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Beyond Identity and Domestic Politics:
Stability in South Korea-Japan Relations*

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South Korea and Japan have experienced their worst deterioration of bilateral relations since 2012. What are the long-term prospects for this relationship? Will it continue on this negative trajectory or recover positively in the long term? Challenging the conventional view that supports the former conclusion, this paper argues for a positive outlook for the relationship in the long term. This is defended from a structural perspective relying on two long-term strategic trends for Northeast/ East Asia—the elevated uncertainty in the regional environment (due to North Korea and China’s strategic rise); and the rising strain on the U.S. military presence in both countries. In response to these structural pressures, South Korea and Japan will adapt and adopt strategies to defend their national security within a reformed U.S. alliance structure and strengthen strategic cooperation through bilateral and trilateral (with the United States) means.

Keywords: Japan; South Korea; China; North Korea; security

Introduction

Since 2012, South Korea-Japan relations have seen one of their worst phases of deterioration in recent history. The governments of Yoshihiko Noda and Lee Myung-bak had to address the negative effects of the less than favorable summit between the two leaders in Tokyo in December 2011; oversee the last-minute cancellation of the signing of the first military accord between South Korea and Japan since 1945 (known as the General Security of Military Information Agreement [GSOMIA]); and manage the downward slide of the bilateral relationship when Lee became the first sitting president to visit Dokdo in August 2012.¹ This trend worsened under the leadership of Shinzo Abe and Park Geun-hye when the unresolved history issue has taken centre-stage in defining the bilateral relationship. The level of suspicion toward Japan

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peaked when Abe became the first Japanese prime minister in seven years to visit the Yasukuni Shrine in December 2013. Both leaders not only have yet to hold a bilateral summit, but the prospects for such a meeting seem dim in the present context.2

In response to the above developments, pessimistic accounts became dominant in characterizing the present and long-term state of South Korea-Japan relations. These explanations were based on domestic and identity-related factors relevant to the bilateral relationship. Though useful, this paper contends that focusing on second-image factors inevitably results in a less than favorable conclusion of South Korea-Japan relations, especially in the short term. The reason is that these factors are susceptible to political manipulation for short term gains, as discussed in detail below.

This paper offers a counter-narrative to the analysis of South Korea-Japan relations. It reaches a more optimistic reading of the bilateral relationship applying a systemic/structural approach that focuses on the evolving distribution of power in East Asia. The paper focuses on two structural factors extended into the long term with the timeline of one to two decades: first, the elevated threat levels from two of the most important strategic concerns for the Northeast Asian security environment—North Korea’s ballistic missile and nuclear capabilities, as well as its repeated belligerent actions, and China’s rapid political and military rise; and second, the rising strain on the U.S. military presence in both countries and its security commitment to both its allies. The second factor is not a breakdown of the U.S. alliances with South Korea and Japan, but a limited drawdown of the U.S. military presence (in terms of troops and infrastructure) and a recalibration of U.S. strategy in the Asia-Pacific. Though these structural factors point toward escalated uncertainty in Northeast Asia, it is argued here that these will have a positive impact on South Korea-Japan relations. The combined effect of these long-term factors would cause South Korea and Japan to adapt and adopt strategies to defend their national security within a reformed U.S. alliance structure and strengthen strategic cooperation through bilateral as well as trilateral (with the United States) terms.

The importance of this paper lies in two areas: First, it serves as a caution to Seoul and Tokyo of the long-term strategic challenges that lie ahead. By underscoring the long-term strategic challenges and trends, the preferable outcome would be for leaders in Seoul and Tokyo to channel their bilateral interactions toward a positive direction and pursue prudent policymaking that mitigates political tensions and promotes bilateral cooperation to address the long-term challenges faced by both states. Second, this paper is based on interviews and discussions held in both Seoul and Tokyo with a range of individuals from government, think-tanks (government-linked and private) and universities. These insights offer a good overview of the state of the strategic debates in both countries.

The paper is structured as follows: It begins by highlighting reasons attributed to the current and long-term pessimism in South Korea-Japan relations. This is followed by a discussion on the long-term structural factors that concern both Japanese and South Korean strategic planners. The third section is an explication on why strengthened bilateral cooperation is the more likely outcome in response to the long-term structural trends as opposed to other outcomes. The paper concludes by offering policy recommendations that could strengthen the foundation of the South Korea-Japan relationship from a long-term perspective.