time in December 2012 (and has so far remained in office), Japan's threat perceptions of North Korea and China have hardened considerably. Whoever succeeds Abe in the LDP as prime minister is highly unlikely to significantly shift his or her views on North Korea's nuclear threat and China's increasingly sophisticated power projection capabilities.

For the United States, every administration has supported stronger trilateral security ties since South Korea normalized ties with Japan in 1965. During the Vietnam War, the United States was eager to push South Korea to contribute ground forces, and at the height of the war three ROK divisions were stationed in South Vietnam. While Japan did not contribute troops, it served as an important logistics base going back to the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950. Having supported the economic revival of Japan and South Korea and maintained troops there since the 1950s, Washington has sought to strengthen trilateral security cooperation to deepen common defense ties and ensure continuity in policy among these three key allies.

<sup>4</sup> "Highlights of Kim-Obuchi Declaration," October 8, 1998, *Japan Times*, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/1998/10/08/national/highlights-of-kim-obuchi-declaration/#.Wr3w5ohua70>.

## Prospects for US-South Korean-Japanese Trilateral Security Cooperation in an Era of Unprecedented Threats and Evolving Political Forces

As Daniel Sneider has noted:

The construction of a trilateral partnership between the United States and its two allies in the region, Japan and the ROK, has long been a strategic goal of US foreign policy. As the Korean War made clear to US policymakers, our security commitments to the ROK and Japan are interlinked, both conceptually and operationally. The United States' defense of South Korea depends on the infrastructure of US bases and other rear-area support in Japan. And the Korean Peninsula is the de facto front line, the strategic buffer, for the security of Japan ... Despite the abortive attempts to create a regional security structure in the wake of the Korean War, the United States persisted in efforts to bring its two allies together. The normalization of diplomatic relations between the ROK and Japan in 1965 was a milestone, accomplished thanks to the efforts of South Korean and Japanese leaders, but not without behind-the-scenes US mediation.<sup>5</sup>

Remarkably, the greatest uncertainty that could influence the future of trilateral cooperation stems from the highly mixed signals and incongruous policy initiatives undertaken by the Trump administration toward Japan and South Korea. For Washington and Tokyo, the preference is for President Moon to lay the groundwork for possible denuclearization in close consultation with the United States and Japan and not to provide Kim Jong-un with unilateral incentives. At the same time, Tokyo and Seoul do not want to be faced with a surprise if President Trump feels that only he can reach a grand bargain with Kim Jong-un without taking into serious consideration the political and security repercussions such an agreement could have on Japanese and South Korean security.

Trilateral threat perceptions on China are also a source of division since the United States and Japan have been much more vocal in their criticism of the growing security threat from China, whereas South Korea has taken a more reserved posture. From South Korea's perspective, Seoul cannot afford to vocalize the China threat as openly as Japan given China's critical ties with North

Korea and the fact that China is South Korea's largest trading partner. Nevertheless, intense Chinese pressure on South Korea following the deployment of the terminal high-altitude area defense (THAAD) missile defense system after North Korea's fifth nuclear test in January 2016 had extremely negative repercussions in South Korea.<sup>6</sup> Wu Dawei, China's former special representative for Korean Peninsula affairs, stated during a meeting in Seoul in April 2016 that

deployment of THAAD in South Korea will leave half of China within the potential radius covered by X-band radar which would result in China's strategic security interests being severely compromised. China's position is very clear. We have been opposed from the outset to the US deploying THAAD in South Korea.<sup>7</sup>

President Moon came into office in May 2017 following the impeachment of former President Park Geun-hye and importantly, he had to cope with the repercussions flowing from the THAAD deployment. During the presidential campaign in April-May 2017, then candidate Moon stressed the need to revisit the THAAD issue and although his political base continues to be opposed to THAAD, the Moon administration has decided to proceed with operationalizing THAAD batteries. However, in the aftermath of China's vociferous opposition, blatant economic repercussions, and domestic political interference, South Korea and China came to an agreement referred to as the "three no's." Specifically, Seoul and Beijing agreed that South Korea wouldn't consider additional THAAD deployments, wouldn't participate in any theater ballistic missile system led by the United States, and wouldn't consider forming a trilateral alliance with the United States and Japan.<sup>8</sup> According to a South Korean foreign policy analyst, despite this interim agreement, outstanding differences between South Korea and China on critical security issues means that while China and South Korea believed in the "necessity to manage their bilateral relations for different reasons, not for common objectives [and] the conflict is not over yet."<sup>9</sup>

5 Dan Sneider, "Advancing US-Japan-ROK Trilateral Cooperation: a US Perspective," NBR Political and Security Affairs, March 30, 2016, <https://www.nbr.org/publications/advancing-us-japan-rok-trilateral-cooperation-a-us-perspective>.

6 "China Reiterates Opposition to THAAD Anti-missile System in South Korea," Reuters, May 2, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-usa-china/china-reiterates-opposition-to-thaad-anti-missile-system-in-south-korea-idUSKBN17Y0VF>.

7 "Chinese Diplomat Conveys China's THAAD Opposition to S. Korean Presidential Candidates," *Hankkyoreh*, April 12, 2017, [http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_international/790398.html](http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/790398.html).

8 Ankit Panda, "China and South Korea: Examining the Resolution of the THAAD Impasse," *The Diplomat*, November 13, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/china-and-south-korea-examining-the-resolution-of-the-thaad-impasse/>

9 Adam Taylor, "South Korea and China move to normalize relations after THAAD dispute," *New York Times*, October 31, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/south-korea-and-china-move-to-normalize-relations-after-thaad-conflict/2017/10/31/60f2bad8-bde0-11e7-b412-000119080000/>

## Political Currents and Trilateral Cooperation

The Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG)—set up in 1999 to co-manage more effectively common security threats such as North Korea’s nuclear weapons program—was arguably the highlight of trilateral security cooperation among the United States, South Korea, and Japan. TCOG continued in its official form until 2003 when it was superseded by working-level trilateral security consultations. It came into existence in the aftermath of the October 1994 Agreed Framework that was signed between the United States and North Korea to defuse the first North Korean nuclear crisis when the DPRK announced that it was going to leave the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Subsequently, the creation of the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) to build two light water reactors in North Korea in addition to the provision of heavy oil were undertaken primarily by the United States, South Korea, and Japan. “South Korea and Japan provided the majority of funding for the reactor project, while the United States contributed an average of nearly \$35 million annually to support KEDO and the fuel oil deliveries.”<sup>10</sup>

When former Secretary of Defense William Perry was chosen by President William Clinton as the special US representative to coordinate policies toward North Korea, TCOG was born as part of that process with the first meeting held in Honolulu on April 25, 1999. Over time, TCOG meetings were led by the senior foreign ministry officials and “Washington saw the TCOG as an opportunity to get Seoul and Tokyo involved in the US policy making process and on board with initiatives early, which was a recognized weakness of the process that led to the Agreed Framework in 1994.”<sup>11</sup> When the George W. Bush administration came into office in January 2001, it conducted a thorough review of US policy toward North Korea and concluded that Pyongyang was not abiding by the 1994 Agreed Framework. The White House issued a presidential statement on June 13, 2001, which noted:

I have directed my national security team to undertake serious discussions with North Korea on a broad agenda to include: improved implementation

of the Agreed Framework relating to North Korea’s nuclear activities; verifiable constraints on North Korea’s missile programs and a ban on its missile exports; and a less threatening conventional military posture. We will pursue these discussions in the context of a comprehensive approach to North Korea which will seek to encourage progress toward North-South reconciliation, peace on the Korean Peninsula, a constructive relationship with the United States, and greater stability in the region. These are the goals that South Korean President Kim Dae Jung and I discussed during his visit here last March. I look forward to working with him.<sup>12</sup>

As is well known, however, President Kim Dae-jung and President Bush had significantly different approaches to North Korea. Especially after the June 2000 inter-Korean summit, Kim Dae-jung was convinced that his Sunshine Policy would prevent the North from developing nuclear weapons. Indeed, Kim Dae-jung famously stated in 2001 that

*North Korea has not developed nuclear weapons nor does it have the capability to do so. Thus, the assertion that our [South Korea’s] financial assistance to North Korea is being misappropriated for the development of nuclear weapons is a groundless rumor. One should not spread the rumor that North Korea is developing or has developed nuclear weapons and if it should do so, I will accept responsibility.”*<sup>13</sup> (Emphasis added)

In reality, it was subsequently revealed that the Kim Dae-jung administration paid North Korea \$500 million for holding the first inter-Korean summit in June 2000. How much of that money was diverted to North Korea’s nuclear weapons or other WMD programs cannot be independently verified, but one would have to assume that Kim Jong-il did not use that money to provide humanitarian aid to North Koreans. Equally startling was the fact that even after he left office, Kim Dae-jung continued to emphasize that Pyongyang did not have hostile intentions against the South. In October 2004, he mentioned in an interview with newspaper *Kyunghyang Shinmun* that “North Korea stated during the South-North summit that it wanted

11e7-af84-d3e2ee4b2af1\_story.html?utm\_term=.6eaa920c5981

10 James Schoff, *First Interim Report: The Evolution of the TCOG as a Diplomatic Tool* (Cambridge, MA: Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, November 2004), 6.

11 Ibid., 11.

12 Statement by the President, The White House, June 13, 2001, /news/releases/2001/06/20010611-4.html.

13 Goh Sung-hyuk, “Kim Dae Jung-Roh Moo-hyun Bukhek Ohnggho Baleon Moeum” [Compilation of Kim Dae-jung’s and Roh Moo-hyun’s remarks defending North Korea’s nuclear weapons], *New Daily*, February 5, 2013, <https://www.newdaily.co.kr/news/article.html?no=141367>.

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to resolve everything peacefully and in reality, North Korea doesn't have warfighting capabilities or the desire to start a war."<sup>14</sup>

### Contrasting Security Perceptions

Yet the Kim Dae-jung administration, as well as the Roh Moo-hyun administration (2003-08), blamed the Bush administration for derailing the Sunshine Policy even though North Korea's first nuclear test occurred in 2006 during the Roh presidency. In a PBS interview conducted on March 1, 2003, Kim Dae-jung's most important national security official, Lim Dong-won (who served as the National Security Council (NSC) adviser, director of the National Intelligence Service, and minister of unification) consistently argued that it was the hardline posture of the Bush administration that led Kim Jong-il into developing nuclear weapons. When asked about the revelation in 2002 that North Korea was working on an enriched uranium nuclear weapons program, Lim remarked that

*in North Korea, there are quite a lot of natural uranium mines. So they might try to pursue technological enrichment of uranium. We could guess that over the past several years. But that is different than acquiring equipment or materials or facilities. So we were just carefully watching any development at that time.*<sup>15</sup> (Emphasis added)

In the same interview, Lim maintained that there was no definitive proof that North Korea was working on a nuclear weapons program, and when asked about North Korea's HEU program, he replied that "the Agreed Framework [addresses] only the plutonium reprocessing. They didn't say anything about uranium." He also repeated Kim Jong-il's oft-stated position that he had no intention or desire to develop nuclear weapons.<sup>16</sup> When queried whether he thought that North Korea had reneged on the Agreed Framework, Lim stated that "every country [tries] to have technology for research and development purposes, you know? But if they don't have facilities and they don't produce, then it is not violating the intention of agreement."<sup>17</sup> It is incredulous that President Kim's most trusted official in charge of intelligence and policies toward North Korea did not believe that North Korea was pursuing nuclear weapons since it "didn't have the facilities."

Reminiscent of the discussions that are taking place today, Lim also repeated what North Korea has maintained for the past twenty-plus years: namely, that if the United States stops its "hostile policies" toward North Korea, the United States would no longer need to be concerned about threats from the North. Indeed, Lim's statement back in 2003 sounds almost exactly the same as the Moon administration's standing position on North Korea:

What North Korea wants is the assurance of security by the United States. They are not happy to hear preemption, axis of evil, etc. What North Korea wants is the normalization of relations with the United States so that they can improve their economy and survive. If these conditions are accepted by the United States, then North Korea says they are willing to give up all the security concerns raised by the United States. That's what they said.<sup>18</sup>

While the United States, South Korea, and Japan continued to coordinate their policies during the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun presidencies, friction between Washington and Seoul, as well as between Seoul and Tokyo (especially under President Roh and Prime Minister Koizumi), impeded trilateral security cooperation. One point of contention that remained throughout the Kim-Roh years with the Bush administration was the firm belief by Seoul that Washington's security guarantee and related confidence-building measures (CBMs) would roll back North Korea's aggressive actions, including its work on developing nuclear weapons. Although President Bush (and before him, President Clinton) repeatedly stated that the United States had no intention of attacking North Korea and offered assurances, the Kim and Roh governments continued to insist that Bush's aggressive postures meant that Kim Jong-il had no choice but to fend for his own security and defense.

From the aftermath of the United States' invasion of Iraq in March 2003 and NATO's lead in supporting the rebels to taking out Muammar al-Qaddafi in March 2011, many pro-Sunshine analysts in South Korea and the United States argued that North Korea learned a valuable lesson; namely, that if Saddam Hussein and Qaddafi had had nuclear weapons, the United States or NATO forces, would never have attacked Iraq and Libya. North Korea has argued that one reason why

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> "Interview with Lim Dong Won, *Frontline*, March 1, 2003, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/kim/interviews/won.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

they developed nuclear weapons was to protect itself from potential US actions as evinced by the US invasion of Iraq and NATO's intervention in Libya that eventually toppled the Qaddafi regime. In other words, North Korea had an incentive to develop nuclear weapons as the "only reliable guarantee of the country's basic sovereignty, of the communist regime's control, and of the rule of Kim Jong-un."<sup>19</sup> At the same time, one could also argue that the unprecedented exchange of heated rhetoric between Trump and Kim Jong-un in 2017 contributed to a growing siege mentality in North Korea.

During his maiden speech to the United Nations in September 2017, Trump asserted, in part, that "the United States has great strength and patience, but if it is forced to defend itself or its allies, we will have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea. Rocket Man is on a suicide mission for himself and for his regime."<sup>20</sup> In response, Kim Jong-un stated that Trump "*is unfit to hold the prerogative of supreme command of a country, and he is surely a rogue and a gangster fond of playing with fire, rather than a politician [and] whatever Trump might have expected, he will face results beyond his expectation. I will surely and definitely tame the mentally deranged US dotard with fire.*"<sup>21</sup> While North Korea claims that the constant threat of attack from the United States compelled it to develop

nuclear weapons, the truth is that North Korea began work on a nuclear program from the 1960s. Moreover, one major impetus for North Korea's accelerated nuclear weapons program.

In essence, one of the prerequisites from South Korea's progressive governments—including the current Moon administration—for ensuring inter-Korean peace and security is for Washington to extend a security guarantee for Pyongyang. However, it's important to remember that no foreign power—the United States, China, or Russia—can guarantee regime security for North Korea. The downfall of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and other Middle Eastern despots attests to the fact that regime security ultimately rests with domestic political, economic, and social forces. Even China—North Korea's closest patron—cannot guarantee regime survival for Kim Jong-un. Clearly, China has vested interests in keeping Kim Jong-un's regime afloat despite deep reservations about his nuclear program and it has repeatedly stated that it will not stand for regime change. That said, if the Kim Jong-un regime begins to unravel due to mounting public resentment (however unlikely such a development seems to be at the present time) or a military takeover, China will take measures to secure its own interests but won't prop up Kim Jong-un at all costs.

19 Stephen Evans, "The Saddam factor in North Korea's nuclear strategy," *BBC News*, September 9, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-37321686>

20 Peter Baker and Rick Gladstone, "With Combative Style and Epithets, Trump Takes America First to the U.N.," *New York Times*, September 19, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/19/world/trump-un-north-korea-iran.html>

21 Matt Stevens, "Trump and Kim Jong-un, and the Names They've Called Each Other," *New York Times*, March 9, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/09/world/asia/trump-kim-jong-un.html>

### III. Recent Trends in Trilateral Cooperation and Key Issues

Unsurprisingly, the core issue that has brought the three countries together continues to be the North Korean nuclear and ballistic missile threats, though as North Korea's ICBM technologies have accelerated, Washington has become much more concerned about nuclear-armed ICBMs. Four key political transitions have occurred since 2016 that continue to resonate on the extent to which the three allies have cooperated and are likely to cooperate on their approaches toward North Korea. In November 2016 and contrary to virtually all mainstream media and political forecasts, Donald Trump won the presidency over Hillary Clinton. President Moon won a snap presidential election in May 2017 following the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye and Prime Minister Abe won a snap election in October 2017. Last but not least, Chinese President Xi Jinping revised the constitution during the March 2018 National People's Congress that enabled him to govern for life if he wants to and emerged as the strongest Chinese leader since Mao Zedong. Increasingly authoritarian with foregone conclusions, Russian President Vladimir Putin won his fourth presidential term that will allow him to serve until 2024 and became the first Kremlin leader after Josef Stalin to serve two decades in power.<sup>22</sup>

In North Korea, Kim Jong-un is now entering his eighth year in power after the death of Kim Jong-il in December 2011. When he became the Great Leader at the age of 27, there was skepticism about whether he had the political acumen and support to lead North Korea. But through a series of brutal, bloody, and unprecedented purges, acceleration of North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs, and adroit political moves (as evinced by his very active diplomatic initiatives since January 2018), Kim has consolidated his power base.

The strengthening of political power for Xi, Putin, and Kim—who each rule rather than govern—and constantly shifting political currents for Moon, Abe, and Trump as leaders of democracies suggest that the authoritarian leaders have an upper hand in implementing more consistent foreign and security policies devoid of checks and balances and a free press. That said, while

democracies are inherently susceptible to public opinion pressures and contrasting power bases, including the legislative branch and an independent judiciary, their advantage lies in much more stable institutions. Insofar as coping with the North Korean nuclear threat is concerned and with respect to trilateral cooperation, Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul have to contend with an impatient public, but there is significant consensus in each of their capitals on the severity of the North Korean nuclear threat, the unprecedented rise in Chinese military power, and coordinating their policies even under very trying political circumstances.

#### The Election of Donald Trump

Throughout the 2016 campaign, Trump's speeches on foreign policy were vague on detail and went against the grain of decades of bipartisan approaches to Europe and Asia. For example, in an interview with the *New York Times* printed on March 26, 2016, Trump reiterated his position that key US allies such as Japan and South Korea were essentially free riders on defense while enjoying trade surpluses with the United States. When asked if he thought it was alright for South Korea and Japan to have nuclear weapons in order to counterbalance North Korea's growing nuclear threat, Trump replied that it would not necessarily be a bad thing because the United States could no longer afford to be the policeman of the world:

Well, you know, at some point, there is going to be a point at which we just can't do this [continuing to provide military assistance] anymore. And, I know the upsides and the downsides. But right now we're protecting, we're basically protecting Japan, and we are, every time North Korea raises its head, you know, we get calls from Japan and we get calls from everybody else, and "Do something." *And there'll be a point at which we're just not going to be able to do it anymore. Now, does that mean nuclear? It could mean nuclear. ... And, would I rather have North Korea have them with Japan sitting there having them also? You may very well be better off if that's the case.* In other words, where Japan is defending itself against North

<sup>22</sup> Andrew Roth, "Vladimir Putin Secures Landslide Victory in Russian Election," *Guardian*, March 18, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/18/vladimir-putin-wins-russian-election-with-more-than-70-of-vote-exit-poll>.

Korea, which is a real problem. You very well may have a better case right there.<sup>23</sup> (Emphasis added)

During the campaign and since he entered the White House, Trump's foreign policy has been based primarily on transactional strategies, i.e., that the United States can no longer afford to provide security umbrellas or accept trade deficits as the norm and that allies have to pay up if they want to continue to receive American security protection and access to the US market. But while he criticized Japan and South Korea as free riders on defense, retired Admiral Timothy Keating, former head of the US Pacific Command, reminded readers that

[Japan and South Korea] are at the very core of our national security strategy in the Asia-Pacific ... There is no need for either South Korea or Japan to pursue a nuclear weapon program. Japan provides significant financial support for the thousands of US troops stationed there, as does South Korea. Trump's position is not helpful.<sup>24</sup>

### President Moon Jae-in's Victory

President Moon Jae-in's victory in a snap presidential election, held on May 9, 2017, dramatically altered the political landscape in South Korea. Following the finalization of the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye on March 10, 2017, this snap presidential election was held some seven months prior to the scheduled December 2017 election. Candidate Moon Jae-in of the Democratic Party was the clear favorite since it was virtually impossible for the then-ruling Saenuri Party to overcome the enormous cost to the party's credibility following Park's impeachment. President Moon served as chief of staff during President Roh Moo-hyun's administration (2003-08) and analysts were not quite sure whether he would follow the previous progressive government's approach toward North Korea, i.e., reemphasizing the Sunshine Policy at the potential expense of alliance solidarity. Once he entered the Blue House, however, President Moon reaffirmed the centrality of the ROK-US alliance and the importance of maintaining trilateral cooperation. At the same time, however, President Moon was much more willing to test new avenues of engagement with Kim Jong-un.

When President Trump unexpectedly announced stiff tariffs on steel and aluminum on major suppliers to the United States including South Korea—accounting for 10 percent of the United States' annual steel imports—Seoul made every effort to receive an exemption in exchange for renegotiating the United States-Korea Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) where talks were first held in January 2018. On March 25, 2018, Seoul and Washington agreed on a renegotiated FTA that doubled the number of US car exports to South Korea that did not have to meet local emissions standards while Seoul agreed to limit its steel exports to 7 percent. This was the first renegotiated FTA that provided Trump with a “mini-victory” since he threatened to do away with FTAs, including the all-important North American Free Trade Agreement. One analyst noted that

ultimately this was a good agreement for both sides ... It looks like everybody got a little bit of something out of this, and with the talks with North Korea coming up, it takes what could have been a contentious issue off the table and puts the two allies basically back lockstep on all major issues.<sup>25</sup>

But in an even more surprising turn of events, President Trump announced in a speech to his base at the end of March 2018 that he “may hold it [KORUS FTA] up after a deal is made with North Korea [because] it's a very strong card. And I want to make sure everyone is treated fairly.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, Trump was insinuating that if he held back on signing the newly renegotiated trade deal with Seoul, he would be able to exercise maximum political leverage on President Moon so that Moon would not deviate from the policy of maximum pressure on North Korea even after his meetings with Kim Jong-un. Ultimately, Trump succeeded in renegotiating the KORUS FTA but has continued to send mixed signals toward the Moon administration. On the one hand, senior Trump administration officials insist that the strategy of maximum pressure on North Korea remains unchanged and that Seoul should align its policy with Washington insofar as sanctions toward North Korea is concerned although President Moon wants to provide some sanctions relief to Kim Jong-un as a goodwill gesture. At the same time, however, Trump continues to emphasize his willingness to meet with Kim for a second summit to seal a nuclear deal in order

23 Maggie Haberman and David E. Sanger, “Transcript: Donald Trump Expounds on His Foreign Policy Views,” March 26, 2018, *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/27/us/politics/donald-trump-transcript.html>.

24 Demetri Sevastopulo, “Donald Trump Open to Japan and South Korea Having Nuclear Weapons,” *Financial Times*, March 27, 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/c927017c-f398-11e5-9afe-dd2472ea263d>.

25 Kanga Kong, Ben Brody, and Jiyeun Lee, “US Settles South Korea Trade Dispute before Summit with North,” Bloomberg, March 26, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-03-25/south-korea-says-agreement-made-with-u-s-on-trade-deal-tariffs>.

26 “Trump Plays the Trade Card against South Korea's Détente,” *Nikkei Asian Review*, March 31, 2018, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics-Economy/Policy-Politics/Trump-plays-the-trade-card-against-South-Korea-s-detente>.

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to make sure that he gets the credit for achieving a major breakthrough with North Korea.

### Prime Minister Abe's Political Rise and Challenges

In Japan, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe called a snap election for October 22, 2017, to take advantage of a rapidly recovering Japanese economy and public support for emphasizing threats from North Korea and China. The ruling LDP won 33 percent of the vote while the party's coalition partner Komeito won 7 percent, or enough for Abe to seek a third term as prime minister. The BBC reported at that time that:

Mr. Abe is best known for his muscular stance on Japan's defence, particularly in territorial rows. In 2015 he pushed for Japan's right to collective self-defense, which is the ability to mobilize troops overseas to defend themselves and allies under attack. This controversial change in law was approved by Japan's parliament but encountered significant opposition from the Japanese public, China and South Korea. He hopes to amend the country's constitution by 2020 in order to formally recognize the military forces.<sup>27</sup>

Prime Minister Abe's grip on power seemed to be at its height after the October 2017 election and he made a special effort right after Donald Trump was elected to forge a special relationship. Among Asian leaders, he was the first to visit Trump during the transition and throughout 2017 enjoyed the closest of ties with Trump. Nonetheless, Abe was not consulted prior to Trump's surprise announcement that he agreed to hold a summit meeting with Kim Jong-un in May 2018, and Japan was the largest American ally not to be included in the list of temporary exemptions from newly announced high tariffs on steel and aluminum. As Professor Koichi Nakano of Sophia University commented,

It's really kind of almost tragicomic ... Abe was being really sycophantic in trying to please Trump, and at a certain point, quite recently, he was talked about as the closest friend that Trump has. And it all turns out that that wasn't good for anything when it comes to furthering the national interests of Japan.<sup>28</sup>

More recently, Prime Minister Abe has faced a scandal involving his wife that surfaced in 2016 when state-owned land was sold to a "nationalist operator of schools" who claimed to have connections to Abe and his wife, Akie.<sup>29</sup> So far, Abe has been able to contain the damage and is poised to become the longest-serving Japanese prime minister in the postwar era. Moreover, Abe has tried to ensure that Japan's core security interests wouldn't suffer on account of the rapid pace of inter-Korean détente as well as US-North Korea ties as illustrated by Trump's June 12 summit with Kim in Singapore. Abe has not ruled out a bilateral meeting with Kim Jong-un or a trilateral United States-Japan-North Korea summit meeting as a means to resolving the abductee issue.<sup>30</sup>

If Prime Minister Abe succeeds in resolving the abductee issue with Kim Jong-un it would signal a huge political victory for him given the highly emotionally charged nature of the issue. But Abe will also lose face if he is not able to bring home tangible results on the abductee issue, "nor is it clear that Pyongyang would be open to talks. North Korea's ultimate goal is thought to be for the US to guarantee the Kim government's survival. With a Kim-Trump summit now on the agenda, Pyongyang has little reason to work for improved ties with Tokyo."<sup>31</sup>

### Trilateral Cooperation in Action and GSOMIA

The first trilateral vice ministers' meeting was held in Washington, DC, in April 2015 and a second meeting was held right after North Korea's January 6, 2016, fourth nuclear test. One of the most important steps in strengthening South Korean-Japanese security cooperation was the passing of the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) in Seoul on November 23, 2016, in the midst of unprecedented political turmoil in South Korea following allegations against President Park Geun-hye of abusing presidential powers and corruption. The GSOMIA bill was originally planned to be passed under the Lee Myung-bak administration in the fall of 2012 prior to the December presidential election but then-candidate Park remarked that given domestic sensitivities, the GSOMIA agreement with Japan should be indefinitely postponed. Given that Seoul still lacks strategic surveillance assets,

27 "Japan Election: Shinzo Abe Set for Record Tenure," BBC, October 23, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-19725705>.

28 Motoko Rich, "Misreading Trump: Ally Japan Is Spurned on Tariff Exceptions," *New York Times*, March 23, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/23/world/asia/japan-trump-tariffs-trade.html>.

29 "Japan: Embattled Shinzo Abe Blames Staff over Land Sale Scandal," *Guardian*, March 19, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/19/japan-shinzo-abe-land-sale-scandal>.

30 Koya Jibiki, "Abe Weighs Pros and Cons of Meeting North Korean Leader," *Nikkei Asian Review*, March 31, 2018, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics-Economy/International-Relations/Abe-weighs-pros-and-cons-of-meeting-North-Korean-leader>.

31 Ibid.

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sharing military intelligence through the GSOMIA agreement would allow South Korea and Japan to share key intelligence on North Korea. According to the South Korean press, both sides agreed to exchange intelligence labeled confidential, highly confidential, and secret.<sup>32</sup>

For the past several years, the defense ministers of South Korea and Japan have met at the annual Shangri-La Dialogue sponsored by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies in Singapore including a trilateral defense ministers' meeting including the US secretary of defense. On June 28, 2016, naval forces from the three countries participated in the "Pacific Dragon" exercise designed to test their capabilities in monitoring and tracking North Korean ballistic missiles. Military-to-military dialogue has also continued without fanfare, such as then-ROK Army Chief of Staff Jang Jun-kyu's visit to Washington where he held a trilateral meeting with his Japanese and American counterparts and discussed avenues of strengthened defense cooperation. Even when South Korea was in political turmoil following the impeachment of President Park in December 2016 and was led by a prime minister who served as acting president, defense ministers held a video conference on February 14, 2017, over North Korea's ballistic missile threats. On April 3-5, 2017, South Korean and Japanese navy vessels held a combined anti-submarine exercise in international waters between Jeju Island and mainland Japan.

President Park was impeached by the National Assembly (and subsequently by the Constitutional Court, which finalized her impeachment) on December 9, 2016, but the eighth trilateral security conference Defense Trilateral Talks (DTT) proceeded as planned; the most recent tenth DTT was held in Washington, DC,

on March 21, 2018. The ROK ministry of defense issued a statement that noted, in part, that

the three representatives reaffirmed that they were facing common security threats in the region, that there was a need in enhancing security cooperation, and that such moves contributed to the peace and stability of the Asia-Pacific region. The three countries called upon North Korea to completely, verifiably and irreversibly give up its nuclear and ballistic missile program, to stop provocations and other activities that increase tensions within the region, and to immediately abide fully with all existing international responsibilities and promises including related UN Security Council resolutions.<sup>33</sup>

After President Moon entered office in May 2017, a joint statement was released on July 7, 2017, on the sidelines of the G-20 summit in Hamburg. Moon, Abe, and Trump emphasized the need to enhance cooperation in the face of North Korea's growing nuclear and ballistic missile threats:

The leaders affirmed the importance of working together to counter the DPRK threat and to achieve the complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in a peaceful manner, a shared goal among the three countries. They also committed to continue to cooperate to apply maximum pressure on the DPRK to change its path, refrain from provocative and threatening actions, and take steps necessary to return to serious denuclearization dialogue. The three leaders emphasized that they, together with the rest of the international community, stand ready to offer a brighter future for the DPRK if it chooses the right path. The United States, the ROK, and Japan will never accept a nuclear armed DPRK.<sup>34</sup>

32 Jeong Young Soo and Park Sung Hoon, "Hanil 1keub bimil jaewaehan gunsa bimil kyowhan...GSOMIA hyeopjung chekyul," (Korea-Japan sign GSOMIA agreement on exchanging military secrets below the top secret level), *Joongang-Ilbo*, November 23, 2016, <http://news.joins.com/article/20914025>.

33 "The 10<sup>th</sup> Korea-US-Japan Security Conference (DTT)," Press Release, Ministry of National Defense, March 23, 2018.

34 "Joint Statement from the United States of America, Republic of Korea, and Japan," US Embassy and Consulate in Korea, July 7, 2017, <https://kr.usembassy.gov/070717-joint-statement-united-states-america-republic-korea-japan/>.

## IV. Trust but Verify: Assessing Northeast Asia's Shifting Geopolitics

Getting a grip on accelerating developments in and around the Korean Peninsula has seldom been more difficult. Head-turning diplomatic and political developments have occurred one after the other since January 2018. Kim Jong-un's New Year's speech stressed his willingness to send North Korean athletes to the Pyeongchang Winter Olympic Games and he then sent his sister, Kim Yo-jong—the second most powerful person in the Kim family regime—as a special envoy to send a personal message to President Moon Jae-in. President Moon accepted Kim's suggestion to hold a third Korean summit followed by Moon's own special envoys' visit to Pyongyang. Upon returning to Seoul, they were sent to Washington, Tokyo, and Beijing to brief the top leadership and when a delegation led by Seoul's national security adviser was briefing President Donald Trump and other high-level US officials, Trump decided on the spot to accept Kim Jong-un's invitation to hold the first-ever United States-North Korea summit.

### The 'Olympic Thaw' and Diplomatic Races

From March 25 to 28, 2018, Kim Jong-un, his wife, Ri Sol-ju, and a coterie of top officials secretly visited Beijing at the invitation of President Xi Jinping. Since Kim Jong-un succeeded his father in December 2011, he had never been invited by China's top leader, either by President Hu Jintao or President Xi Jinping, to formally signal China's approval of a new North Korean leader. Yet Xi's decision to extend an invitation to Kim illustrated China's desire to maximize its leverage on North Korea and sent an unequivocal signal to the United States and South Korea that despite frictions in the Sino-North Korean relationship, Beijing had no intention of abandoning Pyongyang.

To the contrary, while Beijing has been deeply disappointed at Kim Jong-un for accelerating his nuclear weapons program, a nuclearized North Korea is not necessarily a fundamentally negative security driver for China. While North Korea no longer functions as a buffer for China as it did during the Cold War, it cannot be denied that Xi Jinping, who is set to remain in

power well into the foreseeable future, can exploit key dividends from a nuclearized North Korea. By emphasizing the need for a parallel reduction of tensions on the Korean Peninsula, i.e., implementing a nuclear and ballistic missile freeze in North Korea in exchange for reducing the intensity and duration of US-ROK military exercises, and fully supporting the Moon Jae-in government's inter-Korean détente, Beijing can increase its political leverage on the Korean Peninsula.

Xi's decision to meet with Kim prior to the April inter-Korean summit and the June United States-North Korea summit assured Beijing of a seat at the table and ensures that its strategic interests are not diluted by the two Koreas or through the conclusion of a significant agreement between President Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un. According to Chinese media's summary of the Xi-Kim meeting (as reported in the *New York Times*, March 27, 2018), Kim Jong-un apparently stated that "if South Korea and the United States respond with good will to our efforts and create an atmosphere of peace and stability, and take phased, synchronized measures to achieve peace, the issue of the denuclearization of the peninsula can reach resolution."

No other South Korean leader has used as much political capital as President Moon in engineering unprecedented exchanges with North Korea. After the April 27 Panmunjom summit, the two leaders announced the Panmunjom Declaration. In it, Moon and Kim agreed to set up a joint liaison office, accelerate economic cooperation, addressing the plight of separated families, and to work toward the signing of a permanent peace treaty. On the critical nuclear issue, the declaration<sup>35</sup> only noted that "South and North Korea confirmed the common goal of realizing, through complete denuclearisation, a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula. South and North Korea shared the view that the measures being initiated by North Korea are very meaningful and crucial for the denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula and agreed to carry out their respective roles and responsibilities in this regard."

When Moon visited Pyongyang for his third meeting with Kim, the two leaders announced the Pyongyang

35 "Panmunjom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity and Unification of the Korean Peninsula," Reuters, April 27, 2018, <https://in.reuters.com/article/northkorea-southkorea-summit-statement/panmunjom-declaration-for-peace-prosperity-and-unification-of-the-korean-peninsula-idINKBN1HY18V>; Steven Lee Myers and Jane Perlez, "Kim Jong-un Met with Xi Jinping in Secret Beijing Visit," *New York Times*, March 27, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/y88japz9>

Declaration that included unprecedented military confidence-building measures (CBMs) amounting to a de facto cessation of hostilities. The two Koreas agreed to adopt a military cooperation annex including the establishment of a no-fly zone near the demilitarized zone (DMZ) and dismantling of guard posts inside the DMZ. The declaration noted that the “Korean Peninsula must be turned into a land of peace free from nuclear weapons and nuclear threats...[and] the North expressed its willingness to continue to take additional measures, such as the permanent dismantlement of the nuclear facilities in Yeongbyeon.”<sup>36</sup>

As important as these declarations are, however, North Korea has yet to show a tangible commitment to verified denuclearization. Indeed, one of the key problems that remains unresolved is how North Korea interprets denuclearization. Pyongyang has long insisted that it is ready to give up its nuclear weapons so long as the United States takes reciprocal actions such as dismantling its own nuclear capabilities that could target North Korea. Moreover, the 1991 South-North Basic Agreement and the South–North Joint Declaration on Denuclearization explicitly stated that neither side could develop nuclear weapons. After six North Korean nuclear tests since 2006, including a hydrogen bomb test in September 2017, it is self-evident that North Korea has disavowed and nullified the 1991 Basic Agreement. The fact that Pyongyang reaffirmed its commitment to denuclearization through the Panmunjom and Pyongyang Declarations does not carry much weight since North Korea has already contravened earlier denuclearization commitments.

### Testing Kim Jong-un’s Denuclearization Promises

To be sure, opinions differ on interpreting the sincerity of Kim Jong-un’s motives since those on the left in South Korea have argued that the main reason why North Korea acquired nuclear weapons was to safeguard its security in the aftermaths of US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq after the 9/11 attacks. Moreover, they have maintained that once the United States halts its “hostile” policies toward North Korea and provides security assurances, Pyongyang has every incentive to denuclearize. But given the progress made by North Korea on intercontinental ballistic missiles, miniaturized nuclear warheads, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and significant biological and chemical weapons, on top of its 1.1-million-strong

conventional forces, there is no incentive for Kim Jong-un to give up his nuclear weapons.

The primary reason why Kim Jong-un agreed to the inter-Korean summits and his meeting with Trump, in addition to his meetings with Xi Jinping, was to buy time as mounting sanctions have begun to erode North Korea’s all-important illicit hard currency earnings and sustained allocation of materials and resources toward its growing WMD programs. Hence, while worldwide media attention was focused on the flurry of shuttle diplomacy throughout 2018, very little substantive progress has been made on a viable denuclearization roadmap as Kim Jong-un continues to stave off harsher sanctions. What Kim Jong-un is really seeking is sanctions relief with some modicum of progress on denuclearization talks with the United States while drawing out the process since he will outlive all of the major players.

Seen from such a perspective, how the United States and its two most important allies in the region—South Korea and Japan—coordinate their efforts, bilaterally and trilaterally, throughout the process of the Olympic thaw is going to assume greater salience than before for two key reasons. First, despite existing difficulties in the South Korean-Japanese relationship, it is essential for Asia’s most advanced economies and robust democracies to work closely together on maintaining a united front in the face of growing nuclear and ballistic missile threats from North Korea, regardless of the outcomes of the two expected summits. Second, US leadership globally and in Asia has never been more important, but mixed signals and inconsistent policies by the Trump administration have exasperated US allies and partners in the region at a time when China is emerging as the next superpower.

Whatever one may say about Xi Jinping’s recent decision to abolish presidential term limits, the fact remains that Xi is now able to forge ahead with much more aggressive foreign and defense policies. Hence, how the United States manages its bilateral ties with Tokyo and Seoul in addition to maintaining the closest of consultations and coordination with South Korea and Japan is going to become a critical factor, not only in sustaining maximum pressure on North Korea, but also in ensuring that North Korea will face enormous consequences if it reneges on its promise to begin the process of denuclearization.

36 “Full Text: Pyongyang Declaration,” *Korea Times*, September 18, 2018, [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2018/09/103\\_255848.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2018/09/103_255848.html).

## V. The Prerequisites for Sustained US-South Korean-Japanese Cooperation

One of the most difficult but also most important bilateral relationships in East Asia is the relationship between South Korea and Japan—two of the most important US allies in the Asia-Pacific. Tied together by history, culture, and geopolitics, Asia’s most advanced economies and robust democracies have much to gain by enhancing security and political cooperation, bilaterally and trilaterally, with the United States, but are constantly held back by deeply ingrained historical legacies and domestic political constraints. In more ways than one, South Korean-Japanese ties are not as bad as they seem to be, nor as good as they need to be, in an era of rapidly evolving geopolitical ties in Northeast Asia.

Any assessment focused on enhanced security cooperation among the United States, South Korea, and Japan has to take into consideration three critical factors that are in constant flux owing to the convergence of very strong domestic political forces, shared but also distinct strategic interests, and common but incongruent threat perceptions.

### Overcoming Historical Legacies and Identity Politics

First, the sustainability and durability of trilateral security cooperation has been and will continue to be affected deeply by very strong political currents in Seoul and Tokyo. This is not unique to South Korea and Japan as evinced by Great Britain’s decision to exit from the European Union or the rise of right-wing nationalism in Europe over the past several years. What makes the Seoul-Tokyo relationship so fragile, however, despite fifty-five years of normalization, is that citizens of these two neighbors have not come to grips with deeply ingrained historical memories and interpretations, and sharp national identities. Prior to democratization in 1987, public opinion played only a limited role in shaping South Korean-Japanese ties owing to decades of authoritarian rule and the primacy of common security threats. Bilateral ties were driven by the two nations’ political leadership, chief executive officers of major companies bonded through decades of interaction, and key opinion leaders. The public at large was not a critical factor in maintaining bilateral ties although

there were violent demonstrations in South Korea led by university students when President Park Chung-hee decided to fully normalize ties with Japan in 1965, two decades after the end of the Second World War.

Japan’s rapid economic rise in the postwar era, becoming the world’s second largest economy in the early 1970s, meant that Tokyo had greater overall leverage in the bilateral relationship. Sustained governance by the Liberal Democratic Party also meant continuity in policies toward South Korea. But as South Korea began to mark its own unparalleled economic takeoff starting in the 1970s and with its successful transition to democratic rule in 1987, the political status quo that long-defined South Korean-Japanese ties was no longer tenable. To be sure, there were key windows of opportunity, such as the 1998 groundbreaking summit meeting between South Korean President Kim Dae-jung and Japanese Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo that marked the peak in post-1965 bilateral ties. 2018 marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Kim-Obuchi summit, which was arguably the high mark of South Korean-Japanese ties.

As the political right became more vocal in Japan commensurate with rising nationalism on both sides in addition to the increasingly powerful influence of the media, public opinion, and the role of nongovernmental organizations, bilateral ties were no longer immune from powerful domestic political forces. As two long-time observers of Seoul and Tokyo have noted:

Why are domestic political considerations a chronic flashpoint in Korea-Japan relations, and what has prevented these two countries—fellow Asian democracies and successful market economies with common values—from overcoming their tragic historical legacy? ... *Because South Korea and Japan are mature democracies, public opinion directly influences the parameters of foreign policy making in each country. It shapes, constrains, and potentially enlarges alliance-based cooperation with the United States. ... Public views influence foreign policy, international relations, and the prospects for future conflict in Asia, with powerful implications for US management of relations with these two allies.*<sup>37</sup> (Emphasis added)

37 Brad Glosserman and Scott Snyder, *The Japan-South Korea Identity Clash: East Asian Security and the United States* (New York:

## Common Security Threats and Coordinated Responses

Second, notwithstanding the potency of identity politics and vibrant nationalism in both countries, it is also true that they face an array of common security threats, though threat perceptions in recent years have also been influenced by the ideological makeup of the ruling party or the most powerful faction in the ruling party in South Korea and Japan. The most acute security threat confronting South Korea and Japan is North Korea's increasingly powerful nuclear weapons capabilities coupled with its ballistic missile capabilities and WMDs (such as biological and chemical weapons). Outside of South Korea and the United States, Japan has been the most vocal about North Korea's nuclear threat. According to the *Defense of Japan 2017* issued by the Ministry of Defense:

North Korea seems to maintain and reinforce its so-called asymmetric military capabilities by continuing to promote the development of WMDs and ballistic missiles and the enhancement of its operation capabilities, including five nuclear tests so far and repeatedly launching ballistic missiles, and by maintaining large-scale special operations forces ... Such a military trend in North Korea constitutes a serious and imminent threat to the security not only of Japan but also of the entire region and the international community.<sup>38</sup>

While hardly uniform across the board, the South Korean press and many defense analysts have emphasized that while the North Korean nuclear and ballistic missile threats are genuine, Japan has exploited this threat to beef up its own formidable military capabilities. Tokyo remains firmly non-nuclear and there is no indication that Japan will overturn its non-nuclear posture even with North Korea's increasingly robust nuclear capabilities. Such perceptions in South Korea are driven primarily by pre-World War II legacies of Japanese colonialism and militarism, the Abe government's "pro-active contribution to peace," and the

affirmation of Japan's right to collective self-defense. In December 2013, Japan established the National Security Council in the cabinet, and both its National Security Strategy and the National Defense Program Guidelines are discussed and approved in the NSC.<sup>39</sup> Masahiko Komura, former foreign minister and a leading member of the LDP, emphasized in a speech in March 2015 that the main dilemma facing the Japanese cabinet was that:

In Japan's current security environment, a single-minded focus on a literal interpretation of the Constitution may not be adequate to protect the lives of the people, but at the same time, the government must not overzealously pursue security in such a way as to violate the sanctity of the Constitution. The middle ground is to figure out the *minimum degree* to which Japan must be prepared to use force in order to successfully protect the Japanese people. Collective self-defense is a minimum condition that Japan must have to be able to defend itself and expect the cooperation of allies and partners in its defense.<sup>40</sup>

On March 29, 2016, Japan's Diet passed two security-related bills that reinterpreted the constitution to allow Japan to exercise collective self-defense under certain circumstances, i.e., providing Self-Defense Force (SDF) support to protect US military vessels and expanding the scope of the SDF's ability to provide logistical support.<sup>41</sup> While China and South Korea voiced their opposition to such a move, though Beijing was much more aggressive in airing its views, Abe pushed the security legislation to enhance the SDF's coordination with US forces and to enable the SDF to assume "bigger roles in East and Southeast Asia."<sup>42</sup> The March 2016 changes were driven, in part, by Japan's perception that China's increasingly robust military power projection capabilities were becoming a major threat to Japanese security. For example, Tokyo doubled the number of F-15 combat aircraft to defend the disputed Senkaku Islands, which are claimed by both Japan and China but are under the effective control of Japan.<sup>43</sup>

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Columbia University Press, 2016), Kindle Locations 152-154, 156-157.

38 *Defense of Japan 2017* (Tokyo: Ministry of Defense, 2017), 60.

39 *Ibid.*, 216.

40 Mina Pollmann, "Japan's Argument for Collective Self-Defense," *The Diplomat*, March 30, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/03/japans-argument-for-collective-self-defense/>.

41 Ayako Mie, "Security Laws Usher in New Era for Pacifist Japan," *Japan Times*, March 29, 2016, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/03/29/national/politics-diplomacy/japans-contentious-new-security-laws-take-effect-paving-way-collective-self-defense/#.Wrpl44hua70>.

42 *Ibid.*

43 Danielle Demetriou, "Japan Doubles Its Fighter Jet Numbers to Defense Islands Claimed by China," *The Telegraph*, February 1, 2016, <file:///C:/Users/USER/Dropbox/Research%20Materials%201/Japanese%20Defense/2016-02-01,%20The%20Telegraph,%20Japan%20doubles%20its%20fighter%20jet%20numbers%20to%20defend%20islands%20claimed%20by%20China.pdf>.

## Prospects for US-South Korean-Japanese Trilateral Security Cooperation in an Era of Unprecedented Threats and Evolving Political Forces

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that in combination with North Korea's WMD capabilities and China's unprecedented military modernization and much more aggressive power projection capabilities, Japanese threat perceptions have undergone significant shifts over the past decade. As Hirofumi Toskai has noted, the outbreak of the North Korean nuclear crisis means that

there seems to be few clues towards resolving the North Korean nuclear issue; moreover, its nuclear and missile developments have increased the threat to Japan, the United States and South Korea. *Therefore, strengthening their effective deterrence postures, respectively and/or collectively, vis-à-vis North Korea has been the top priority.* The key for this effort is how they could ensure adaptability and flexibility for their deterrence posture since their development needs to be carried out with taking into consideration the possibility of deterrence failure that could result from the opacity, uncertainty and fluidity of North Korea's capability, intention and perception.<sup>44</sup> (Emphasis added)

### Looking Beyond Historical Disputes

As noted in previous sections, the weakest link in trilateral cooperation has been and is likely to remain the South Korean-Japanese relationship. Intractable issues with deep divisions continue to shape bilateral ties, such as the future of the comfort women issue after a landmark South Korean-Japanese agreement reached in December 2015, major disagreement on Japanese textbooks that water down the brutal colonial era (1910-45), and territorial disputes over Dokdo, or what the Japanese refer to as Takeshima, although the official ROK position is that there is no territorial dispute with Japan since it controls Dokdo and was seized by force when Japan annexed Korea in 1910.

### Public Opinion: The Need to Dig Deeper

Opinion surveys in South Korea and Japan attest to deep public mistrust between the two countries. But while polls offer important snapshots, they do not

provide in-depth motivations nor have they significantly stymied bilateral cooperation over a range of issues. In the Genron NPO 2017 poll on bilateral ties, 44.6 percent of Japanese had "bad impressions" of South Koreans while South Korean views toward the Japanese increased from 21.3 percent in 2016 to 26.8 percent in 2017.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, over 60 percent of Japanese and 70 percent of South Koreans do not support President Trump's stances on free trade and multilateralism but more South Koreans (70 percent) than Japanese (30 percent) voiced concerns on their respective alliances with the United States.<sup>46</sup>

Surveys conducted by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, which include country favorability ratings (0=least favorable, 10=most favorable) of the United States, China, Japan, and North Korea, show that from 2016 to 2017, South Koreans gave the highest score to the United States (relatively stable at 6).<sup>47</sup> Favorable views on China slipped from 5.8 in January 2016 to 4.3 in November 2017, reflecting the South Korean public's negative views on Chinese pressure around the THAAD deployment and attendant reactions such as closing down key South Korean businesses.<sup>48</sup> Japan's favorability rating was 3.73 while North Korea's was 2.52.<sup>49</sup> But one of the most interesting and important results from the poll was on the question of whether South Korea should upgrade its military cooperation with the United States and Japan. *Notwithstanding President Moon's inclination against strengthening trilateral cooperation to the level of a military alliance, 47.1 percent responded favorably, 33.8 percent were negative, and 19.1 percent did not have an opinion.*<sup>50</sup> Understandably, the highest level of support came from those ages sixty and above (53.9 percent) and conservatives (56.1 percent), but positive responses outstripped negative ones in all age categories, i.e., twenties (47.8 percent versus 27.3 percent), thirties (42.9 percent versus 44 percent), forties (45.1 percent versus 42 percent), and sixties and over (53.9 percent versus 19.4 percent).<sup>51</sup>

As Figure 1 illustrates, both Japan and South Korea have maintained fairly favorable views on the United States, but in the years when polls were conducted

44 Hirofumi Toskai, "The North Korean Nuclear Issue and Japan's Deterrence Posture," *Japan and the World Digital Library* (March 2017), 15, [http://www2.jiia.or.jp/en/digital\\_library/world.php](http://www2.jiia.or.jp/en/digital_library/world.php).

45 "The Japan-South Korea Joint Opinion Poll 2017: How Can Japanese and South Koreans Cooperate in Future for the Sake of Peace in Northeast Asia?", *The Genron NPO 2017*, <http://www.genron-npo.net/en/archives/170726.pdf>, 1.

46 Ibid., 2.

47 Asan Institute for Policy Studies, *Asan Report: South Koreans' Perceptions of President Trump's State Visit and Neighboring Countries*, January 2018, Public Opinion Studies Program, 4.

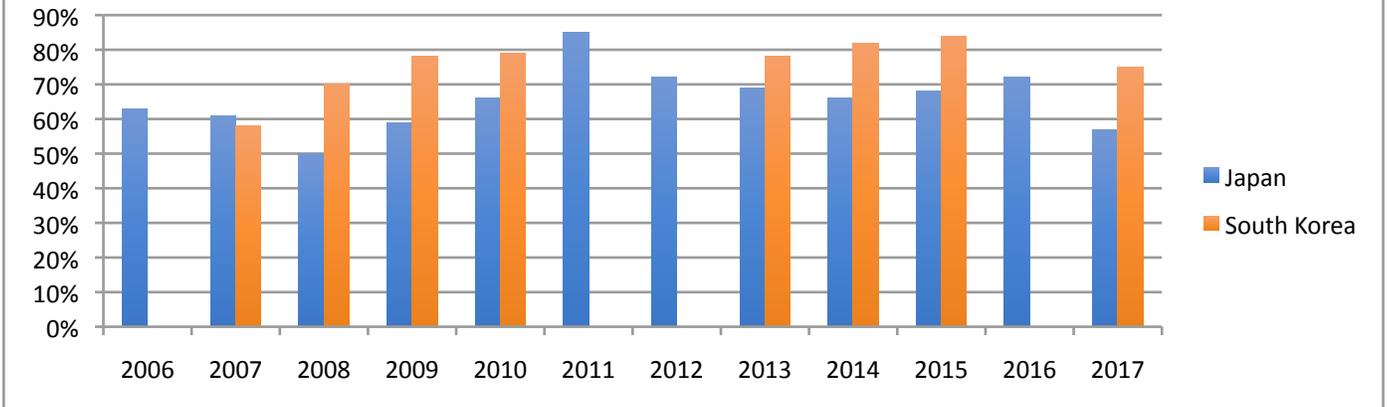
48 Ibid., 5.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid., 20.

51 Ibid., 17.

**Figure 1: Favorable Views of the United States:  
Japan and South Korea**

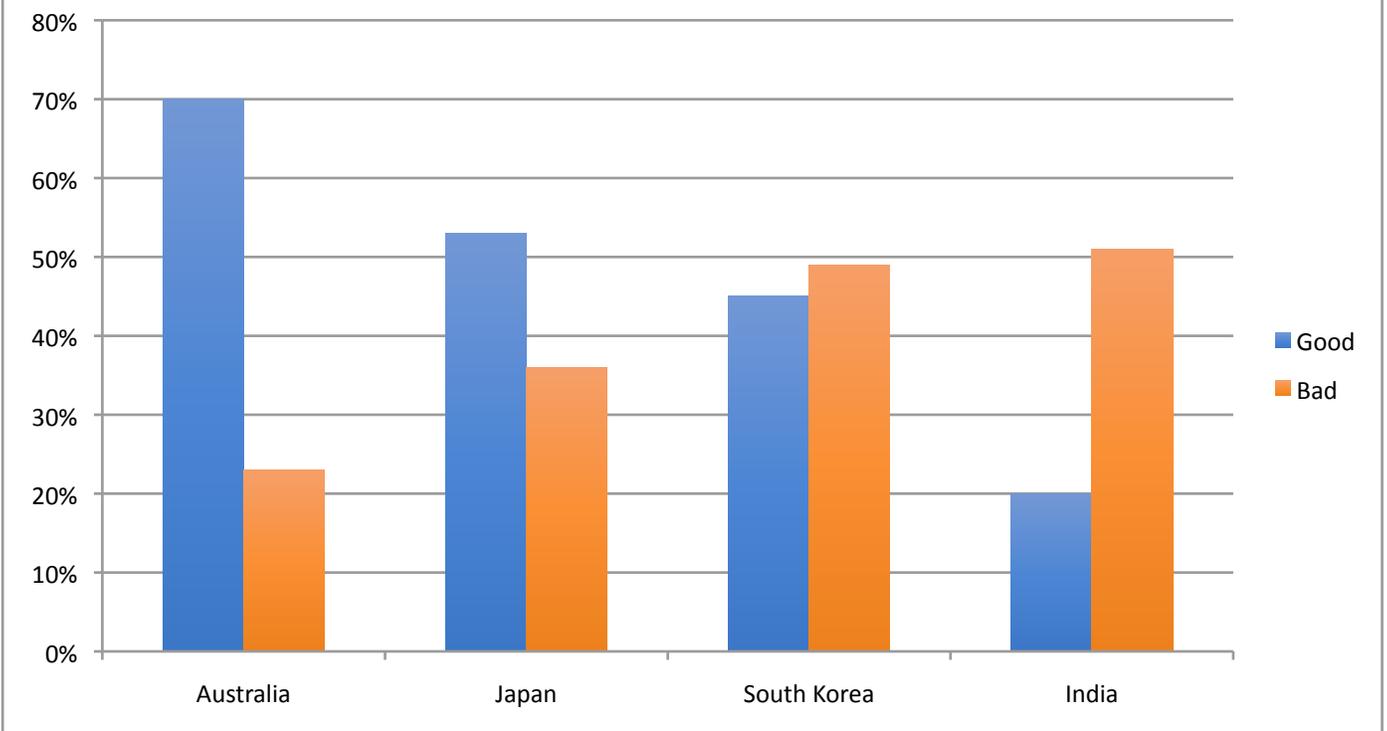


Source: Global Indicators Database, Spring 2017, Pew Global Attitudes, <http://www.pewglobal.org/database/indicator/1/country/116/>.

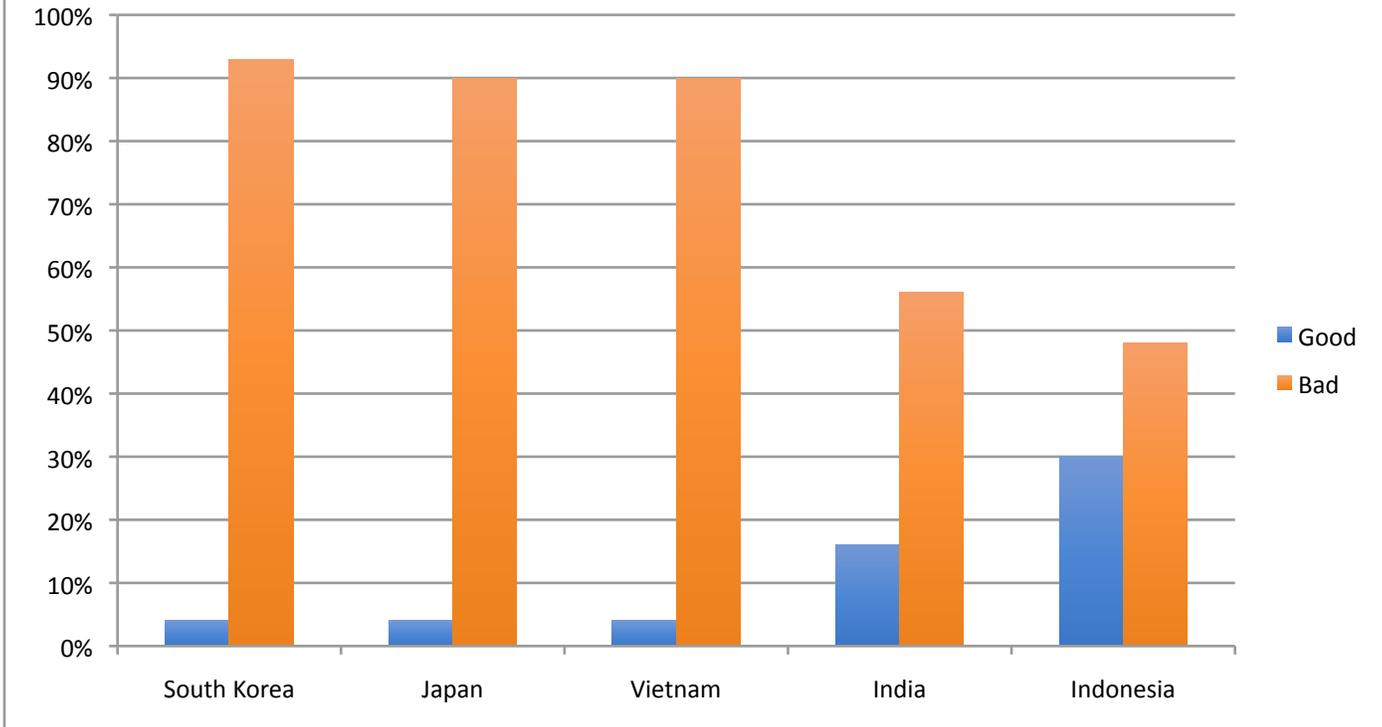
in South Korea and Japan, South Korea had a more favorable view of the United States compared with Japan. This lies in stark contrast to very high levels of anti-Americanism in South Korea in the early 2000s. As for China, both Japan and South Korea registered deep anxieties.

As can be seen in Figures 2 and 3, South Korea and Japan have ambivalent views about the impact of China’s economic rise on their own countries, whereas 70 percent of Australians had favorable views of China’s economy. Given the huge increase in Australian mineral exports over the past decade, such perceptions reflect

**Figure 2: Effects of Chinese Economy**



**Figure 3: Effects of Chinese Military**



Source: Laura Silver, “How People in Asia-Pacific View China,” Pew Research Center, October 16, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/10/16/how-people-in-asia-pacific-view-china/>.

market realities. South Korea also heavily depends on exports to China but 49 percent said China’s growing economy was a bad thing for the South Korean economy and 45 percent said it was good thing.<sup>52</sup>

South Korea’s views look counterintuitive given the country’s enormous dependence on the Chinese market, but as Chinese companies have begun to reach parity with South Korean firms and as Beijing has shown that it is not shy about using economic means to send political messages, the South Korean public has acquired very mixed feelings about the Chinese economy. On the military front, 93 percent of South Koreans (the highest number in this poll) responded that a strong Chinese military was negative for South Korea and only 4 percent answered that it was positive. Similar views were shared by Japan: 90 percent answered negatively while only 4 percent responded positively.<sup>53</sup>

Although it is certainly true that Japan and South Korea show high degrees of mutual mistrust and

negative perceptions driven by historical legacies and very strong nationalistic identities, their citizens also realize that they have to cooperate in coping with a common threat such as a nuclearized North Korea. As illustrated in Figure 4, South Korea had the highest sense that China is a major threat (83 percent), followed by Vietnam (80 percent) and Japan (64 percent). Reflective of evolving Australian perceptions on China, only 39 percent of Australians polled viewed China as a major threat while 47 percent responded that China was a minor threat.<sup>54</sup>

### The Central Role of the United States

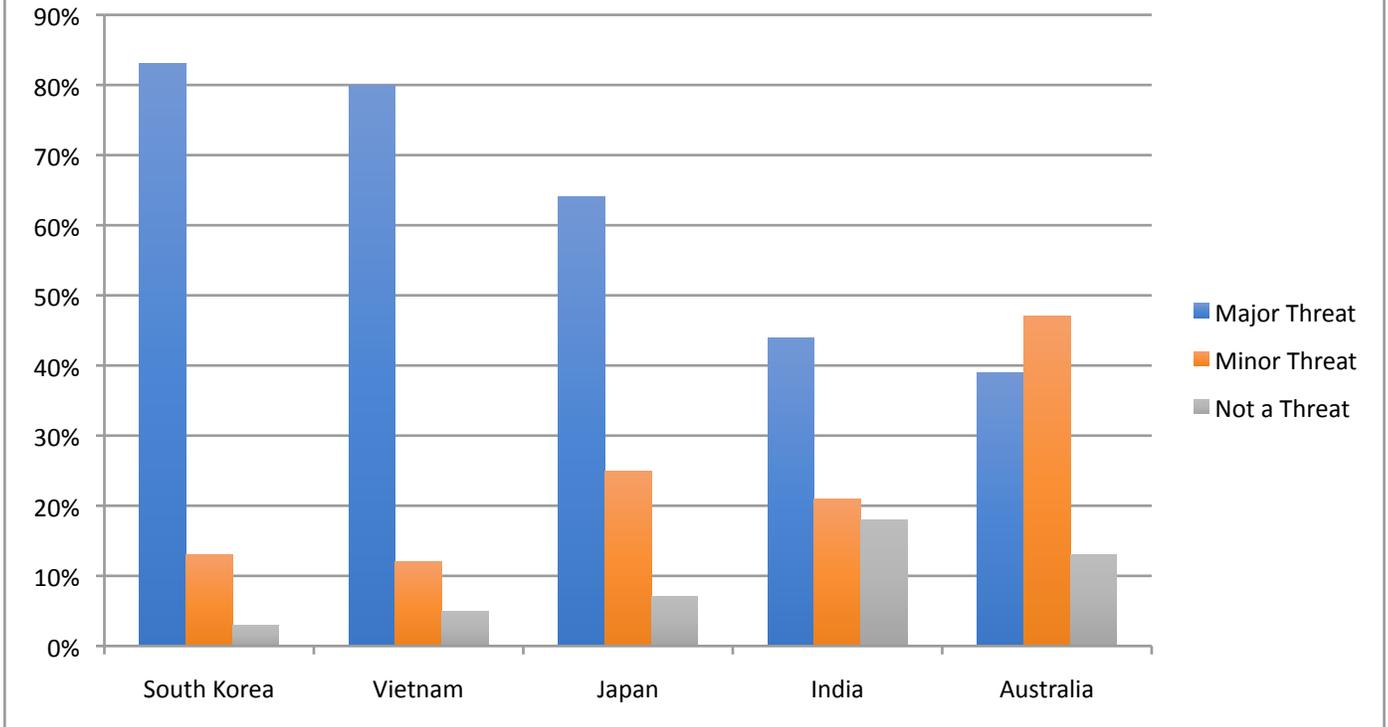
Third, the United States has played a central role in bringing Japan and South Korea closer since the normalization of relations in 1965 despite widespread public opposition. But as these two key allies have grown in importance over the past several decades—though Japan continues to wield more influence as the world’s third largest economy (South Korea is the

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

**Figure 4: Perceptions of China as a Threat**



Source: Laura Silver, “How people in Asia-Pacific View China,” Pew Research Center, October 16, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/10/16/how-people-in-asia-pacific-view-china/>

twelfth largest)—Tokyo and Seoul have each pressured Washington to tilt to its side on outstanding historical and territorial disputes. Nevertheless, the United States has refused to take sides on outstanding territorial disputes and has opted to nudge Seoul and Tokyo to incremental reconciliation while keeping their focus on critical security threats and developments.

From the perspective of the United States, China’s construction of seven artificial islands in the South China Sea that are military bases, unilateral expansion of its air defense identification zone, and rapidly catch-up with the United States on key defense technologies all require strong trilateral security coordination and cooperation. According to Eric Heginbotham and Richard Samuels,

the stakes of security cooperation for South Korea, Japan, and the United States are high. In the event of a North Korean missile attack, smooth and seamless data sharing could, for example, greatly increase missile intercept probabilities. Should a general war recur on the peninsula, Japan could,

if permitted, bring a range of important military and civil defense capabilities, some of which would otherwise be in very short supply.<sup>55</sup>

For Seoul, particularly under progressive governments such as the Roh Moo-hyun administration (2003-08) and under the current Moon Jae-in administration, the dominant view is that security cooperation with Japan should be maintained but not at the expense of potentially costly repercussions from China or drawing South Korea into a de facto trilateral military alliance. But Seoul also cannot escape the fact that even though Chinese support is critical in helping to convince North Korea to go down the path of denuclearization, the PRC’s longer-term goal lies in weakening the US-ROK alliance while maximizing its pressure against South Korea, as evinced by China’s unprecedented opposition and domestic political interference when Seoul decided to positively view the deployment of the THAAD missile system following North Korea’s fourth nuclear test on January 6, 2016.

55 Eric Heginbotham and Richard Samuels, “With Friends Like These: Japan-ROK Cooperation and US Policy,” *The Asan Forum* 6, no. 2 (March 1, 2018), <http://www.theasanforum.org/with-friends-like-these-japan-rok-cooperation-and-us-policy/>.

The three inter-Korean summits and the US-North Korea summit has influenced the future of trilateral security cooperation since China, together with Russia and North Korea, continue to maintain the need for a so-called double freeze option, or freezing North Korea's nuclear and WMD programs while the United States and South Korea significantly cap their annual military exercises. To make matters even more complicated, Trump has repeatedly stated that joint military exercises between US and ROK forces were "provocative" and in August 2018, stated that "there is no reason at this time to be spending large amounts of money on joint US-South Korea war games" because of his "warm" relationship with Kim Jong-un.<sup>56</sup> Maintaining a robust US-ROK alliance and a credible deterrent posture while Trump insists that joint exercises are costly and provocative is a hugely challenging endeavor that so far has only bolstered North Korea's and China's strategic postures.

Although the United States retains a formidable military presence in the Asia-Pacific, it needs to be emphasized that US influence, including defense and deterrence capabilities and equally critical economic power, has waned over the past decade. This is not to suggest that the United States will lose its hegemonic posture in the region anytime in the near future. But it also cannot be denied that accelerating Chinese power, Beijing's growing economic clout and support for sustaining a free trade regime, and most importantly, haphazard Asia policies on the part of the Trump administration have contributed to a deep sense of uncertainty across Asia.

Although the Trump administration may feel that it has gained the upper hand through renegotiating KORUS<sup>57</sup> and threatening a trade war with China, the cumulative impact of weakened US credibility coupled with very mixed signals on virtually all critical issues will have negative repercussions for the United States' core allies in the region, including Japan, South Korea, and Australia. In this respect, retaining the core structure of trilateral security cooperation is even more important, and more specifically, enhancing confidence building measures between South Korea and Japan.

## VI. Japanese Responses to South Korean Shuttle Diplomacy

In the aftermath of the Olympic thaw on the Korean Peninsula during and after the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympic Games, including the unprecedented first-ever summit US-North Korea summit, the need for sustained, depoliticized, and coordinated trilateral security cooperation is stronger than ever before. But sustaining this momentum is going to become increasingly difficult owing to the alignment of Chinese, North Korean, and South Korean interests insofar as creating a so-called "peace regime" is concerned, such as signing a permanent peace treaty and implementing a series of military CBMs. In the face of unrelenting Chinese pressure on South Korea after Seoul decided to deploy THAAD batteries, South Korea finally agreed not to deploy additional THAAD batteries, not to participate jointly in a theater-wide ballistic missile system, and not to forge a trilateral alliance with the United States and Japan. As long as the Moon administration is in office, Seoul will come under increasing pressure from Beijing to ensure that security cooperation with the United States and Japan will be kept to a minimum. What the Moon administration does not realize, however, is that the more South Korea agrees to China's outlandish demands that is synonymous with dictating terms to a sovereign state, the more China is going to pressure South Korea on a range of defense capabilities. The longer term opportunity costs for South Korea cannot be accurately calculated at this time, but given China's much more aggressive and capable military capabilities and its desire to strengthen its leverage over the two Koreas, it is only natural to expect progressively increasing Chinese pressure to downsize and to weaken the US-ROK alliance, and by extension, diluting trilateral security cooperation.

### Preventing 'Japan Passing'

These events are unprecedented in their speed and content, given that until recently, the Trump administration was openly suggesting that some type of a preemptive strike on North Korea was warranted on the basis of Pyongyang's accelerated inter-continental

56 Amanda Macias, "Trump says 'no reason' for military exercises with South Korea despite stalled nuke talks with North," CNBC, August 29, 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/08/29/trump-says-no-reason-for-military-exercises-with-south-korea-despite-stalled-nuke-talks-with-north.html>.

57 Chun Seong-pil, "'Hanmi FTA gaejeong wonchikjeok hapeui' hansum dolin jeongbu nameun kwajae," (Government Sighs Relief after Reaching an Agreement in Principle on Renegotiating the Korean-American FTA), *Chosun Ilbo*, March 27, 2018, [http://biz.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2018/03/27/2018032701631.html](http://biz.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2018/03/27/2018032701631.html).

ballistic missile program tipped with nuclear warheads.<sup>58</sup> Three former Central Intelligence Agency analysts and key South Korea watchers in Washington, DC, noted in a joint article that

we believe that any military strike against North Korea is likely to unleash a series of events that could lead to devastation and massive casualties as well as undermine Washington's 'maximum pressure and engagement' strategy. We work at three different think tanks and don't see eye to eye on everything, but on this issue we are in total agreement.<sup>59</sup>

Regardless of the political divide between Seoul and Tokyo, both sides agree fully that any preemptive or preventive attack on North Korean nuclear and WMD sites would result in catastrophic consequences, including the deaths of tens of thousands of US, Japanese, and Chinese civilians living in South Korea, not to speak of even more South Korean casualties. Although any preemptive strike is going to be highly situation-specific, even senior-level US military officers have noted how difficult and dangerous such a move would be.

In response to queries from House members in the US Congress on providing casualty estimates in the event of a preemptive attack, Rear Admiral Michael J. Dumont, vice director of the joint staff, responded, in part, that "'the only way to 'locate and destroy—with complete certainty—all components of North Korea's nuclear weapons program' is through a ground invasion."<sup>60</sup> Admiral Dumont also noted that estimating casualties for both conventional and nuclear attack scenarios on the Korean Peninsula is very challenging given greater Seoul's population of twenty-five million and the fact that it will "vary significantly upon the nature, intensity, and duration of a North Korean attack."<sup>61</sup>

Even under the best of circumstances, i.e., a verifiable freeze on North Korea's nuclear and WMD programs with the promise to move down the path of complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement,

implementing such a road map into tangible steps will require unparalleled cooperation between the two Koreas, North Korea and the United States, active participation of China (and Russia to a much lesser degree), and unprecedented cooperation between the United States, Japan, and South Korea.

### The Urgency of North Korean Threats

For Japan, the North Korean nuclear and ballistic missile threats have been at the forefront of its security concerns, much more immediate than the accelerated rise of Chinese military power, which is also seen as a deeply troubling phenomenon by Japan. After the visit to South Korea by Kim Jong-un's sister, Kim Yo-jong, who is an alternate member of the politburo and director of the agitation and propaganda directorate in the Korean Workers' Party, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was concerned that the policy of "maximum pressure" that was agreed upon by the three countries could be faltering.

In a telephone call with Trump on February 14, Abe said that the two leaders agreed that "dialogue for the sake of dialogue would be meaningless ... [and] we talked thoroughly about what we should do from here to make the denuclearization of North Korea a reality."<sup>62</sup> Japan's sense that events could move far more rapidly was confirmed by President Trump's decision to accept Kim Jong-un's invitation for the first-ever US-North Korean summit. President Trump did not consult Prime Minister Abe prior to his decision, which was made when two high-level South Korean envoys, Director of National Security Affairs Chung Eui-yong and Director of the National Intelligence Agency Suh Hoon, visited the White House to brief President Trump and high-level US officials on their visit to Pyongyang.

When Director Suh visited Tokyo to brief Japanese officials including Prime Minister Abe on March 12, 2018, Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono remarked that "we agreed ... that we will not repeat the mistakes of the past and will maintain maximum pressure on North Korea

58 David Nakamura and Greg Jaffe, "The White House's 'Bloody Nose' Strategy on North Korea Sounds Trumpian. So Why Do His Aides Hate It?" *Washington Post*, February 26, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/the-white-houses-bloody-nose-strategy-on-north-korea-sounds-trumpian-so-why-do-his-aides-hate-it/2018/02/26/9ec20744-18b5-11e8-b681-2d4d462a1921\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.a629c6396c79](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/the-white-houses-bloody-nose-strategy-on-north-korea-sounds-trumpian-so-why-do-his-aides-hate-it/2018/02/26/9ec20744-18b5-11e8-b681-2d4d462a1921_story.html?utm_term=.a629c6396c79).

59 Jung H. Park, Sue Mi Terry, and Bruce Klinger, "Ex-CIA Analysts Explain Why a Bloody Nose Policy on North Korea Would Backfire," *Brookings*, February 12, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/02/12/ex-cia-analysts-explain-why-a-bloody-nose-policy-on-north-korea-would-backfire/>.

60 Rear Admiral Michael J. Dumont, Vice Director, Joint Staff, Letter to Ted W. Lieu, US House of Representatives, October 27, 2017, <https://lieu.house.gov/sites/lieu.house.gov/files/Response%20to%20TWL-RG%20Letter%20on%20NK.pdf>.

61 Ibid.

62 "Donald Trump and Shinzo Abe Agree to Keep Pressure Up on North Korea," *South China Morning Post*, February 15, 2018, <http://www.scmp.com/news/world/united-states-canada/article/2133427/abe-trump-agree-keep-pressure-north-korea>.

## Prospects for US-South Korean-Japanese Trilateral Security Cooperation in an Era of Unprecedented Threats and Evolving Political Forces

to make the abandonment of its nuclear and missile (programs) a reality.”<sup>63</sup> When Director Suh called upon Prime Minister Abe on March 13, Abe stressed that “it’s extremely important that North Korea act on its word by taking concrete actions toward denuclearization.”<sup>64</sup> Soon after Kim’s visit to Beijing, Japanese Prime Minister Abe told the Diet that his cabinet was watching North Korea’s movements very carefully and that he wanted to receive a thorough explanation from China.<sup>65</sup>

For Prime Minister Abe, ensuring that the United States will not damage Japan’s security interests in direct negotiations with North Korea remains a top foreign policy priority, as well as making sure that Japan’s security concerns are clearly understood by South Korea, China, and North Korea. When Abe moved rapidly to establish personal ties with Trump as soon as Trump was elected president in November 2016, South Korea’s press and opinion leaders coined the phrase “Korea passing” to illustrate Japan’s ability to go over South Korea’s head. More recently, as Seoul has taken the driver’s seat, the Japanese have been concerned about a similar “Japan passing” phenomenon. Prime Minister Abe has devoted substantial political capital to ensure that Washington recognizes Tokyo’s core strategic interests but given the transactional nature by which Trump perceives Japan, Abe faces an uphill challenge.

At the same time, Tokyo has undertaken important military changes, such as creating a new Ground Component Command “to provide unified command over regional

armies and the Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade, Japan’s version of the US Marines, came as Tokyo seeks to beef up its defenses against North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs and China’s maritime assertiveness.”<sup>66</sup> In response to a rapidly evolving and worsening regional security environment, the Japanese SDF felt a need for more centralized and streamlined command and control and requisite forces to better defend its remote islands. Minister of Defense Itsunori Onodera emphasized that “we are expecting more situations in which the Ground, Maritime and Air Self-Defense Forces have to work together to rapidly respond at a nationwide level against ballistic missile launches, attacks on islands and major disasters.”<sup>67</sup>

Japan has been adamant in its support for maintaining maximum pressure on North Korea since China’s growing military capabilities and North Korea’s nuclear and ballistic missile threats have convinced Tokyo that while the US-Japanese alliance is central to Japan’s defense, it is also necessary for Japan to undertake significant military modernization efforts. Given that China’s own massive military restructuring and sustained modernization of all of its military services, including greater operational jointness and flexibility and unlikely prospects for North Korea’s acceptance of CVID anytime in the short to medium term, Tokyo continues to pursue a strategy that emphasizes diplomacy and alliance, but also a sense of deep wariness around Chinese and North Korean motives.

63 “South Korean Envoy Briefs Japan Foreign Minister on North Korea Trip,” *Kyodo News*, March 12, 2018, <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2018/03/2adb0c1e80c8-s-korean-envoy-meets-japan-foreign-minister-to-explain-n-korea-trip.html>.

64 “Abe Stresses Concrete Action in Talks with S. Korean Envoy,” *Japan News*, March 12, 2018, <http://the-japan-news.com/news/article/0004300748>.

65 Tomoyuki Tachikawa, “N. Korea’s Kim Vows Denuclearization in His Historic Trip to China,” *Kyodo News*, March 28, 2019, <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2018/03/f85093f15f04-bulletin-n-koreas-kim-visits-beijing-meets-chinas-xi-official-tv.html>.

66 “Japan’s GSDF Undergoes Biggest Shake-Up amid N. Korea, China Tensions,” *Kyodo News*, March 27, 2018, <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2018/03/8da0b0158e6b-update2-japans-gsdf-undergoes-biggest-shake-up-amid-n-korea-china-tensions.html?phrase=north+korea&words=North,Korea,Korea%27s>.

67 Ibid.

## VII. Trilateral Security Cooperation: The Road Ahead

Japanese and South Korean ties have been normalized since 1965 and tremendous inroads have been made in bilateral relations in addition to trilateral cooperation with the United States. It is very difficult to search for a bilateral relationship that exhibits such contrasting traits: two robust democracies with complementary economies but with deeply ingrained historical memories and ongoing territorial disputes. South Korea has served as a front line for Japanese security since the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, but especially since North Korea's accelerated nuclear and ballistic missile programs. Japan is the world's third largest economy and second in Asia, and South Korea is Asia's fourth largest economy and the twelfth largest in the world, which fosters competition but also cooperation. On critical agendas, such as climate change, human rights, free and open trade, and sustainable development, Tokyo and Seoul share very similar views and interests.

Some in Washington have criticized South Korea for not speaking out more forcefully on the growing China threat, but as the Pew Global Survey illustrated, 93 percent of South Koreans feel that China's growing military prowess is a negative development and 84 percent see China as a major threat. Japan also shares deep anxieties about China. In the 2017 edition of Japan's defense white paper, it was noted that "Japan has great concerns over such Chinese military activities, etc., together with the lack of transparency in its military affairs and security issues, and needs to keep utmost attention to them."<sup>68</sup> The report further noted that:

China has been continuously increasing its defense budget at a high level, and has been rapidly reinforcing its military capabilities in a wide range of areas, without sufficient transparency ... As for the seas and airspace around Japan, Chinese government ships have routinely and repeatedly intruded into Japan's territorial waters, and China has engaged in dangerous activities that could cause unintended consequences, such as its naval vessel's direction of fire control radar at a Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) destroyer, the flight of fighters abnormally close to SDF aircraft, and its announcement of establishing the "East China Sea Air Defense Identification

Zone (ADIZ)" based on its own assertion, thereby infringing the freedom of overflight.<sup>69</sup>

South Korea's official views on China's growing military strength are couched in much softened tones compared with Japan's. Given China's core importance in coping with the North Korean nuclear issue and the PLA's proximity to South Korea in case of an intense crisis or conflict, the South Korean ministry of defense has a more nuanced view on China's military threat. Still, as opinion surveys have shown, the South Korean public feels deep anxieties over China's increasingly aggressive power projection capabilities. And over the longer term, when the Korean Peninsula is unified hopefully under the auspices of the ROK, a unified Korea will directly confront an economic and military giant right across its borders. Given the long history of Korean-Chinese relations including centuries of tributary ties, countless invasions from mainland China, and China's perception of Korea as a "small China," Korea's deeply embedded ambivalence toward China as a longer-term threat and irreversible asymmetrical relations are shared equally by one other Asian country: Vietnam.

The conventional wisdom that gained currency as China adopted significant economic reforms was that the more China was exposed to global norms, with great influence of market forces, unparalleled growth in information flows, and a burgeoning middle class, China would also undergo a political transformation. To be sure, so long as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is in power, it is impossible to imagine China's political transformation to a full-fledged democracy as evinced by South Korea's and Taiwan's shift from authoritarian rule to democratic governance. Indeed, if recent events can serve as a guide, China is more certain than ever of the need for stronger authoritarian rule, the undisputed power and prestige of the Party, rejection of Western norms and values, and the construction of the most technologically advanced and deeply intrusive domestic surveillance system. Like previous dynasties, the CCP plans to uproot any serious challenges to its authority, and having reemerged on the world stage as a rising superpower, China no longer feels that it has to maintain a lower political and military profile in Asia and across the world.

68 2017 Defense of Japan, 87.

69 Ibid., 46.

## Prospects for US-South Korean-Japanese Trilateral Security Cooperation in an Era of Unprecedented Threats and Evolving Political Forces

Thus, three common strands necessitate closer trilateral security cooperation between the United States, South Korea, and Japan, but especially in the context of Japanese-South Korean ties. First, irrespective of the outcomes of Northeast Asia's shuttle diplomacy that began in January 2018, it would be naïve in the extreme to believe that Kim Jong-un would agree to CVID. Notwithstanding Washington's increasing concern about North Korea's ICBM capabilities, South Korea and Japan are more worried about short- to medium-range missiles that can hit all civilian and military targets in the two countries. While approaches to North Korea differ between the Moon administration and the Abe government, with the former placing greater emphasis on inter-Korean dialogue, détente, and gradual steps toward denuclearization, expectations of significant forward momentum on North Korean denuclearization are not likely to be met.

Second, despite outstanding issues, both Seoul and Tokyo have collaborated on key security issues including joint military exercises. For example, in 2015 both naval vessels conducted a Search and Rescue Exercise, and the Maritime Self Defense Force and the ROK Navy participate in the annual RIMPAC (Rim of the Pacific) and Cobra Gold exercises.<sup>70</sup> Japan and South Korea both face a nuclearized North Korea, which necessitates greater intelligence sharing (including imagery and signals intelligence), joint military exercises, and enhanced familiarity with each other's crisis management capabilities and structures to react more effectively to a major crisis or conflict. Although it is difficult to imagine any significant movement in the two militaries' interoperability given the political sensitivities, interoperability between the ROK and US forces and Japan and US forces is indispensable. Seen from such a perspective, incrementally increasing trilateral interoperability can serve only to strengthen deterrence and

defense capabilities of Japan and South Korea. There is little reason to believe that deeply entrenched bilateral issues will be resolved anytime soon. However, it is in the core interests of South Korea and Japan as well as the United States to see the common benefits from strengthened trilateral cooperation.

Such cooperation must be initiated gradually and steadily and range from soft matters to hard ones; cooperation must not be hindered by distorted political and social relations, but may be postponed until such as public opinion has recovered; cooperation must be supported by the US along with other [United Nations Command] member states; each area of defense exchange and cooperation must be planned systematically and based on high-level defense cooperation, because of the characteristics of top-down military organization and sensitivity.<sup>71</sup>

In the end, South Korea and Japan must foster closer ties in the political and security realms, not only because they face common threats and concerns, but much more importantly, because of the very high opportunity costs both sides will face if the weakest link in the trilateral security framework—bilateral relations between South Korea and Japan—is not strengthened. Volatile domestic politics cannot be avoided in two robust democracies. But neither should the two countries become so politically and socially polarized that it paralyzes common approaches to common security threats and defense cooperation. As Northeast Asia enters an era of unparalleled geopolitical and geo-economic turbulence, it makes eminent sense for Seoul and Tokyo to make their partnership work, especially under politically difficult circumstances. That is true political leadership, which is called for in Asia's two most advanced economies and robust democracies.

70 Chung Kyung-young and Izumi Kazushige, *ROK-Japan Security Cooperation in a Turbulent Strategic Environment* (Seoul: East Asia Institute, 2017), 15.

71 Ibid., 26.

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Chung Min Lee is currently a senior fellow in the Asia Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Previously, Dr. Lee was a visiting senior fellow in the Asia Security Initiative within the Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security at the Atlantic Council. Dr. Lee taught for twenty years at the Graduate School of International Studies (GSIS) in Yonsei University in Seoul. He is a council member of the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). From 2013 to 2016, he served as ambassador for national security affairs for South Korea, and from 2010 to 2011 as ambassador for international security affairs.





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