South Korea and Japan have a complex relationship. Although they both have a military alliance with the United States, they are developing diverging strategic views on a rising China and have unresolved disputes over historical and territorial issues. However, in order to respond to their common security threat from nuclear-armed North Korea, South Korea and Japan continue to cooperate through their strong bilateral alliance with the United States. Nevertheless, the strategic cooperation between South Korea and Japan is likely to remain fragmented due to two crucial factors—bilateral mistrust and China.

Containing China through the alliance with the United States is not in the best interests of South Korea as its economic and political ties with China are deepening. Japan, on the other hand, is increasing its military cooperation with the United States to respond to China’s manifest and potential further assertiveness. Japan’s military developments give rise to South Korean misgivings due to the popular perception that Japan has failed to settle its historical and colonial wrongdoing. Koreans’ mistrust of Japan may even intensify if Japan mounts a more serious challenge to South Korea’s sovereignty over the Dokdo Islets (Takeshima), which are disputed by both countries. On February 22, 2019, for instance, South Korean civic groups denounced Japan for holding an event to highlight its claim to Dokdo at a time when their diplomatic ties were already strained over
long-standing disputes stemming from Japan’s 1910-45 colonial rule of the Korean Peninsula. They held rallies in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul in protest of the annual event in Shimane Prefecture, western Japan, which designated February 22 as “Takeshima Day” in 2005 to claim its administrative sovereignty over the islets.1 Given their deep-rooted historical legacy, Seoul-Tokyo bilateral cooperation works best through the trilateral relationship mediated by Washington. Both Seoul and Tokyo look to Washington as their primary military ally in the region. If left unattended, however, the two Asian neighbors might further drift away from each other.

Unfortunately, there are an increasing number of incidents lately that have intensified bilateral tensions. In January 2019, South Korean military complained that a Japanese military aircraft made a threatening low-altitude flight over one of its naval vessels—saying this was the third such incident that month involving a Japanese military aircraft flying near a South Korean warship—and warning that South Korea would respond accordingly based on the “military’s rules of conduct.”2 The incident was the latest in a tension-spiking military dispute between the two Asian neighbors since December 2018, when Tokyo claimed a South Korean destroyer “locked” its targeting radar on a Japanese surveillance plane in the East Sea (Sea of Japan). Seoul accused the Japanese plane of flying too close to the destroyer, which was engaged in a rescue operation. Both governments are also embroiled in a tit-for-tat diplomatic row over Seoul’s seizing the assets of Japanese companies following a South Korean court decision that required the Japanese firms to compensate forced Korean laborers during World War II. Washington’s ability to help manage its two Asian allies’ bilateral relationship will remain a key strategic asset in its intensifying rivalry with China in the region.

No End in Sight: Recent South Korea -Japan Tensions

On November 9, 2018, Japanese broadcaster TV Asahi canceled a planned appearance by popular South Korean boy band BTS. This happened after a photo began spreading online of a BTS member sporting a long-sleeved shirt celebrating South Korea’s independence from colonial Japanese rule on a Korean TV program one year before.3 The shirt also included what appeared to be an image of a mushroom cloud over the Japanese city of Nagasaki. Commenting on it, The

Seoul-Tokyo cooperation works best through the trilateral relationship mediated by Washington.
Diplomat ran a piece, titled “K-Pop Group BTS Caught in Latest Tensions between South Korea and Japan.”

The relationship between Seoul and Tokyo has been quite complex and attempts to describe it have often been met with protests internally as well as from the other side, as emotions often latch onto the convoluted narrative. The lessening economic gap between the two nations (Japan is the world’s number three economy, while South Korea is the 11th) is one major structural factor behind the situation, while other factors such as the presence of new-generation leaders, the role of the media, varied perceptions over wartime history, the territorial dispute over Dokdo/Takeshima islets, and dissimilar strategies toward China all play into the current reality. While the neighbors are both market democracies and U.S. allies facing similar threats, their relationship is mired in the past. Tensions date back to the Japanese Empire’s 1910 seizure and colonization of the then-unified Korean Peninsula, but in recent years, Seoul-Tokyo ties have been at their lowest point since President Park Geun-hye’s tenure (February 2013–March 2017). As a female leader, Park attached a great significance to the issue of the wartime Korean sex slaves under the Japanese military during WWII. Even though Park reached an agreement with Japan in late 2015 on the sensitive matter, it backfired domestically in South Korea, dealing a blow to her political standing.

When South Korean President Moon Jae-in visited Japan in May 2018, he was the first South Korean leader to do so in more than six years. When Moon met with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on September 25, 2018, on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, he said the “Reconciliation and Healing Foundation” established after a previous intergovernmental agreement on the comfort women issue “failed to function properly due to objections from the comfort women survivors and South Korean public.” The foundation had been established in 2016 to support the victims of Japanese wartime sex slavery. It began carrying out its official duties using the 10 billion won ($8.8 million) fund provided by the Japanese government to pay compensation to the 34-surviving victims and families of the deceased. During a subsequent meeting of Japan’s Diet in October 2016, however, Abe made it clear that he “is not at all considering” sending a letter of apology. Without one, the sex slave victims and advocates in turn refused to accept the agreement along with the compensation, and the position of the foundation began to crumble. Moon’s message was interpreted as informing Japan of his intent to disband the foundation.

In another recent bilateral spat, in October 2018, Japan refused requests from Seoul that its warship refrain from flying the controversial naval ensign, the Rising Sun Flag—seen by many in Asia as a symbol of colonialism—when it would dock in South Korea’s Jeju island for an international event. In the same month, South Korea’s Supreme Court ordered Nippon Steel & Sumitomo Metal Corporation to pay four citizens, who had been forced to work for a Japanese
company during the period of Japanese occupation in WWII, 100 million won ($88,740) each in compensation. The Japanese government quickly denounced the ruling, which had laid bare the resilient bitterness over Imperial Japan’s occupation of its Asian neighbor even seven decades after Japan’s surrender to allied powers.

**Fraying Linkages**

Japan’s diminishing share in South Korean external trade reflects the broader declining linkage between the two countries. While Japan has been among South Korea’s top three export destinations over the past two decades, in late 2015 Japan descended to the fifth spot. South Korean policymakers are generally unworried about the economic impact because China has filled the gap, but it gives credence to the view that Japan’s relevance to South Korea is diminishing.

Despite being bound together by geography and ties of democracy, Seoul and Tokyo have progressively lost common interests. Today, South Korea houses tech giants such as Samsung and LG that are competing globally with Japanese premium brands such as Sony. In 2009, The Wall Street Journal reported that Samsung Electronics’ operating profit of $3.14 billion was more than double the combined operating profit of nine of Japan’s largest consumer electronic companies. Naturally, Japan is increasingly seeing South Korea as a competitor. South Korea’s Hyundai Motor Co., once regarded as a cheap copy of Japanese automobiles, is also upping its profile in the United States—a prime auto market for Japanese brand moguls such as Toyota and Honda. South Korean industry’s overall confidence has risen vis-à-vis Japan’s.

The result has been a collective psychological and perceptual shift, as well as a growing rivalry on both sides, even though some casual Western observers remain baffled as to why two of East Asia’s most prominent democracies fail to get along, particularly when both of them are major U.S. allies in the region. There are deep emotional and psychological undercurrents running beneath the veneer of the South Korea-Japan equation. From South Korea’s standpoint, the country has transformed from an innocuous latecomer to a market competitor to Japan, displaying ever growing confidence in global affairs. For Japan, Korea’s rise appears to be challenging Japan’s long-held psychological upper-hand status, held since the late 19th century.

Koreans, however, believe they are reclaiming the historical sense of prowess Seoul had held over Tokyo. For instance, Korea played a significant role in the
introduction of Buddhism to Japan via Baekje (18 BC–660 AD), an ancient kingdom of Korea. The fact that Japan’s own emperors have Baekje lineage has long been a source of deep-seated feeling of Korean superiority over Japan. Although this historical background and resulting mismatch of psychology has been recognized by outside researchers, its degree of severity has been often underappreciated.

South Korea and Japan do share a natural post-Cold War affinity toward a rules-based liberal order of international institutions led by the United States. The 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster illustrated the importance of jointly addressing natural and industrial health risks, which could have region-wide impacts. The issue is particularly relevant to South Korea, given the country’s heavy reliance on nuclear power. At a regional level, the two can also work together to strengthen missile defense, submarine detection vis-à-vis North Korea, or responding to other natural disasters or refugee crises that have increasingly become pronounced in recent years. Naturally motivated by their own national interests, South Korea and Japan attach great importance to climate change, green growth and a sustainable environment. Both countries therefore have ample incentives to build a stronger sense of common cause to foster historical and territorial reconciliation by building relationships among political, government, business, and opinion leaders of each other’s country. But things do not often work that way.

Significantly, Tokyo argues that South Korea has continually moved the “goal posts” regarding history and the sex-slave issue, which is euphemistically also termed the “comfort women” issue, and that Seoul has also failed to control protests over these issues against Japan by groups such as the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, a South Korean NGO that is fighting for an apology from Japan. As a result, Tokyo felt that a “settlement” was increasingly difficult to attain.

From South Korea’s perspective, if it failed to properly recognize some of Japan’s atonement measures for wartime wrongdoings, it was because Japan failed to win the hearts and minds of the Korean people with genuine contrition and apology. From the South Korean government’s perspective, no issue is seen more paramount in the Japan-South Korea relationship. Former South Korean President Park Geun-hye herself clarified in her summit meeting with Abe in November 2015 that the issue of comfort women is “the biggest obstacle” in efforts to improve bilateral ties.
Legacy of Sex Slaves from World War II

As of today, the sex-slaves issue remains the top issue for both sides to overcome. South Korea and Japan have fundamentally different perspectives on it that go back to their diverse interpretations of the so-called 1965 agreement, in which they normalized their diplomatic relations. The Japanese government has maintained that the matter was resolved “completely and conclusively” in the 1965 normalization treaty. The Japanese government confirmed the same stance even after the summit between Abe and Park in November 2015. On the contrary, the South Korean government adheres to the stance that the matter over “inhumane and illegal treatment on sex slaves” was not covered in the 1965 agreement and needs to be redressed.

The comfort women issue, which was largely hushed even within South Korea, came to the fore in 1991 when in a session of the Diet, the Japanese government denied the involvement of the wartime state and its military in the affair. This enraged South Koreans. Former comfort woman Kim Hak-soon was so angry that she decided to reveal herself as a former comfort woman, the first Korean woman residing in South Korea to do so. In the fall of 1991, Kim testified before the Japanese public: “As I try to speak now, my heart pounds against my chest, because what happened in the past was something extremely unconscionable … Why does [the Japanese government] tell such a lie [to deny its knowledge of the comfort women system]? Actually, I was made into a comfort woman, and I’m here alive.” Yoshiko Nozaki, the author of War Memory, Nationalism and Education in Postwar Japan, observed, translated and recorded her testimony, and wrote that “Kim’s testimony was the most significant event in establishing a new interpretation of the comfort women system.”

At an October 1998 summit, South Korean President Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003) made a state visit to Tokyo. During their meeting, Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi “regarded in a spirit of humility the fact of history that Japan caused, during a certain period in the past, tremendous damage and suffering to the people of the Republic of Korea through its colonial rule,” and “expressed his deep remorse and heartfelt apology” for this fact. Kim, in return, accepted “with sincerity” and expressed his “appreciation” for Obuchi’s expression of remorse and apology. Kim also expressed his view that the present calls upon both countries to overcome their unfortunate history and to build “a future-oriented relationship based on reconciliation.” Further, both leaders shared the view that it was important that the people of both countries, the young generation in particular, deepen their understanding of history, and stressed the need to devote much attention and effort to that end. Following on that spirit, South Korea and Japan also opened to each other more cultural products. For instance, the Japanese film, “Love Letter,” became a box office hit in South Korea, while the South Korean movie “JSA” was
well received by the Japanese public. However, the Kim-Obuchi thaw didn’t last long.

In 2001, Junichiro Koizumi became Japan’s new prime minister. He had repeatedly vowed that he would visit the Yasukuni shrine when he would become the prime minister. The shrine honors Japan’s war dead, including convicted World War II criminals. Upon his taking office, Koizumi carried out his words into action. The visit infuriated South Korea and China, who view the shrine as a glorification of Japan’s wartime past. The Japanese leader visited the shrine six times afterwards.

During the Roh Moo-hyun administration (2003–2008), South Korea’s relationship with Japan remained chilled. In January 2003, Koizumi made a surprise visit to the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo again. The shrine is seen as a rallying point for revisionists for the nationalist version of Japanese military history. Thus, the visit was seen as putting the wrong foot forward in Japan’s relations with Roh, who was at that time a president-elect. Koizumi especially angered Roh when he said he paid tribute at the shrine “as the prime minister,” thus making his visit an official one. His chief cabinet secretary Yasuo Fukuda soon retracted it and said Koizumi’s visit was “a private act as an individual.” But that failed to quell South Koreans’ anger.

From the South Korean perspective, it was a familiar emotional game on the part of Japanese politicians—first raising the tension and then backtracking from it. Roh, after his inauguration, condemned the visit as a “reckless” effort by Japanese leaders to “drum up” public support at the expense of other countries’ feelings. But the bigger problem is that such behavior sowed South Koreans’ mistrust over the sincerity of Japan’s apology for their wartime atrocities. Roh’s relations with Japan further soured as Japanese history textbooks also retracted an earlier remorseful attitude on wartime crimes.

The South Korean government, under pressure from civic groups and the media, convened a joint committee belatedly in 2005 consisting of civilian scholars and government officials. The committee established that “with regard to the inhumane and illegal acts where the Japanese government and military and state agencies were involved, including the comfort women issue, the matter couldn’t be construed as being solved by the 1965 accord and the legal responsibilities of the Japanese government still remains.”

Entering the Lee Myung-bak government (2008–2013), Seoul-Tokyo ties saw an initial thaw as the former business-tycoon turned political-leader Lee was seen as eager to strengthen business ties with Japan. However, his government came...
under pressure when the Constitutional Court in 2011 ruled that the South Korean government’s negligence of the sufferings of comfort women was “unconstitutional” given that the South Korean government, in 1965 under a military dictatorship, did not do its best to properly resolve the comfort women issue with Japan. It further ruled that South Korea should take active measures toward the Japanese government to settle the comfort women reparations. This decision propelled the matter to the fore as the most sensitive bilateral issue.

In August 2012, Lee made a surprise visit to Dokdo/Takeshima Islets, the maritime territory under South Korean control disputed by Japan. Lee’s visit, however, was domestically criticized as a move to prop up his sliding support rating by summoning familiar anti-Japanese sentiment. Lee was at that time mired in a series of corruption scandals involving his family and relatives, which pulled his support ratings down below 20 percent. His move, the first ever visit by a sitting South Korean president to do so, turned out to be quite unfortunate. The chill was immediately felt on the Japanese side.

Entering the Park Geun-hye government (February 2013–March 2017), there was some initial hope that bilateral ties would improve. But Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited the controversial Yasukuni war shrine in the same year. Seoul condemned the move as a “lamentable” and “anachronistic act.” It also triggered a strong reaction from Beijing as well as the U.S. government, which said it was “disappointed” by Abe’s visit to the Yasukuni Shrine. When Abe and Park eventually held a summit in November 2015, it was the first bilateral meeting between the top leaders of the two nations in three and a half years.

The November 2015 Seoul-Tokyo summit meeting between Park and Abe reconfirmed their old differences on the wartime Korean sex-slave issue by the Japanese military. Park called on Japan to “heal the painful history” and Abe urged South Korea to “look to the future.” Overall, Park and Abe managed to achieve the minimum diplomatic results and face-saving needed to display to their public and to Washington, while avoiding criticism that they were the one stalling bilateral progress—a key element of the trilateral partnership for Washington’s regional strategy vis-à-vis China and North Korea.

On December 28, 2015, in what media broadly characterized as a “landmark” accord, South Korea and Japan suddenly announced the “final and irreversible” settlement of the comfort women issue. Japanese foreign minister Fumio Kishida flew to Seoul and held a joint press briefing with his South Korean counterpart Yun Byung-se. In the announcement, Japan offered apology and a one-billion yen ($8.3 million) payment to the then-46 surviving South Korean comfort women (as of March 2019, the number was down to 22). Japan stopped short of describing the payment as official compensation, although the fund would come from the government coffers, thus leaving room for ambiguity over whether Japan was accepting formal legal responsibility or not. Apparently, it was a premeditated
ambiguity both governments painstakingly brainstormed to quell public opinion on both sides on the thorny issue. After the announcement, Abe made a symbolic telephone call to President Park to cement the accord. The White House welcomed the agreement. “We support this agreement and its full implementation, and believe this comprehensive resolution is an important gesture of healing and reconciliation that should be welcomed by the international community,” U.S. national security adviser Susan Rice said in a statement issued by the White House.25

The agreement generated hope that U.S.-South Korea-Japan trilateral strategic cooperation would be strengthened, since the Tokyo-Seoul relationship was now apparently normalized. However, ensuing public reactions and opinion polls advise caution before optimism (a December 2015 public opinion poll in South Korea by the Realmeter polling agency showed a sharply divided nation in which 50.7 percent of the respondents opposed the deal, while 43.2 percent supported it).26

The settlement included a lot of strategic ambiguity, engineered for political expediency. The issue became much more contentious in South Korea than in Japan, when it became known only days after the agreement that the surviving comfort women themselves were furious because they had not been consulted prior to the “final” announcement.

Second, legal experts noted that there was no formal joint document produced in this important agreement; rather the two foreign ministers read out each country’s positions. Current South Korean President Moon Jae-in, who was at that time the head of the main opposition party, declared the bilateral deal “null” because it was reached without parliamentary consent.

Third, the South Korean public was angry at the abrupt shift in President Park’s stance as well as the seemingly lower-level achievements in the accord. She underscored previously that she would handle the comfort women issue “in a manner that the victims can accept and our citizens can understand.”27 Many South Koreans suspect that the United States under President Obama, which readily welcomed the deal, was behind the sudden agreement. Critics note the United States has “pressured” both Tokyo and Seoul to resolve their differences “without thinking deeply about the consequences of such a high-handed approach.”28

### Rising China’s Impact

At the same time, in regional affairs, South Korea has failed to give due credit to Japan’s postwar contributions to peace and prosperity in East Asia and its fledgling
efforts under former prime ministers Tomiichi Murayama (1994–96), Keizo Obuchi (1998–2000) and Naoto Kan (2010–11).\(^29\) Japanese government officials, academics, journalists, and opinion leaders have in recent years conveyed to their South Korean counterparts that Japan and South Korea should unite to counter the rise of China. Japan sees an increasingly powerful and economically influential China as a threat.

The perspective from South Korea is more nuanced, if not different, as South Korea sees China’s rise as both a risk and an opportunity. While some opinion leaders in South Korea have placed more emphasis on the risk aspect, reminding the populace that the majority of South Korea’s historical suffering actually came from numerous foreign invasions from China,\(^30\) the overall public discourse portrays China as an economic magnet that houses South Korean-run factories, and a major contributor to South Korea’s economy through tourism. However, this sentiment was somewhat moderated after the THAAD (Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense) dispute between Seoul and Beijing. China vehemently opposed THAAD, the U.S. anti-missile system being deployed in South Korea. China’s concern was that THAAD’s powerful radar system could track the movement of Chinese military hardware inside China. China retaliated against South Korea by limiting the sales of South Korean products in China and withdrawing Chinese tourists from traveling to South Korea.

Besides the economic angle, in recent years China has been brandishing its image as a key stakeholder that wields more influence over the North Korean affair than any other country. South Korea, keen to manage North Korea’s provocations, increasingly finds China useful in containing North Korea’s manifest and potential belligerence, not to mention its nuclear drive. South Korea also lays hope in China’s support for the unification of the two Koreas that Seoul seeks to realize on its own initiative. For instance, after her meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2015, then-South Korean President Park Geun-hye told reporters that Xi insinuated Beijing would support Seoul-led unification of the two Koreas.\(^31\) At the very least, South Korea is currently investing its political resources in China so that Beijing would not sabotage Seoul’s effort to reunify the Korean Peninsula, which was split into two at the end of World War II.

From the regional perspective, Shin Kak-soo, South Korea’s ambassador to Japan from June 2011 to May 2013, identifies the rise of China as “the primary driver of the rift in South Korea–Japan relations.” Japan, he observes, “appears obsessed with how to respond to China flexing its diplomatic and military muscles in East Asia. Meanwhile, South Korea has taken a pragmatic approach by forging a strategic partnership with China to utilize the latter’s leverage against North Korean provocations and to capitalize on the Chinese market as an export market.” The statement underscores the sentiment that Seoul sees an opportunity in Beijing’s rise, while Tokyo sees it as a threat. And Tokyo has
indeed been frustrated by Seoul’s lack of a hardline stance toward China, while Seoul is increasingly bothered by Tokyo’s annoyance, as it sees in it a shadow of the former colonizer trying to impose its will on South Korea. “Squeezed between China’s pull and Japan’s push, South Korea is baffled at Japan’s irritation about its supposed turn to China,” observes Shin. Meanwhile, China has been mounting a charm offensive on South Korea in recent years and pundits even termed the relationship as a “honeymoon” during the Park Geun-hye administration, until the dispute over THAAD moderated such a sentiment.

Seoul’s Perspective on the Washington-Seoul-Tokyo Trilateral Network

As has been obvious so far, emotional factors have played a significant role in the dynamics between Seoul and Tokyo, in addition to the structural changes that the region as a whole is undergoing. This has led to calls by some, particularly in Tokyo and Washington, for transforming the informal Washington-Tokyo-Seoul trilateral relationship into a more formal alliance network, and for Washington to employ more emotional intelligence in handling its two Asian allies, which suffer from mutual estrangements. Even though both South Korea and Japan are two pillars of the U.S. alliance structure in Northeast Asia, there has been a sense of rivalry between Seoul and Tokyo regarding who is deemed more “valued” in the eyes of Washington.

While curious to onlookers, this phenomenon is well-established. During the height of South Korean’s stalwart relationship with Washington under the Lee Myung-bak administration (2008–13), the Lee government publicly proclaimed that South Korea’s alliance with the United States was “on the basis of common values.” U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry characterized the U.S.-South Korea alliance very firmly united “without an inch of daylight between us.” Some South Koreans at that time even argued publicly that South Korea’s importance to the United States surpassed Japan’s importance to Washington, though this may have been a statement for domestic audience. Overall, however, policymakers largely agree that Japan is the mainstay of the U.S. regional alliance structure in Northeast Asia.

While Japan’s postwar constitution restricted the country’s military capabilities, in 2014 Abe took steps to loosen the constitutional constraints, allowing Japanese forces to plan for and potentially participate in joint military operations with the United States beyond Japan’s home islands. This change has strengthened the notion of Tokyo as Washington’s primary alliance partner in Northeast Asia. Japan can now send troops overseas to fight for allies such as the United States that may engage in armed conflicts with an adversary such as North Korea or potentially China. Japan’s primary ally, the United States, welcomed Japan’s move. Some
South Korean policymakers suspected that South Korea may be relegated to an auxiliary of the U.S.-Japan alliance, though such a defeatist sentiment is seldom discussed in South Korean media. While South Korea and Japan both see the United States as the biggest outside stakeholder for their security, the American attitude is often considered the key judge when there is a disagreement between Seoul and Tokyo. It’s because both orient their primary diplomacy around their relationship with Washington.

Washington wants to strengthen its trilateral security partnership with its two Northeast Asian countries, hoping to transform it into a formal trilateral alliance system. However, South Korea’s position on what the trilateral alliance aims to accomplish if it materializes is slightly different from that of Washington or Tokyo. All three countries agree on the need for alliance cooperation to deal with North Korean missile and nuclear programs, but Washington also wants the alliance system to be utilized to counter an increasingly powerful China in the region. Here, Japan’s national interests are congruent with Washington’s. Yet, South Korea has been careful not to irk China, and hopes its alliance with the United States does not take a larger regional role. In fact, this has been a persistent strain on bilateral ties between Seoul and Washington in recent years.

South Korea already hosts American military bases with some of the most advanced military assets (including THAAD) deployed, and its wartime military commanding rights for both American and South Korean troops are in the hands of an American general. South Korea does not want to evoke further Chinese suspicions by eagerly implicating itself in a U.S.-led trilateral alliance that explicitly targets China. That logic is especially pertinent as Beijing and Seoul deepen their economic and political ties. At the same time, South Korea sees its role as a moderator between Washington and Beijing in the region where mediation is not only viable but also increasingly necessary. Former South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun (2003–08) used the term “balancer” in this regard, but his bid largely turned out to be unsuccessful, partly due to his image as an “anti-American” political figure and thus was not well received by Americans.

The Missing Mediator

For the bilateral relationship between Japan and South Korea to be future-oriented and constructive, and also to forge a deeper bilateral security partnership, a
genuine historical reconciliation is indispensable in breaking the vicious cycle of hostile actions and reactions. Regarding the “comfort women,” former South Korean ambassador Shin Kak-Soo adheres to the unanimous admonition in the U.S. House of Representatives’ Resolution 121 passed on July 30, 2007. It states that Japan should “clearly and publicly refute any claims” denying their sexual enslavement and trafficking and “educate current and future generations” about this tragedy, while “following the recommendations of the international community.” In the same spirit, Japan must also live up to its apology and commitments embodied in its successive cabinet statements.\(^{39}\)

South Korea should also give more credit to the presence of conscientious voices among Japanese opinion leaders and former Japanese leadership. For instance, former Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama during his visit to Seoul in 2015 said, “What is really being patriotic as a Japanese is to repent the state’s wrongdoings and move forward. Japan should take responsibility until neighboring countries tell Japan they won’t hold Japan for the responsibility any more.”\(^{40}\) Hatoyama even visited the Seodaemun Prison History Hall in Seoul where many Koreans were imprisoned and tortured. He took to his knees to apologize to those who experienced harsh treatment there during Japan’s colonial rule. While Hatoyama’s apology was reminiscent of then-West German Chancellor Willy Brandt’s kneeling at the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising memorial in 1970, he was however broadly criticized as a “traitor” in Japanese online forums. Hatoyama later said during a news conference that he was there as a former prime minister of Japan as well as a Japanese national and a “human being.”\(^{41}\) He was well received in South Korea. But such an individual act of rapprochement, without the broader supportive social canopy in both countries, did not lead to further bilateral thaw.

Whether South Korea and Japan could develop a strategic alliance focusing on issues of mutual interest despite deeply troubled political relations will also require political will from the top leaderships of the two countries. Different political calculations between Seoul and Tokyo and their respective interim responses to the rise of China do not bode well for the future of Korea-Japan relations. The two countries therefore should adjust the perception gap over China. Japan has long been known for its prowess for soft power, but when it comes to China’s ascendance, Japan has been increasingly seen as also attempting to offset it using hard power.\(^{42}\)

The United States has a vital role in managing the Tokyo-Seoul relationship as well, especially since its security interests require a stable Asia-Pacific security architecture, led by Washington and anchored to its two regional allies—South Korea and Japan. In Asia, culture plays an important role, and communication and tension-thawing initiatives first made by the top level effectively trickle down to the public sphere. That is the case today especially since both countries
are democracies and have vocal constituencies that contribute to shaping the national narrative. This peculiar and pronounced aspect of Asian culture where the top leadership should set model behavior and moral logic goes back to old traditions in which the king should first display morally correct behavior, so that it could be emulated by the public. This, once again, points to the urgency for the highest political echelons to lead the way for reconciliation, for civic groups and media to follow the cue from the top.

At the extension of this psychology, the United States is also seen in Asia as the moral standard-bearer among the three democratic institutions, which is expected to take the responsibility of putting the house in order. All in all, the United States needs to exert more vigor and political leadership in helping bringing the two smaller Asian democracies together. The United States has traditionally been an active mediator, albeit mostly under the table, in South Korea-Japan conflicts, so as to maintain the optimal level of military cooperation among South Korea, the United States and Japan. For instance, it was likely the U.S. behind-the-scene prodding that led to the comfort women agreement in 2015, as well as a military information protection agreement in 2016 between South Korea and Japan. Some analysts saw the military intelligence sharing deal as the Obama administration’s initiative to “consummate” its Pivot to Asia before the end of Obama’s term.43

However, the current Trump administration is not so much engaged in mediating the Seoul-Tokyo relationship as Washington did in the past. There is even a view that characterizes the U.S. role as “detached” from the matter,44 as conspicuously seen in the latest tit-for-tat of Japan’s accusation and South Korea’s denial of an alleged radar lock on a Japanese patrol plane. “East Asian geopolitics has been shaken loose and is now unsettled,” said Van Jackson, a former U.S. Department of Defense official specializing in Asia.45

The Trump administration’s not placing due attention to alliance coordination and management is problematic and essentially weakens the U.S. standing in the world. It is also seen as a manifestation of declining U.S. leadership, and will play into the hands of China and North Korea. Former Defense Secretary James Mattis, for instance, pointed to that as a key disagreement he had with Trump: “Our strength as a nation is inextricably linked to the strength of our unique and comprehensive system of alliances and partnerships,” Mattis wrote in his resignation letter.46 “While the U.S. remains the indispensable nation in the free world, we cannot protect our interests or serve that role effectively without maintaining

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The U.S. needs to exert more vigor and political leadership in bringing South Korea and Japan together.

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strong alliances and showing respect to those allies,” he underscored. In January 2019, international relations journalist Sebastien Roblin assessed that the discord between America’s two Asian allies is serious enough and it warrants U.S. engagement: “The United States’ political disarray and relative absence from northeast Asian politics have also removed a typical stabilizing force on relations between the two countries,” he wrote in the National Interest.47

### The Future of Seoul-Tokyo Relations

The comfort women issue was the main topic of discussion at the South Korea-Japan summit in New York in September 2018 between Moon Jae-in and Shinzo Abe on the margins of the annual UN General Assembly meeting. About half of the two leaders’ summit meeting time was reportedly devoted to this issue and other historical matters, while the other half involved discussions on North Korea’s denuclearization.48 At their meeting, Moon also told Abe of his intention to disband “the Reconciliation and Healing Foundation,” citing that the organization didn’t live up to play its supposed roles. Acrimonious emotions toward each other remain high in both South Korea and Japan, leaving much uncertainty for the future trajectory of the bilateral relationship. Both Japan and South Korea prioritize their respective relationships with the United States and China—the two heavyweight stakeholders in the region—at the expense of their mutual relationship.

Seoul and Tokyo feel ambivalent about just how important each is to the other, at a time when geopolitical fluidity is increasing in East Asia. Uncertainty, if not pessimism, runs deep because, as we have seen, the current deadlock is also part of deeply embedded issues of history and territory, to which there is no easy solution. Some already accuse the landmark agreement as a political “collusion” between the two governments prodded by Washington, not a genuine détente between the two peoples, so as to expedite the U.S.-led regional governance to counter China. In fact, relational defeatism is so great that even an argument such as “only time will solve the problem” is suggested as a solution. The danger of this logic is that both sides can settle for a strategy of waiting for the other side to scream “ouch” first. There is no reason to believe that time will run its healing course and salvage the relationship, which is at its lowest since the two countries normalized relations in 1965. The relationship will drift further apart without active intervention, but how?
Some say the issue really is about the narrative over the wartime sex slaves issue. Others presume it is in fact a veiled legal affair that may open up a flood of fresh lawsuits in case the Japanese government acknowledges its legal responsibilities (they were not acknowledged in the 2015 agreement), not to mention domestic opposition especially from Japan’s rightwing elements. Still others say it is essentially a moral issue. These are all valid points, as we have examined. They all underscore the different aspects of the convoluted matter. But what is missing in the debate is the underlying psychology and attitude that often eludes analysis. Seoul and Tokyo brush each other aside as secondary stakeholders as they muscle their diplomatic resources and attention around in coping with the seismic geopolitical shift led by Beijing and Washington, their most important economic and security partners.

Meanwhile, Seoul and Tokyo feel ambiguous toward each other’s strategic values. Both countries see each other as a less important security partner compared to Washington; they also see each other as a less important economic partner compared to Beijing. Prioritizing their relations with Washington for security and Beijing for the economy, and mulling over their own hedging strategy between the two superpowers, Seoul and Tokyo are simply not sure just how important the other side is. Thus, there is less interest and enthusiasm to tackle historical matters. Both sides are locked in a wait-and-see mentality of how much damage the other side can tolerate by cold-shouldering each other.

Given that Seoul and Tokyo feel that they are dealing with more important issues at hand, they are willing to relegate their bilateral relationship to the back burner. This explains why it is so hard to find diplomatic zeal in Seoul and Tokyo to seek a solution. This underlying psychology persists and dampens political will. Left unattended, the relationship has already been pummeled by hard-line voices on both sides. The current stalemate undermines political trust, depresses economic ties and dampens the spirit of civilian exchanges.

To mend the situation, the following avenues can be explored. First, as the East Asian political landscape is undergoing tectonic changes and thus poses new challenges, it is natural for both Seoul and Tokyo to think about their own strategic positioning. Their differences are often highlighted while their commonalities are ignored, but both Seoul and Tokyo are facing the same challenge: how to deal with the rise of China and continue to maintain a robust security alliance with Washington. Focusing on this common aspect and building on it is essential.
Second, the current hiccup in the relationship has an interesting feature: it is primarily driven by the political leadership in the two countries. Politics, by nature, often sees its own virtue in sustaining a posture of non-compromise. And that is why alternative avenues for fostering dialogue should be vigorously sought, especially among nongovernmental organizations, academics, the media, cultural events and students. Politics simply hijacks the two countries’ relationship but in democracies, civilians should not easily give up on their right to check and balance their own government. The current paralysis in the South Korea-Japan relationship should not be allowed to be sustained, given that it does not serve either country well in the long run.

More specifically, Seoul and Tokyo have a shared interest in resolving Pyongyang’s nuclear-missile ambitions. Japan’s unconditional public support for Korean reunification, if done, would also help it win the trust and goodwill of the Korean people. The two countries also share crucial strategic interests in upholding and advancing a fair, stable, and prosperous regional environment and jointly steering the agenda in their dealings with China.

Third, South Korea and Japan also share their strategic interests in the sustained presence of the United States and a multilateral network of regional entities so as to continue to promote a rules-based order and communicating that effectively with China. As the two most stable liberal democracies in the region, South Korea and Japan must take the lead in this endeavor. But its viability, Kan Kimura, a Japanese scholar on Korea at Kobe University argues, can be most effectively felt with the sustained commitment at their top leadership, while grassroots level initiatives also help.

Taken together, the current deadlock between Japan and South Korea should be approached from multiple tracks. However, it should be also acknowledged that the most effective solution would be for the initiative to come from both political leaderships as well as the United States. As the treaty ally of both Asian countries, Washington should be more actively engaged in fostering the Seoul-Tokyo relationship. President Barack Obama’s hosting in 2014 of the meeting between Abe and Park in The Hague was a stellar case in point. The clever arrangement was the product of three months of intense behind-the-scenes American diplomacy. The culturally smart diplomatic move was well appreciated by opinion circles in both Seoul and Tokyo: “The diplomacy of northeast Asia is a little like junior prom: Cathy won’t sit with Jamie, but maybe she would if Sally comes over and sits with them,” Michael Green, a former director for Asian affairs at the White House responsible for covering Japan and Korea, deftly observed. And it gives a glimmer of hope that the estranged Asian neighbors can surprisingly be forthcoming when they are assured that they can “save face,” by maintaining the façade that they do a certain act because they are cordially invited to do so.
For instance, Park Geun-hye did not intentionally plan to adopt a manifestly hardline posture with Japan in the manner we now know. As a matter of fact, she was keen to improve relations with Japan after she was sworn in at the outset of her presidency, especially because her predecessor Lee Myung-bak had turbulent ties with Japan and she could “correct” it. “She was waiting for a cue from the Japanese side that she could act along to improve ties,” said a former senior aide to Park.\textsuperscript{54} Apparently, it didn’t materialize. Rather, the situation got worse with Abe’s visit to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine in the same year Park was sworn in. The episode highlights the importance of sending clear messages and showing clearer intentions.\textsuperscript{55}

The suggestions included in this article do not automatically constitute solutions. There are challenges ahead, especially in the short- and medium-term as emotions remain high on both sides, in particular in public opinion. Political elites on both sides will be tempted to exploit it, instead of calming it down. If Japan wants to defend its interests in the region, part of its effort must be to sustain its charm offensive and soft power. Japan has been successful in its soft power offensive in most other parts of the world, except with its two immediate neighbors—South Korea and China. Although Japan may justify that its military arming is to counter the rising Chinese threat, it is obvious that South Korea, given its history of colonization, feels uneasy about it.

Against the backdrop, a constructive intervention by Washington stands to play a vital role in managing the regional relationship and promoting dialogue between Tokyo and Seoul. In its endeavor, Washington has to intervene “visibly,” not behind the scenes, to send an unambiguous signal that the improvement in South Korea-Japan relations is in line with the strategic interests of the United States.\textsuperscript{56} In other words, it should publicly demonstrate that it is committed to advancing relations between the U.S. allies while taking significant diplomatic risks. This means that there is more room for the South Korean and Japanese governments to persuade their own people.

Notes

1. Tokyo sent Hiroshi Ando, a Cabinet Office parliamentary vice minister, to attend this year’s ceremony, the seventh year in a row that a vice minister level official has joined the controversial event. “S. Korean Civic Groups Demand Japan End Annual Event to Claim Dokdo,” Yonhap, February 22, 2019, https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20190222007000315.


9. Japan (21.5 billion USD) trails behind China (114.5 billion USD), the United States (58.4 billion USD), Hong Kong (24.7 billion USD) and Vietnam (23.3 billion USD), in that order. According to the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy, as reported by South Korean media. See, for instance, “Seismic Shift in 20 Years in South Korea’s Top Three Export Destinations, the US, Japan and China,” Yonhap News [a news agency controlled by the South Korean government], November 6, 2015, http://www.yonhapnews.co.kr/bulletin/2015/11/05/0200000000AKR20151105134900003.HTML.


11. A former senior American diplomat to Asia characterized the tension between Seoul and Tokyo as “unnatural.” Author’s interview, Seoul, November 2015.

12. As of February 2019, South Korea has 23 reactors that provide about one-third of South Korea’s electricity, but current president Moon Jae-in is trying to move away from nuclear energy to environmentally-friendly renewables over the next four decades. For details, see “Nuclear Power in South Korea,” World Nuclear Association, February 2019, http://www.world-nuclear.org/information-library/country-profiles/countries-o-s/south-korea.aspx.

13. “박근혜 대통령, 아베 총리와 한일 정상회담” [President Park Geun-hye Holds a Summit with Prime Minister Abe], Ministry of Foreign Affairs, South Korea, November 2, 2015, http://www.mofa.go.kr/www/brd/m_4076/view.do?seq=356917&srchFr=&srchTo=&srchWord=&srchTp=&multi_itm_seq=0&itm_seq_1=0&itm_seq_2=0&company_cd=&company_nm=&page=95.


19. [军慰安부정상회담후 다시 국장금 테이블…양국 근본적 시각차] [Discussion on the Military Comfort Women at the Summit Is Followed by Negotiation at the Director-General Levels], Yonhap, November 10, 2015, https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20151110167100014.
26. “일본군 위안부 합의, 잘했다 43.2% vs 잘못했다 50.7%” [Japanese Military Comfort Women Agreement: Pro 43.2% vs. Against 50.7%], Realmeter, December 31, 2015, http://wwwrealmeter.net%EC%9D%BC%EB%B3%B8%EA%B5%B0-%EC%9C%84%EC%95%88%EB%B6%80-%ED%95%A9%EC%9D%98-%EC%9E%98%ED%96%88%EB%8B%A4-43-2-vs-%EC%9E%98%EB%AA%BB%ED%96%88%EB%8B%A4-50-7?ckattempt=1.
28. Author’s private discussion on the matter with an American scholar via social media, December 31, 2015.
29. Interview with Shin Kak-Soo, former South Korean ambassador to Japan, Seoul, November 16, 2015. His views were further expounded in his speech at Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Used here with Shin’s permission. For further information, see “In Search of

30. This was part of an often-cited conversation South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun had with George W. Bush. See “한미정상 회담서 이런 ‘맞장구 대화’도” [The South Korea-U.S. Summit Included a Conversation of Enthusiastic Agreement (by President Bush)], Dong-a Ilbo, June 13, 2005, https://news.naver.com/main/read.nhn?mode=LSD&mid=sec&sid1=100&oid=020&aid=0000303186.


37. Author’s interview, Seoul, November 2015. Interviewed on the condition of anonymity.


39. Interview with Shin, the former South Korean ambassador to Japan, Seoul, November, 2015.


42. Shin the former South Korean ambassador to Japan, interview with author, Seoul, November 2015.


44. “한일갈등에 옆 과거와 다른 행보… 이유는?” [Why the U.S. Is Doing Differently This Time, in the Conflict between South Korea and Japan?], YTN, January 5, 2019.


50. Shin the former South Korean ambassador to Japan, interview with author, Seoul, November 2015.

51. This idea, proposed by Ambassador Shin, could be one area where South Korea and Japan could brainstorm more vigorously.


54. Author’s interview, Seoul, November 2015. Interviewed on the condition of anonymity.
