

U.S. SECURITY TIES WITH KOREA AND JAPAN: GETTING BEYOND DETERRENCE

Stephan Haggard

Summary

Japan and Korea—the United States’ two key allies in Northeast Asia—are both advanced industrial democracies facing similar constraints from a rising China and a nuclear North Korea. One would think that trilateral cooperation would be a cinch. Yet Japan and Korea have been at each other’s throats over simmering historical issues and differing approaches to China. Forging a trilateral alliance is highly unlikely. But strengthening cooperation is possible by focusing less on the military components of the alliance—i.e., providing extended deterrence—and more on new issues such as 5G, artificial intelligence (AI), and infrastructure, which can strengthen collective capabilities and make cooperation more appealing.

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History of the Alliances

The United States' two bilateral alliances with Japan and Korea, which are at the core of the security architecture in Northeast Asia, were forged in war. North Korea's invasion of the south in June 1950, had profound effects for U.S. foreign policy, not only in Asia but also in Europe. The war paved the way for the end of the U.S. occupation of Japan and the country's reintegration. Not coincidentally, the foundations of the "San Francisco System"—the network of bilateral alliances pursued by the United States in East Asia after the end of the World War II—were laid in September 1951 by the signing of both the formal peace treaty with Tokyo and the bilateral security treaty, subsequently amended in 1960.

The Korean War triggered a succession of other hub-and-spokes treaty arrangements. These remain key to the balancing strategy the United States has pursued in the region, which was recently reformulated—by both political parties—as an Indo-Pacific strategy; the former treaty allies also include Australia and New Zealand, the Philippines, and—initially through the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization—Thailand. Formal alliance partnerships with South Korea and the Republic of China on Taiwan followed in the wake of the Korean armistice, in 1953 and 1955 respectively.

What is striking about these treaties is their brevity and overwhelming focus on the problem of extended deterrence. They outline the American commitment to provide an effective security guarantee for its allies, and sketch the basic legal and institutional mechanisms for affecting it. By any metric, this system appears to have worked. Since the American withdrawal from Vietnam, the Asia-Pacific has witnessed an almost unprecedented era of peace and prosperity. Whatever Sturm und Drang might follow in the wake of North Korea's relentless pursuit of nuclear and missile capabilities, the underlying fact remains that the likelihood of major conflict is low. From a strategic perspective, Northeast Asia is surprisingly stable.

Expanding Scope of the Alliances

The strategic stability of Northeast Asia is partly the result of the way U.S. alliances have evolved. The Asian alliances did not prove to be static arrangements, nor did they remain as narrow—even skeletal—as the signed pieces of paper might suggest. Initially preoccupied with building credible, workable, and interoperable military-to-military relations, the alliances naturally evolved with a more complex and technology-driven security agenda, and in response to global and regional challenges. Not surprisingly, formal defense industry cooperation was an early add-on; a Defense Industry Consultative Committee with Korea was formed as early as 1993.

More recently, the Abe government's re-interpretation of Article IX of the Japanese Constitution permits much more extensive cooperation between allies, not only at the military level, but in defense industry cooperation as well. Among those changes:

- ◆ more permissive guidelines for defense cooperation;
- ◆ a restructured Systems and Technology Forum that permits engagement on a wider array of common acquisition interests;
- ◆ and a new “base” strategy that prioritizes international cooperation and relaxed military export guidelines, which extend the reach of alliance cooperation to other partners in the region and beyond.¹

The concept of the alliances has also expanded over time, broadly in line with the capabilities that came with the region's rapid economic growth. Initially taking a restricted view of the legal boundaries of its peace Constitution, Japan gradually ventured outside the region through participation in multilateral peacekeeping operations. The U.S. alliance with Japan, in effect supplemented the objectives the United States pursued through multilateral initiatives. With the changes engineered by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the alliance also shifted from a unilateral security guarantee by the United States into one in which Japan's right to engage in collective defense in support of the United States was openly asserted, albeit with strongly defensive limits. Korea similarly took on greater security responsibilities, from peacekeeping to anti-piracy operations, and even a highly controversial commitment to American operations in Iraq. High-level consultative structures, initially among secretaries of defense but coming to incorporate secretaries of state in the so-called 2+2 format, followed, reflecting the wider strategic significance of the alliance arrangements.

The growth of the alliances was by no means limited to the security sphere. Economic integration was initially managed by bringing Japan and Korea into multilateral economic institutions. Both relationships have a long and sometimes bumpy history of intense bilateral economic negotiations aimed at liberalizing historically closed markets. As the two countries gradually moved away from statist economic strategies, bilateral economic relations have come to be governed by formal trade agreements, most notably the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement of 2007. Had the Trans-Pacific Partnership been ratified, it would have had at its core a U.S.-Japan free trade agreement, and a first step in that direction was taken in 2019.

¹ See [New Frontiers of Security Cooperation with Seoul and Tokyo](#), in particular, contributions from Heginbotham, Samuels, and Cooper.

These arrangements cannot be seen through a narrow economic lens, however; economic ties are themselves a core component of the credibility of American commitments. But the economic components have deepened on their own as well; a 2009 “vision statement” for the U.S.-Korea alliance made mention of piracy, organized crime and narcotics, climate change, poverty, infringement on human rights, energy security and epidemic disease. Nor were these simply platitudes; in each of those areas and others, summits between American presidents and their Korean and Japanese counterparts have resulted in dozens of cooperative agreements facilitating cooperation in these and other areas, both bilaterally and through multilateral channels.

Current Challenges

The current conjuncture poses three central challenges to these two alliance partnerships, although these issues are by no means limited to the Northeast Asian alliances.

CHALLENGE 1

The first is the China question, which is linked closely to the changing demands on national security strategy. While China’s disputes with Taiwan and in the South China Sea have consumed media attention, the Chinese-Japanese dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands is ongoing. China’s recently passed law giving its coast guard the authority to use force has caused unease throughout the region.

The extent to which Japan and Korea want to align around a confrontational posture toward China is an ongoing issue, to some extent a function of shifting political winds in Tokyo and Seoul. The important point is not *whether* interests are aligned but *around what*. The challenges posed by China are by no means limited to the military sphere as traditionally conceived; rather, they extend to the new technologies that are emerging as the foundations of national power and which have a direct effect on the pace of innovation, and ultimately on economic growth.

In this regard, alliances are crucial force multipliers, and a smart alliance strategy should structure cooperation, not only to augment capabilities, but to converge around standards that provide competitive advantage broadly conceived.

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CHALLENGE 2

A second challenge has to do with the hub-and-spokes nature of the American security architecture in the Asia-Pacific. The differences between Europe and Asia in this regard have been analyzed in some detail, and particularly the United States' preference for bilateralism in the 1950s as a way of controlling the propensity for risk taking on the part of the leadership in Seoul and Taipei. However, there is now a deeper problem. It is a common misperception in the United States that Japan and Korea are similar advanced industrial democracies, with broadly similar values, facing similar strategic and economic challenges. As a result, American observers are continually puzzled by the current downward spiral in bilateral relations. Why can't they simply get along?

In fact, the United States should not expect that the interests of Japan and Korea would necessarily align. Japan is much more exposed to direct Chinese military pressure than Korea; Korea by contrast is both smaller and more dependent on China economically. Politics in the two countries are also quite different. In Japan, the Liberal Democratic Party continues its remarkable run with few coherent challengers on the left; a more nationalist foreign policy vis-à-vis China may have limits, but also works politically. In Korea, power has oscillated, but the left currently has the upper hand, and the right is not necessarily aligned with a hawkish foreign policy vis-à-vis China in any case.

But most important are the recurrent historical issues—around comfort women, forced labor, and the broader meaning of the imperial era—that have proven a recurrent stumbling block to closer cooperation. It is unlikely that these issues can be finessed, or that the United States has much latitude to mediate between Seoul and Tokyo.

The U.S. goal for managing the Korea-Japan relationship should not be to identify a final solution to those grievances, but rather to incrementally build cooperative ventures—rooted in functional but nonetheless common interests—that can strengthen trilateral cooperation and even cooperation among larger clusters of major democratic allies.

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Credit: [Michael Gaida](#)

CHALLENGE 3

The final challenge to U.S. alliance partnerships with Korea and Japan is what might be called the Pogo problem, after cartoonist Walt Kelly’s observation that “we have met the enemy and he is us.” The United States has just survived four difficult years in its bilateral relations with the two countries, rooted in a suspicion, cultivated by former President Trump, that allies are free riders and therefore focusing relentlessly on burden sharing issues. Despite the apparent policy vicissitudes and missteps, the institutional machinery of the alliances continued to move forward—secretaries of defense and state continued to reiterate long-standing alliance talking points, military and other forms of cooperation continued; and there were even areas of measurable advance, such as a preliminary bilateral trade agreement with Japan. Nonetheless, there is damage to repair, and while a recitation of homilies will do at least some of that work, innovating is more convincing than simply resting on accumulated laurels.

A Way Forward

A new study from the Nonproliferation Policy Education Center edited by Henry Sokolski and called [New Frontiers for Security Cooperation with Seoul and Tokyo](#) (in which I participated), outlines a menu for increased cooperation, focusing on six areas that move beyond traditional security issues. Three give a flavor of the approach.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)

A contribution from Tarun Chhabra, now Director for Technology and National Security at the National Security Council, suggests a menu of specific initiatives to protect the transfer of sensitive AI information, coordinate the screening of AI investments, block hostile penetration of allied AI-related supply chains, and harmonize AI-related export controls. In addition, Chhabra recommends that Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo work with other AI-advanced allied governments to establish common standards—for example, to pool and store non-sensitive datasets and develop inter-allied AI human capital pools. AI standard-setting is a way, not only to advance common interests, but to secure allied advantages against hostile competitors.

5G

5G communication systems exports constitute an emerging geo-economic contest. Fortunately, there may be technical fixes to short-circuit China's 5G head start. Eric Brown of the Hudson Institute suggests that the United States develop technical alternatives to China's end-to-end 5G systems. Rakuten Mobile in Japan as well as Nokia, Cisco, and NEC are experimenting with Open RAN 5G software that allows countries to use almost any 5G handset or terminal without sacrificing control over the data that flows to and from them. Commercial groups such as the O-Ran Alliance and the Open RAN Policy Coalition are forging ahead, but more could be done. A “democratic ecosystem” for 5G cooperation could expand beyond the United States, Japan, and South Korea to include Taiwan, Australia, India, and western Europe.

COMPETING AGAINST CHINA'S ONE BELT ONE ROAD INITIATIVE

Washington would like to compete with China in building major infrastructure projects in developing countries. But as Karl Friedhoff of the Chicago Council of Foreign Affairs notes, Beijing has some advantages in speed. But the United States, Japan, Korea and other partners can leverage their comparative advantages in providing services—schooling, medical care, business financing, legal counsel, and secure IT—that exploit the large projects China is funding. South Korea and Japan are already taking this approach in Southeast Asia. Washington could help by standing up trilateral structures and financing that would broaden their positions in Southeast Asia.

The Bottom Line

Rebuilding alliances is a mantra of the Biden administration. But as with the domestic front, it is most useful to think about “building back *better*.” The differences—and even tensions—in the alliances cannot be wished away. We currently know how to deter adversaries in the region. Future steps should be future-oriented, building on strengths not only to expand joint capabilities but to remind the parties of the gains that can be had from trilateral cooperation.

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Authors

STEPHAN HAGGARD is the Lawrence and Sallye Krause Professor of Korea-Pacific studies at UC San Diego and an IGCC affiliated researcher.

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