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Japan and South Korea: The Limits of Alliance

Brendan Taylor

Japan–South Korea security relations seemed to be going so well. The two countries, along with their American ally, met on the sidelines of the June 2012 IISS Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore and formally agreed to institutionalise a ministerial-level defence trilateral. During the same month, Japan, South Korea and the United States conducted joint naval exercises in the Yellow Sea, not far from China and the Korean Peninsula. At least one respected authority on Korean Peninsula security issues (Peter Beck) has even advocated the establishment of a formal alliance relationship between Tokyo and Seoul.¹

Just as significantly, Japan and South Korea were due in late June to sign a bilateral intelligence-sharing agreement that would have provided a legal framework facilitating the direct exchange of classified information relating to, amongst other common security challenges, North Korea's missile and nuclear programmes and China's military modernisation. The pact was significant in that it was to be the first of a military nature signed between these two erstwhile adversaries since the end of the Second World War.

But then things took a dramatic turn for the worse. Responding to domestic pressure, Seoul suspended its participation in the intelligence-sharing pact a mere hour before it was due to be signed. South Korean President Lee Myung-bak substantially inflamed the situation by visiting a small group of islands in the East China Sea which the South Koreans call 'Dokdo', the Japanese 'Takeshima', and whose status Seoul and Tokyo vigorously contest.

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Lee's visit was the first to the disputed islands by a South Korean president. He further upped the ante, asserting that the Japanese emperor would have to apologise for atrocities committed during Japan's occupation of Korea (1910–45) if he ever planned to visit the South. A South Korean footballer was denied his Olympic bronze medal for holding up a sign that read 'Dokdo is our territory' at the end of a game in which his team defeated Japan 2–0. Seoul also rejected a personal letter sent by Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda to his South Korean counterpart protesting Lee's visit to the Dokdo/Takeshima Islands.

Nor did the invective flow in only one direction. Japan's Defence White Paper, released in late July, unambiguously re-stated Tokyo's claim to Takeshima. Tokyo temporarily recalled its ambassador to Seoul following Lee's fleeting visit to the islands. It then publicly mused about the possibility of allowing a currency-swap agreement with South Korea to lapse. This agreement had only just been expanded from an initial \$13 billion to \$70bn in October 2011, with a view to insulating Seoul from the worst effects of the eurozone crisis. Tokyo stated its intention to take the territorial dispute to the International Court of Justice. The Japanese parliament subsequently passed a resolution denouncing Lee's visit to Takeshima, while Noda publicly criticised South Korea for 'illegally' occupying the islands.

Domestic determinants

Domestic politics has undeniably contributed to this recent downturn in Japan–South Korea relations. For instance, anti-Japanese sentiment is pervasive in South Korea: in Gallup Korea's latest annual opinion poll, 44% of Koreans nominated Japan as their 'least favourite country'.² Japan's treatment of Korea during the aforementioned colonial period – and particularly the Imperial Army's abuse of Korean 'comfort women' (more accurately described as sex slaves) during the Second World War – are hot-button issues, as indeed is the Dokdo/Takeshima issue itself.

While some South Korean politicians objected to the intelligence-sharing pact on procedural and legislative grounds, claiming that approval of the agreement was being sought in the absence of appropriate parliamentary oversight, a more common refrain from both sides of the Korean political

spectrum was that Lee was improperly 'joining hands' with a former colonial power that had behaved so brutally. Interestingly, 61% of South Korean voters opposed the agreement, while Lee himself was criticised for being 'pro-Japanese' and overly susceptible to American influence in seeking to secure it.³

Although Lee completes his five-year term as president in 2012 and cannot seek re-election, the fact that the most likely presidential nominee (Park Geun-hye) from his New Frontier Party has ties (through her father, the former South Korean dictator Park Chung-hee) to the Japanese Imperial Army seemed only to make matters worse. Hence, while South Korea has thus far merely suspended signing the intelligence-sharing agreement, these dynamics suggest that the pact's near-term prospects are unpromising. They also imply that electoral politics are an influential driver underpinning Lee's recent jaunt to Dokdo.

Structural impediments

Yet it is all too easy to attribute the recent downturn in Japan–South Korean ties solely to domestic dynamics, assuming that the relationship will make significant headway if only these can somehow be circumvented. As one knowledgeable observer recently quipped of Japan–South Korea security relations, 'the only option for successfully managing a relationship in which both sides need each other is to buck the lure of populism and to resort to "big think"'.⁴

This line of reasoning underestimates, however, the role that a set of equally powerful structural impediments are likely to play in constraining any further deepening of Japan–South Korea security relations.

First and foremost, Seoul and Tokyo have very different perceptions of China's (re-)emergence, and are pursuing markedly different strategies in response to it. To be sure, both Japanese and South Korean policymakers have become increasingly focused on China's rise over recent years, and their concerns are mirrored in declining public perceptions of the 'Middle Kingdom' in both countries.

For Tokyo, however, the threat posed by China's rise is more immediate than it is for Seoul. China and Japan are the historical great powers

of Asia. They have waged major war twice before, and currently possess Asia's two most potent militaries. This explains the significant tightening in the US–Japan alliance that has taken place since China's rise first became readily apparent during the mid-1990s. It also accounts for Japan's more recent restructuring of its military as a 'dynamic' defence force capable of confronting the challenges posed by an increasingly assertive and powerful China.

For South Korea, the primary threat to its existence comes not from a rising China, but from neighbouring North Korea. Seoul tends, therefore, to view cooperation with Japan through the lens of this existential challenge and will often display sensitivity to how that collaboration is perceived in Beijing. Indeed, an oft-overlooked cause for the collapse of the

intelligence-sharing pact with Japan was concerns from some South Korean quarters that this agreement would unduly antagonise China and be perceived as part of a US-led 'containment' strategy.

Seoul prefers to hedge its bets

Notwithstanding the separate downturn in China–South Korean relations brought about by Beijing's (non-) reaction to the sinking of the *Cheonan* in March 2010,

lingering uncertainty remains over which way South Korea would ultimately tilt in response to a significant deepening of strategic competition between the United States and China. Unlike Japan, which has historically shown a high degree of sensitivity to shifts in the balance of power and an accompanying tendency to 'move with the strong' as these transpire, South Korea has instead preferred to hedge its bets, strategically positioning itself between Asia's great powers – a 'shrimp between whales', as the Koreans put it.

The Japan–South Korea relationship is also constrained by an underlying lack of strategic trust. This dynamic has been driven, inadvertently in part, by the acquisitions that Tokyo has made over recent years in response to China's military modernisation. Although Japan's recent acquiring of *Kongo*-class and *Aegis*-class destroyers, amphibious assault ships, a helicopter-carrying destroyer and almost a dozen new submarines has unquestionably been driven by China's growing maritime aspirations, these

platforms also provide Japan with an expanded capability that could, in theory at least, be turned on South Korea.

The clearest evidence that these trends have sparked a latent arms race between Japan and South Korea can be found in the name given to a new class of landing-platform experimental (LPX) ships commissioned by South Korea in July 2007. The first of these was named *Dokdo* – after the islands at the heart of the territorial dispute between Japan and South Korea – and was inscribed with the words ‘Project Power’. As the Australian scholar Desmond Ball has observed on the basis of this and similar evidence, ‘while North Korean capabilities obviously figure centrally in South Korea’s force development, it is also clear that there is an element of competitiveness with Japan with respect to its major naval systems’.⁵

The US ‘pivot’ to Asia (or ‘rebalancing’, as it is increasingly called) could also be having the unintended consequence of keeping Japan and South Korea at arm’s length from each other. That was certainly not its original intent. Indeed, during a period when the US defence budget is coming under increasing pressure, a primary objective of the Obama administration’s Asia strategy has been to encourage greater defence burden-sharing through achieving more effective lateral cooperation amongst its allies and security partners.

As Victor Cha has demonstrated, however, collaboration between America’s Northeast Asian allies has often been most intimate during periods when doubts were greatest regarding the US security commitment to Asia. During the period immediately after the end of the Cold War, for instance, Japan and South Korea worked closely together against the backdrop of fears of American drawdown from Asia.⁶ Following Cha’s logic, what policymakers and pundits alike characterise as America’s newfound commitment to Asia, as embodied in the ‘rebalancing’ strategy, could well be having the unintended consequence of diminishing the incentives for Tokyo and Seoul to deepen their security ties.

A final structural factor conditioning Japan–South Korea security relations is, of course, the North Korean conundrum. Certainly, another credible explanation for closer ties between Seoul and Tokyo in the early 1990s was the intensification of the challenge posed by Pyongyang at that time, which

came to a head during the 1993–94 North Korean nuclear crisis. A similar pattern occurred in response to the *Cheonan* sinking and the Yeonpyeong Island bombardment of 2010. Whereas the sinking of the *Cheonan* served to galvanise security ties between Seoul and Tokyo, the Yeonpyeong crisis gave a renewed sense of purpose and momentum to trilateral cooperation between the United States, Japan and South Korea.

To be sure, Seoul and Tokyo view the North Korean threat quite differently. Anyone who has spent time along the demilitarised zone (DMZ) separating the two Koreas readily understands that, for the South, the conventional challenge posed by the North Korean military is existential. For Japan, by contrast, the North Korean missile and nuclear challenge is more pressing. These differences in threat perception have on occasion complicated cooperation between the two countries. Yet, if there is a silver lining of sorts to current tensions in the Japan–South Korea security relationship, it is perhaps that it reflects an easing in concerns regarding the threat posed by Pyongyang. Reflecting this shift, in late August Japanese officials met for the first time in four years with their North Korean counterparts.

The jury is still very much out on if, why and how a reunification of the two Koreas might unfold. It is certainly possible that such a development could potentially generate even greater divergence between Japan and Korea.

*   *   *

None of this implies that Japan and South Korea are destined to become serious strategic competitors. What it does caution against, however, is overinflated expectations regarding the prospects for any further significant deepening in their strategic relationship.

As for ongoing tensions between Tokyo and Seoul over Dokdo/Takeshima, the US approach to Asia's territorial disputes has thus far been one of not taking sides. While this course has proven to be prudent in the case of the South China Sea, Washington has been able to maintain this line in relation to that particular theatre because America's Southeast Asian allies, when all is said and done, are simply not as significant to US Asia

strategy as their Northeast Asian counterparts. Tokyo demonstrated this during the late 1990s, when it successfully pressed the Clinton administration to confirm that Article V of the US–Japan security treaty (which requires the United States and Japan to act to meet the common danger in the event of an attack against either party) extended to the Senkaku Islands because these were under the administration of Japan. The Obama administration has since reaffirmed that position.

Could Washington be pressed into a similar dilemma involving its Northeast Asian allies? Analysing recent tensions between Tokyo and Seoul, the well-connected American observer Ralph Cossa doesn't dismiss the possibility: 'when faced with a lose–lose situation between two allies,' he writes, 'it is normally more sensible not to play the game. But, like it or not, US territory has now become part of the extended battlefield, and US security interests are being at least peripherally affected.'⁷ Having referred over recent years to South Korea as a 'lynchpin' of Asian security, a term traditionally reserved for Japan, the Obama administration will be desperately hoping that this impression of greater equality between its Northeast Asian allies is not put to the test, and that Tokyo and Seoul are able to successfully manage their differences over Dokdo/Takeshima.

Notes

- ¹ Peter M. Beck, 'A Korea–Japan Alliance?', *East Asia Forum*, 9 June 2011, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2011/06/09/a-korea-japan-alliance/>.
- ² Steven Simonitch, 'S Korea Hates Japan more than N Korea, Gallup Poll Reveals', *Japan Today*, 5 August 2012, <http://www.japan-today.com/category/national/view/s-korea-hates-japan-more-than-n-korea-gallup-poll-reveals>.
- ³ See The Asan Institute for Policy Studies, 'The Asan Monthly Opinion Survey: July 2012', http://asaninst.org/eng/03_publications/report_detail.php?seq=1291&ipage=1&nums=0&ca=1; and Choe Sang-Hun, 'Korean Aide Steps Down in Reaction to Japan Pact', *New York Times*, 5 July 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/06/world/asia/south-korean-aide-offers-to-resign-over-pact-with-japan.html>.
- ⁴ Scott A. Snyder, 'South Korea's Small Think With Japan', *Asia Unbound* (Council on Foreign Relations blog), 15 August 2012, <http://blogs.cfr.org/asia/2012/08/15/south-koreas-small-think-with-japan/>.
- ⁵ Desmond Ball, 'Asia's Naval Arms Race: Myth or Reality?', 25th Asia-Pacific Roundtable, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 30 May 2011, pp. 8–9, <http://>

www.isis.org.my/files/25APR/paper_cs_2_desmond_ball.pdf.

- ⁶ Victor D. Cha, *Alignment Despite Antagonism: The US–Korea–Japan Security Triangle* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 209.

- ⁷ Ralph A. Cossa, 'Korea–Japan: Time for Outside Mediation?', PacNet no. 47, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 27 July 2012, <http://csis.org/publication/>

pacnet-47-korea-japan-time-outside-mediation.

- ⁸ 'Remarks by President Obama and President Lee Myung-Bak of the Republic of Korea After Bilateral Meeting', Intercontinental Downtown Hotel, Toronto, Canada, 26 June 2010, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-obama-and-president-lee-myung-bak-republic-korea-after-bilateral->