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Historically Speaking: Japan-ROK Relations and U.S. Asia Strategy
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Japan-ROK (the Republic of Korea) relations are stalled again over history. While it is not the first time that leaders of America's two key allies in East Asia refused to meet or canceled meetings over history, this time concern is mounting anew in Washington that U.S. Asia strategy itself is challenged due to the Seoul-Tokyo diplomatic row. A key to the success of the Obama administration's rebalancing to Asia strategy depends, at least in part, on having reliable allies and like-minded partners willing to tackle regional and global challenges alongside the United States. Against this backdrop, Presidents Barack Obama and Park Geun-hye confirmed their endorsement of the 2009 U.S.-ROK Joint Vision Statement as a blueprint, which expands the alliance's scope to include such issue areas as terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, climate change, overseas development, and peacekeeping among others. Similarly, Washington's desire to work more closely with Japan for regional security resulted in the recent U.S.-Japan agreement during the visit of Secretaries Chuck Hagel and John Kerry to Tokyo in October, a move seen by some in Seoul as Washington's support for Japan's remilitarization.

In the minds of many policymakers and analysts, Seoul and Tokyo should make logical partners for each other's security and foreign policy, especially at a time of strategic uncertainty in the region. After all, Japan and the ROK, as democracies, share common security ties with the United States. Further, they both face a rising China and a dangerous North Korea. Why, then, does U.S.-Japan-ROK security cooperation remain at a relatively low level? Why did Seoul and Tokyo's attempt at military intelligence cooperation fail in 2012? Clearly, the so-called comfort women issue, the Dokdo/Takeshima islets dispute, the Yasukuni Shrine, or history textbooks are to blame for otherwise mutually beneficial relations. Indeed, in the past few years, it was over these history issues that Japan-ROK relations have repeated the cycle that new leaders who had promised a "future-oriented" relationship almost inevitably ended up repeating the same past diplomatic disputes.

However, beyond these specific history issues, difficulties in Japan-ROK relations in 2013 should be understood in the broader geostrategic context that the rise of China has brought to the region. That is, the rise of China and perceptions of a relative decline in American power have made more evident the differences in Japan and South Korea's geostrategic perspectives and conceptions about their own place in the region. Looking back, it was Prime Minister Shinzo Abe himself who, upon assuming office in 2006, visited Seoul and Beijing to make a breakthrough in then-stalled Japan-ROK and Japan-China relations over former prime minister Junichiro Koizumi's visits to the Yasukuni Shrine. But now he is less likely to do so. His vision of Japan's future and of national pride is tied to a sense of rivalry with China, which does not resonate with what South Koreans demand of Japan to improve relations (i.e., being repentant for imperial Japan's past as a great power and promising not to revise the constitution). In some sense, the prospect for Japan-South Korea relations is related to the fact that Japan under Prime Minister Abe is eyeing Beijing when dealing with Seoul. Seoul should understand that Abe's position over history issues is tied to Japan's search for a new identity with a rising China in mind. Against the backdrop of the collapse of the 1955 system and a changing international security environment, Japan realized that it should be more than an economic power but has not yet reached a national consensus on what should replace the postwar Yoshida Doctrine.

When we take a birds-eye view of the history of East Asian international relations, the idea that Japan and the ROK make natural security partners is fairly new and historically unprecedented, especially at times of shifting power balance in the region. Prior to U.S. postwar engagement with East Asia, for centuries the Korean and Japanese states pursued different strategies for their security and held very different notions about their place in the region, due in part to geography. It is worth remembering that East Asia today is witnessing a rare historical moment in which both Japan and China are great powers at the same time. Historically speaking, it was always either China (up until the late eighteenth century) *or* Japan (in the early twentieth century) *or* the United States (post-World War II 'hub-and-spoke' system) that set the rules of the game in East Asia as the dominant power. When China and Japan's national power levels were more or less similar in the late sixteenth century, the region experienced what is sometimes referred to as "Asia's first world war," the Hideyoshi invasions of Korea. Japan under General Toyotomi Hideyoshi attempted to conquer Ming China and to build a Japan-centered order, which led to two major invasions of Korea in 1592 and 1597.

Geographically, the Korean peninsula was a bridge for an ambitious Japan when it looked toward the Asian continent (China) as in the late sixteenth century and during the second Sino-Japanese War of 1937–1945. To imperial Japan’s strategists, the Korean peninsula was considered “a dagger at the heart of Japan,” if occupied by hostile powers from the Asian continent (at that time Russia). Of course, the geopolitical configurations of East Asia today are different in many respects, due primarily to the U.S. military presence in the region. However, the stronger China becomes militarily, the more evident differences in the geostrategic perspectives of Japan and the ROK will become.

For several years now, Japan has expressed concerns about China’s military modernization and naval activities outside its territorial waters. In addition to North Korea’s nuclear and missile development program, much of Japan’s recent efforts to strengthen its military capacity are directed at countering Chinese influence and power in the region. As much as Japan wants ROK support for its stance vis-à-vis Beijing, Japan is not likely to go so far as to address historical issues with Seoul because that would also bring China into the apology picture. Further, Japanese nationalists believe Japan should not be apologetic about its past.

President Park’s effort to improve strained ROK-China relations distinguishes her North Korea policy from that of her predecessor. But that does *not* mean that the ROK under Park is pro-China against Japan or the United States. President Park has in fact made clear the centrality of the U.S.-ROK alliance in ROK national defense policy and is pursuing a strengthened bilateral relationship with Washington. Unlike Japan, the ROK’s geostrategic location demands much more attention to China’s security calculations and interests. In addition to the economic leverage China has over North Korea, the ROK understands that stability in the northern part of the Korean peninsula is critical for the defense of Beijing due to the geographic proximity between North Korea and China. Historically, decisions regarding Chinese military intervention on the Korean peninsula—at the time of the Hideyoshi invasions of Korea (1592–1598) and the Korean War (1950–1953)—were made when Japanese or UN forces moved up to the northern part of the peninsula.

Therefore, while both Seoul and Tokyo face threats from North Korea, Seoul has to take into account Beijing’s strategic calculations and concerns when dealing with Pyongyang. Due to these differences, it is inevitable that Japan and South Korea will likely adopt different strategies in their dealings with a rising China. The ROK is influenced by its geostrategic location as a bridge between the Asian continent and Japan, and this must be taken into account when considering the prospects for U.S.-Japan-ROK security cooperation as part of the U.S. rebalancing to Asia strategy.

There have been some positive developments in Japan-ROK relations in recent years including progress in the areas of free-trade agreement negotiations, cooperation over financial stability, and North Korea. These accomplishments were facilitated by “shuttle diplomacy” between the two governments and, at times, their leaders. But each side has to take steps to truly pursue a “future-oriented” relationship. If Japan wants to be a respected great power in the world, it should work on history issues with its Asian neighbors. For its part, the ROK should recognize Japan’s underappreciated postwar efforts toward international peace as a pacifist nation including contributions to overseas development and international institutions. This would pave the way for summitry focused on shared interests including the peaceful rise of China and trilateral cooperation with the United States.

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