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Strategic Estrangement Between South Korea and Japan as a Barrier to Trilateral Cooperation

Cheol Hee Park

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ISBN: 978-1-61977-078-2

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November 2019

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Strategic Estrangement Between South Korea and Japan as a Barrier to Trilateral Cooperation

Trilateral Cooperation on the Downhill Path

Demand for trilateral cooperation between the United States, South Korea, and Japan is on the rise. However, political willingness and capacity for trilateral cooperation are declining, especially given recent diplomatic and economic tensions between South Korea and Japan. Diplomatic tensions between the two are not easily fixed; with the recent escalations in the conflict, they have taken retaliatory measures with little chance of alleviation. There are some signs that these two US allies are even resisting security cooperation.

For decades, trilateral cooperation among the three countries has been taken for granted. Since the Cold War, “value diplomacy” has provided a rationale for trilateral cooperation—countries that share similar values are supposed to work together. The United States, South Korea, and Japan have democratic governments and market economies, and respect for rule of law and human rights. Policymakers and opinion leaders in each country became complacent about justifying trilateral cooperation.

Increasing Demand

Despite the increasing difficulty of securing cooperation between the United States, South Korea, and Japan, demand for trilateral cooperation has actually increased. Policymakers and opinion leaders in each country must come up with new ways to justify the cooperation.

First, North Korea’s continued successful testing of its nuclear arsenal has immensely increased the security threat it poses. That arsenal—with long-, medium-, and short-range missiles—poses a formidable threat not only to South Korea and Japan, but to the United States. Although North Korea has promised to denuclearize, there is no guarantee that it has agreed to the US goal of its complete and fully verified denuclearization. Guaranteeing the national security of all three allies requires a coordinated approach for cooperative security, and the demand is increasing for trilateral security cooperation to cope with the threat from North Korea.

Second, China’s rapid rise and assertive maritime strategy—combined with its increasing diplomatic influence—has been a constant source of instability in the Asia-Pacific region. In 2010, China displayed its willingness to engage in diplomatic, and potentially military, conflict with Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. In

2016, when South Korea agreed to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system for the purpose of defending the country from newly developed North Korean missiles, China pressured South Korea and its firms invested in China to step back from security cooperation with the United States. This was an unusual intervention into issues related to South Korea’s national security, as well as those at the heart of the US-South Korea alliance. Knowing that South Korea and Japan are critical US allies, China pushes an offensive strategy to weaken strategic ties between them and the United States. Considering that US presence is the linchpin to maintaining the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region, that continued presence is in the interest of all three countries. As China rapidly gains more power and influence in the region, the demand for trilateral cooperation continues to increase.

Third, China and Russia are strengthening diplomatic and security cooperation in the entire region, especially in the East China Sea and the West Pacific area. In addition to diplomatic coordination, China and Russia are enhancing security ties in the area covering South Korea and Japan. On July 23, 2019, Chinese and Russian fighter planes flew over the Dokdo/Takeshima Islands as part of newly initiated joint military exercises, testing the level of security cooperation between South Korea and Japan during their serious diplomatic and economic conflicts. Trilateral cooperation between the United States, Japan, and South Korea must increase to meet China and Russia’s continued joint challenges in the areas surrounding the Korean peninsula.

Diminishing Supply

While demand for trilateral cooperation is increasing, actual cooperation has declined. The gap between demand for trilateral cooperation and the ability to supply it is widening, for several reasons.

First, US President Donald Trump’s foreign policy places US interests above those of the traditional US alliance network. The United States is not retreating from regional engagement, but it is moving away from a strategy of deep engagement. Shared values and norms are no longer the foundation of the alliance network; President Trump’s conception of alliances is based on a transactional approach. He does

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not hesitate to demand increased burden sharing, or even to impose tariffs on allies. He also believes that US allies and partners should support themselves, rather than request any help from the United States. This is why the United States shows little interest in disputes between alliance partners, and why the “wait and see” approach is the usual response when problems arise between South Korea and Japan. Given the United States’ retreat from global commitments and reluctance to shoulder global-affairs burdens, allies and partners can hardly expect the United States to be an honest broker in conflicts between them.

Second, unlike during the Cold War period, when the three countries stood together against communist expansion, the United States, Japan, and South Korea have developed diverging threat perceptions about potential challengers. As for China, US strategy combines engagement and containment. The United States is trying to check and balance China’s rising military power and level the economic playing field. While suspicious of China’s diplomacy and maritime activities, Japan has adopted a balancing strategy toward China, in accordance with the United States. Notably, South Korea has been pursuing a “hedging strategy.” While South Korea does not necessarily stand side by side with China, it does not want to turn its back on China either, because of its deepening economic interdependence with China and the increasing need for diplomatic collaboration on North Korea.

In addition to threat perception regarding China, the three countries have developed diverging approaches

toward dealing with North Korea. South Korea combines military containment with diplomatic engagement. The Moon Jae-In administration gives more weight than its predecessor to constructing a new peace structure on the Korean peninsula by pursuing a dovish engagement policy. Though there are diverse views on North Korea in the United States, President Trump prefers negotiations. This contrasts with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s emphasis on maintaining economic and diplomatic pressure and sanctions on North Korea. The three countries do not stand on the same platform with regard to handling regional powers and challengers.

Third, the diplomatic rupture between South Korea and Japan has decreased the possibility of trilateral cooperation. The two countries have long been engaged in diplomatic struggles over historical and territorial issues, but this has intensified since the end of 2018. Because the issues are inflammatory and politically charged, South Korea and Japan do not listen to the advice of third parties carefully. From time to time, they show unfriendly faces toward each other, which the other party regards as a gesture of neglect. Between July and September 2019, conflict between the two countries heightened, and they engaged in mutually retaliatory measures in the form of export control and denial of military information exchange. It seems as if the leaders of the two countries treat the other party as an unfriendly partner. This is an unusual development in that two key US allies in East Asia are quarreling over inflammatory issues, with little room for US intervention.

New Perspectives on Trilateral Cooperation

Considering all these new developments, one must revise the conventional understanding of trilateral cooperation in the Asia-Pacific.

From an Idealistic to Realistic Approach

First, one needs to get away from an idealistic and naïve approach that argues solely for the desirability or inevitability of cooperation among the United States, South Korea, and Japan. It has long been taken for granted that the three countries are destined to cooperate in the face of shared threats and common challenges, but outside pressures alone will not result in cooperation. The role played by endogenous logic, or internally driven preference, in trilateral cooperation should be highlighted. What matters is not idealistic cooperation, but a pragmatic approach geared toward overcoming conflicts and discord among nations.

From Utilitarianism to Feasibility

Second, talking about the utility or benefits of trilateral cooperation does not necessarily provide enough justification for trilateral cooperation. Although a number of policymakers in the three countries are aware of its utility, cooperation is not practically provided or easily constructed. Utilitarian claims about trilateral cooperation focus more on the demand, rather than the supply,

side. Actual discussions on how to make partners cooperate are missing, or at least likely to break down quickly; few discuss how to improve trilateral cooperation on the ground.

From Defensive Logic to Proactive Promotion

Third, the traditional approach toward trilateral cooperation assumes that cooperation stems from defense against a common threat. Based on a realist conception of security, defensive positionalists claim that shared threat perceptions justify cooperation. The three countries are expected to cooperate as long as the trilateral partners face common enemies or common challengers. Incentives for cooperation come from without, rather than from within. However, trilateral collaboration does not need to rely on exogenous threat. Promoting shared values, as well as expanding common norms to countries with different systems, may constitute a wider spectrum of cooperation. Not only can defensive cooperation be a source of collaborative initiative, but so can proactive promotion of ideas, norms, values, and rules.

The necessity of trilateral cooperation will not always bring about its supply. Nor can it be taken for granted that the three countries share norms, values, and ideas. One should be aware that ties among the three countries can drift away, or turn volatile.

Expanding Spirals of South Korea-Japan Conflict

The weakest link in trilateral ties is the South Korea-Japan relationship. A closer look at the South Korea-Japan conflict crystalizes three layers of conflict: surface level, deeper level, and submerged cultural level.

On the Surface of Conflict: Controversy over Forced-Labor Issues

One recent source of conflict between South Korea and Japan is differing views on the issue of forced labor. This emerged as a major source of conflict between the two countries on October 30, 2018, after the South Korean Supreme Court delivered a verdict that Japanese corporations represented by Nippon Steel should compensate former forced laborers mobilized during the colonial period. The decision stated that individual victims still possess the right to seek compensation from individual Japanese corporations, despite the two governments diplomatically addressing the forced-labor issue in 1965. The South Korean government has taken the firm position that it has no choice but to respect its judicial branch's decision, and strongly encouraged the Japanese government to take appropriate action to compensate the plaintiffs. On the other hand, the Japanese government has flatly denied the possibility of compensating the victims, arguing the issue was settled through the treaty it signed with South Korea in 1965. The Japanese government asserted that it was the responsibility of the South Korean government to compensate former forced laborers. These diverging interpretations of the treaty ignited tensions between the two sides.

Forced labor during the colonial period has been a polemical, but submerged, issue between South Korea and Japan since 2012. Before 2010, former forced laborers from South Korea petitioned Japanese courts, arguing that Japanese firms should compensate them for material and spiritual damage. After losing a Japanese Supreme Court decision in 2003, they brought the issue to the South Korean courts and, in 2012, the Korean Supreme Court determined that claims sought by the plaintiffs could be justified. At the time, this court decision did not influence the relationship between the two countries, because it was not highly publicized. The forced-labor issue emerged again in 2015, when Japan tried to register modern industrial sites in Kyushu and Yamaguchi as World

Heritage sites with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). South Korean civil groups, backed by the government, argued that the tragic history of forceful mobilization of Korean workers during the colonial era should be clearly recorded in order for the industrial facilities to be registered. A particular site, Hashima or Gunkanjima, drew lots of public attention. After multiple rounds of negotiation, the Abe government acknowledged that Korean workers were forced to work at the sites, though it refused to use the term "forced laborers." Once the modern industrial sites were successfully registered as World Cultural Heritage sites, the forced-labor issue submerged again.

In addition to forced labor, the issue of comfort women caused major controversy between the two governments between 2013 and 2015. South Korean President Park Geun-Hye strongly pressured Prime Minister Abe to accept the conditions set by South Korean civil society: sincere apology, taking legal responsibility, and material compensation from the Japanese government. South Korea-Japan relations were fiercely tense between 2013 and 2015, but President Park and Prime Minister Abe reached consensus on the comfort-women issue in December 2015, on the condition that the Japanese government take responsibility and compensate victimized comfort women with Japanese government money, while South Korea would make utmost efforts to relocate the statue of comfort women standing in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul. They also agreed to finalize the deal, and not to publicize the issue internationally.

However, the Moon administration launched a critical public-diplomacy campaign against the comfort-women deal between President Park and Prime Minister Abe. Only two years after the Reconciliation and Healing Foundation was established through the donation of money from the Japanese government, the Korean government prepared budget to symbolically offset the Japanese government contribution. In January 2019, the South Korean government formally dissolved the foundation. All these moves made Prime Minister Abe, who had reluctantly settled the agreement with President Park, furious and frustrated.

The South Korean Supreme Court decision on forced laborers followed the resurgence of the comfort-women

issue. Japan had reasons to be dissatisfied. Out of frustration and anger, Prime Minister Abe's cabinet repeatedly asked the South Korean government to respond to Japan's request for diplomatic consultation, but received no response. Japan did not lose hope for a diplomatic solution until South Korean Prime Minister Nakyon Lee publicly commented in May 2019 that there were limits to the South Korean government's ability to settle the forced-labor case. Japan increased pressure on South Korea by asking the latter to resolve the issue through third-party international arbitration. Still, South Korea kept silent until June 2019, when its vice foreign minister made a confidential proposal that both South Korean and Japanese corporations should compensate the forced laborers. In South Korea, this proposal was regarded as a step back, because it allowed for the possibility of South Korean firms joining the compensation process. In Japan, this proposal was hard to swallow because it still asked Japanese firms to compensate the plaintiffs.

Tensions between the two governments increased after the Group of Twenty (G20) summit in Osaka, Japan. On July 1, 2019, the Japanese Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industries (METI) announced a plan to impose strict export control over key items for semiconductor production, starting on July 4, 2019. METI also declared its willingness to remove South Korea from Japan's whitelist. Despite strong resistance from South Korea, Japan took initial steps to exclude it from the whitelist on August 2, 2019. As an emotional response to Japan's economic retaliation, South Korean civil society launched a social movement to avoid selling Japanese products, including beer and clothes, in the Korean market. Many Korean tourists also joined the campaign not to go to Japan for leisure activities. Following Japan's announcement, President Moon announced that South Korea would never lose the game against Japan, and promised to invest 5 trillion won by 2023 to expedite independent production of parts, materials, and machinery for Korean industries that heavily rely on Japanese products.

Despite popular outrage, President Moon toned down criticism against Japan in a speech on Independence Day, August 15, 2019, and suggested a negotiated solution of the pending issues. This was a pleasant surprise for Japan, but its government showed no signs of welcoming the dialogue; it simply took South Korea's positive initiative for granted. This caused another cycle of anger on the part of hawkish officials in South Korea's Blue House, which, on August 22, made an unexpected decision not to extend the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), which has a formal expiration date of November 22, 2019. Because Japan

claimed that South Korea was not a reliable partner in the security arena when removing it from the whitelist, the Blue House retorted that it could not continue to cooperate on security issues with a country that considered South Korea an unreliable partner. This meant that South Korea escalated economic tensions to affect the security relationship, while Japan initially escalated the diplomatic dispute to an economic dispute. Both governments are on a collision course, and do not know how to change direction. However, hours before the November 22 deadline, South Korea announced that it had suspended its planned decision to terminate GSOMIA.

Deeper Layer of Conflict: Diverging Regional Strategies

At a deeper level of tensions, though often unnoticed, lie the diverging regional strategies taken by both governments.

During the Cold War, South Korea and Japan maintained converging regional strategies, with little variation. Both countries stood firmly with the United States under the bipolar structure, and perceived the Soviet Union, China, and North Korea as major threats. Trilateral cooperation between the United States, South Korea, and Japan was regarded as a linchpin to regional security. The strategic priority given to trilateral cooperation was undoubtedly high.

However, in recent years—particularly after 2010—their respective regional strategies do not entirely overlap. After Prime Minister Abe assumed power in 2012, Japan presented itself as a proactive promoter of global diplomacy. Abe advocated the concept of “proactive peace” and active involvement in global affairs. He inherited and amplified the idea from Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's administration that international security is closely intertwined with Japan's national security. Globalizing the US-Japan alliance was a clear priority of the Abe cabinet, as it expanded the geographical coverage of the alliance from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific, which coincided with the US Indo-Pacific strategy. The United States and Japan stand together, under the banner of a free and open Indo-Pacific, to cope with the challenge of a rising China. The two nations share the common goal of countering China's active engagement in the wider region via the Belt and Road Initiative. The United States and Japan expect South Korea to jump on the platform, but the latter remains hesitant. As Japan turns its attention from the immediate threat of its closest neighbor, North Korea, to the wider regional theater of the Indo-Pacific, strategic priority given to South Korea is decreasing. In Japan's 2019 defense

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white paper, South Korea was ranked fourth in strategic priority after Australia, India, and Southeast Asia.

North Korea remains South Korea's primary strategic concern. As North Korea continues to develop its nuclear arsenal, South Korea has little choice but to cope with unprecedented security challenges. It strives to reduce tensions with North Korea, avoid another war on the Korean peninsula, and cope with the military threat by employing new defensive weapon systems. Due to the present threat from North Korea, South Korea has little room to widen the scope of its strategic parameters; the Moon administration tends to view its allies and partners in the context of its approach to enhancing cooperation with North Korea. The United States under President Trump is a reliable partner to President Moon, in that President Trump has prioritized efforts to induce dialogue and cooperation from North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un. Moon hopes to establish a new peace structure on the Korean peninsula by negotiating a solution for denuclearizing North Korea. Furthermore, Moon presumes that assisting North Korea's opening and economic reform is in the interest of South Korea and its immediate neighbors. For this purpose, eliciting positive appraisal and help from China in pacifying North Korea is critically important for the Moon administration, and it has no intention of antagonizing or containing China. A denuclearized North Korea, combined with an open economic system, is in both Chinese and South Korean interests. It is under this logic that South Korea takes a cooperative stance toward China. This is quite different from Japan, with its lingering suspicion over China's expansive regional strategy. While South Korea interprets China's position from a local prism of maintaining peace and stability on the Korean peninsula, Japan looks at China's position from a wider regional and global angle.

Prime Minister Abe has repeatedly claimed that he can hold summit meetings with Kim Jong-Un without attaching any conditions. He aims to resolve the issue of North Korean abductions of Japanese citizens, a major controversy between the two countries since Koizumi's visit to Pyongyang in 2002, and denuclearize North Korea, as its short- and long-range missiles pose direct threats to Japan's security. However, he puts higher strategic priority on resolving the abductee issue, as it serves his domestic political interest. Unlike the Moon administration, which sees UN sanction lifting as a positive step toward building a new peace structure on the Korean peninsula, the Abe cabinet firmly denounces the possibility of lifting sanctions without verifying the denuclearization process. South Korea and Japan are developing diverging approaches toward North Korea, though their interests may not be dissimilar. From this

angle, it is not an exaggeration to say that the Moon administration gives a lower strategic priority to inducing cooperation from Japan, while the Abe cabinet regards the Moon administration's approach toward North Korea with suspicion.

These strategic divergences constitute deeper roots of conflict between South Korea and Japan. Strategic suspicion hangs around in the minds of political leaders in both countries.

Submerged Cultural Foundation of Conflict: Generation Change in Political Leadership

Generational change in both South Korea and Japan has set a new tone for cooperative ties between the two countries. Prewar generations survived political storms and constituted the mainstream of political leadership in South Korea and Japan until the early 2000s.

In the case of South Korea, the demise of the so-called "three Kims," charismatic leaders who exerted strong coalitional and factional power on the political scene, constituted a new chapter of political struggle. Three Kims—Kim Young-Sam, Kim Dae-Jong, and Kim Jong-Pil—grew up during the colonial period. They could speak fluent Japanese, developed amicable personal ties with Japanese political leaders, and acquired the skills to engage with Japan diplomatically, although bilateral ties remained sour during their administrations. These powerful political leaders with personal attachments to Japan faded away after Kim Dae-Jong stepped down from the presidency in 2003. The next Korean president, Roh Moo-Yun, had no personal connections with Japan. South Korean presidents after Roh, including incumbent President Moon, are from the postwar generation.

When it comes to Japan, Prime Minister Mori Yoshiro might represent the last political leader who mastered traditional communication and political-maneuvering skills. He might also be the last political leader who exerted political influence through factional coalitional tactics. Prime Ministers Koizumi, Yasuo Fukuda, and Taro Aso partially overlap in terms of generational change in Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) politics. However, it is crystal clear that Prime Minister Abe represents the emergence of the postwar generation on the frontline of Japanese politics. He does not have any prewar experience, and he and his colleagues do not have any psychological debt to neighboring countries. They do not feel that they must repeatedly apologize to South Korea and China. These postwar-generation Japanese leaders are not bound by a sense of guilt—not

because of right-wing ideology, but because they do not have personal attachments to war and colonialism. They tend to stand firm in historical and territorial controversies involving neighboring countries. They take an assertive stance on defending Japan's national interests, and prioritize securing Japan's interests and promoting national pride.

Generational change in political leadership also influenced the diplomatic relationship with regional neighbors. After South Korea and Japan normalized diplomatic ties in 1965, South Korea remained dependent on Japan in terms of technology, capital, and skills. The relationship between the two developed more of a hierarchical nature. South Korea also adopted the Japanese model of economic development. In the early to mid-1990s, South Korea tried to get away from one-sided dependence on Japan. The South Korean firm Samsung began developing independent technology to produce sixty-four mega D-RAM for its semiconductor business in 1991. Hyundai motors, which previously imported automobile engines from Mitsubishi, developed its own in 1994. South Korean firms began actively expanding into the global market and competing with Japanese firms. After South Korea was hit by the Asian financial crisis in 1997, it sped up the process of intense globalization—not only in economic terms, but also in educational terms. Samsung, SK, Hyundai, LG, POSCO, and other corporations turned truly global, which put South Korean firms on par with their Japanese counterparts. The upgraded global status of South Korean firms elevated the sense of confidence and pride among Koreans, and postwar leaders naturally acquired a similar sense of pride and confidence. This feeling was reflected in diplomatic relations, especially in the handling of the Japan relationship. Constructing an equal partnership between South Korea and Japan became the government's new goal. This elevated confidence worked to facilitate cooperation between the two governments as equals, but it also allowed South Korean leaders to

speak up on issues they previously would have avoided.

Japanese postwar leaders were exposed to a different type of development. When these leaders were growing up, South Korea lagged behind Japan. However, when they began their careers, Japan's economy experienced a long-term stagnation called the "lost two decades." Pride and confidence among Japanese leaders weakened during this period of economic recession. South Korea, which they thought to be inferior to Japan, now posed a real competitive economic challenge to Japan. For example, in 2010, the total sales of Samsung Electronics surpassed those of Sony. This unprecedented experience alarmed Japanese postwar leaders. Some Japanese officials tried to develop a new type of equal partnership with South Korea, one different from the hierarchical relationship the two countries developed over time. However, right-wing political leaders in Japan developed a sense of competition, and even hatred. Some even condemned Japan's immediate neighbor as a country with which they did not want to get along. The latter group showed strong antipathy toward South Korea in the form of "Korea Fatigue," *kenkan* ("hating Korea"), or even *hankan* ("anti-Korea").

Clashes between these postwar-generation leaders made it hard for the two countries to find a middle ground in diplomatic disputes. Unlike postwar-generation political leaders in their late fifties through seventies, the younger generation in their twenties and early thirties in both countries grew up with totally different world experiences. They are much more pragmatic than ideological. They have developed a natural sense of the two countries being equal, and deal with each other on an equal footing. They are not afraid to express their political opinions candidly. They travel to each other's countries, irrespective of diplomatic tensions or thorny controversies between governments. In that sense, generational change is not simply a hurdle, but a possibility.

Ambiguous Role of the United States as an Amplifier of Conflict

The ambiguous or indecisive position of the United States is also aggravating the South Korea-Japan conflict. During and after the Cold War, US leaders actively encouraged friendship and partnership between South Korea and Japan. The United States highlighted both countries as good examples of democratic countries with market economies. Shared systemic qualities and similar operating norms served as a bond between the United States and its two allies in East Asia.

Ironically, after the end of the Cold War, the two US allies in East Asia began quarreling often. As those conflicts were related to territorial and historical controversies over which the United States had little say, conflicts between the two went farther than United States expected. The United States usually intervened only reluctantly, and at the last moment. The United States did so because deteriorating ties between South Korea and Japan did not serve US strategic interests, and hampered the smooth progress of trilateral security cooperation. The United States could not stand firm against a rising China if its two key allies in East Asia turned their backs on each other. Furthermore, conflict between two important allies could send other regional powers the wrong signal that US leadership is on the decline. For these reasons, the United States tended to intervene to avoid worse outcomes.

Though disputes between South Korea and Japan are getting worse, the United States still hesitates to get involved. One reason may be that historical issues are emotionally charged and tied up with national pride and domestic politics in both countries, and intervention by a third party may aggravate a volatile situation. In addition, if the United States suggests a compromise that is not accepted by either of the other two parties, the United States may lose face diplomatically.

Fence-Sitting with Patience?

There is no risk-free strategy for the United States; however, adopting a “fence-sitting” strategy for minimizing risk is not desirable. This strategy makes sense when the dust is likely to settle within a short period of time, with little chance of the dispute resurfacing. However, the current conflict between the two allies is not likely to evaporate soon, and could escalate further. South Korea and Japan are engaged not only in

diplomatic disputes, but in economic and security retaliations as well, and no one knows where the threshold lies. On August 22, South Korea refused to extend GSOMIA with Japan, which can be interpreted as a refusal to advance security cooperation, although the planned decision was later suspended hours before the deadline. Therefore, a US “wait-and-see” strategy may further aggravate the conflict between the two. The United States should seriously consider the best time to intervene.

A “fence-sitting” strategy may work if the United States can identify an appropriate moment to deliver its message and when it has confidence in managing not-so-desirable situations. If the two conflicting parties hurt their pride further, there is no guarantee that even the United States can stop or deescalate the situation. Conflict between the two may take a very ugly form if the United States remains indifferent and, without active US involvement, tensions are likely to continue.

Asymmetric Engagement?

If the goal is to revive trilateral cooperation, asymmetric engagement—siding with one party at the expense of the other—will also aggravate the situation. At the extremes, this could weaken the US alliance with one party, or result in pulling back US forces from one of the two allied nations. Most of all, this would send a wrong signal to neighboring countries that US security commitment in the region is undergoing fundamental change. Considering US military presence plays an important role for offshore balancing in the entire region, a weakening alliance with an ally may disrupt the regional balance of power and create a power vacuum. The fear of abandonment may drive the relatively abandoned party to seek a closer partnership with the United States. However, the country may also take a course of autonomy or independence for its survival, or even shift diplomatically to a US competitor. This will destabilize the regional security architecture.

Furthermore, even if the United States sends a signal that it would choose one partner at the expense of the other, the emotionally charged tensions between South Korea and Japan would not be easily pacified. Asymmetric engagement would ultimately give

strategic benefits to immediate neighbors like North Korea, China, and Russia by splitting US allies, and would provide little benefit to the United States, South Korea, or Japan. More often than not, the United States pursuing an asymmetric strategy will not produce the desired outcomes, and may create more turmoil and noise in the alliance network.

Assertive Engagement?

Can assertive US engagement work? It may, but this is a risky adventure. When it comes to military cooperation,

both South Korea and Japan are willing to follow US advice. However, there is a clear limit to the mutually acceptable solutions the United States can provide for historical and territorial controversies. Seemingly objective suggestions can be interpreted as a preference for one party over another party, and there is no guarantee that both parties would willingly accept a US proposal.

Another risk is that one may not find another mediator if the United States fails to narrow the gap between the two allies. The United States may be the last resort—and if the last resort does not work, who else can fix it? This is a practical diplomatic dilemma to consider.

Conditions for Enhancing Trilateral Cooperation

Resuming Efficient Direct Channels of Communication

As conflict between South Korea and Japan escalates, both parties understand the risks involved in sustained disputes. Though the two countries maintain hardline diplomatic stances against each other, that is not the only face they have. They are in search of exit options that are politically acceptable to both; however, it is not easy to find comfortable and mutually acceptable options. At the governmental level, three channels of communication have been important: foreign ministries for diplomatic dialogue, defense ministries for security cooperation, and economy and industry-related ministries for economic collaboration. However, Japan's Foreign Ministry has lost confidence in its South Korean counterpart, thinking that South Korea's Foreign Ministry is not in charge of forming and implementing foreign policy toward Japan. South Korea's Foreign Ministry interprets the situation the same way, thinking that Japan's Foreign Ministry is almost blindly following the guidelines set by the prime minister's office. Japan's Ministry of Defense became suspicious of South Korea's Ministry of Defense after the former imperial Japanese flag could not be used at the international Cavalry Ceremony hosted in South Korea in October 2018. The two ministries also quarreled over a South Korean naval ship's potentially offensive use of radar against a Japanese patrol plane in December 2018. Although the decision was not initiated by South Korea's Defense Ministry, its Japanese counterpart was alarmed by the (later suspended) August 22, 2019, planned decision not to extend GSOMIA, despite its critical importance for bilateral and trilateral security cooperation. Between the industry-related ministries, Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry abruptly—at least in the eyes its South Korean counterpart—initiated retaliatory economic measures against South Korea on July 1, 2019. South Korea's Ministry of Trade, Industry, and Energy retorted by introducing countermeasures when Japan decided to exclude South Korea from the whitelist. As a result, key government officials merely repeat official positions instead of talking to the other party with candor and sincerity during working-level discussions. Efficient channels of government-to-government communication between South Korea and Japan are either broken or working inefficiently.

Therefore, the first condition for enhancing trilateral cooperation is to reconstruct and resume channels of political and governmental communication between South Korea and Japan. Without dialogue and communication based on trust, no progress can be realized. Both Moon and Abe should give political endorsement to relevant ministries to find solutions to the deadlocked disputes between the two countries.

US Facilitation of Dialogue between South Korea and Japan

The United States may not be able to give advice on the content of the dialogue between South Korea and Japan, but it can still facilitate dialogue and communication between the two countries. The United States does not need to take a position regarding pending issues of conflict, but it can work as an impartial broker to facilitate and expedite compromise between the two key allies. During the Barack Obama administration, at a 2014 nuclear summit meeting in The Hague, President Obama arranged a meeting between the two reluctant leaders, President Park and Prime Minister Abe, to push forward dialogue. President Trump can adopt a similar strategy by inviting the two leaders for a talk at a multilateral summit meeting like Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) or the East Asia Summit. The fact that the three leaders are talking would relieve the psychological tension among the general public in all three countries.

Working on Transformative Order Together

Historical controversies have to be handled properly by South Korea and Japan. Trilateral cooperation should not stop at resolving conflicts between the two countries, but should include the active promotion of common agendas and interests. This includes the promotion of active strategic engagement on the Korean peninsula. This does not mean that the United States and Japan should blindly accept President Moon's initiative to bring peace on the peninsula. Rather, the three countries should agree on the principle that final and fully verified denuclearization of North Korea is a priority concern, and be ready for defensive security cooperation against

any North Korean threat at all times. The three countries can agree to go further, to move North Korea in a desirable direction so it is no longer a substantial threat. It may not be an easy task, but with trilateral coordination, all three countries can benefit from the cooperative handling of North Korea. The other transformative agenda is related to China. At the moment, trilateral security cooperation is focused on how to cope with increasing military, especially maritime, assertiveness in the Pacific. Rather than plainly focusing on defensive security cooperation, the three countries can coordinate their strategies to encourage China to accept a rules-based international order, enhance human-rights conditions, prioritize environmental concerns including global climate change, and work together to upgrade living standards of developing and underdeveloped countries. Containing China is not enough; cooperating with China on shared interests should be a priority. Combining engagement with containment can be a guiding spirit for coping with the challenge of a rising China. Standing on these common, proactive strategic platforms would strengthen trilateral cooperation between the United States, South Korea, and Japan.

Defending and Providing Global Public Goods

Continued provision of international public goods may be an enduring goal that the three countries share. Not all nations have the willingness or capacity to provide

and defend global common goods. Maritime security, cybersecurity, and peaceful and equal use of open air and space are gaining strategic importance for all members of the global community. Though several international organizations and countries are working on the issue, the United States, Japan, and South Korea can play leading roles in advancing and promoting global common goods. Keeping sea lanes of communication open, and maintaining free trade and free navigation, serves the interests of all three countries and all the nations in the world. For resource-poor countries like South Korea and Japan, maintaining free and open sea lanes of communication is like a lifeline for peace, stability, and prosperity. In cyberspace, there are not well-established rules or norms. The United States, Japan, and South Korea, as pioneers of cyber communication, can work proactively to establish global rules or norms for cyberspace. The same can be said for travel, exploration, and technology in space. Trilateral cooperation should be extended to the untouched spheres that are relatively neglected by global citizens.

In order to enhance trilateral cooperation, all three countries should go beyond the conventional Cold War mentality. Rather than simply working on a defensive strategy based on shared threat perceptions, co-designing transformative order in the region can be a new engine of trilateral cooperation and coordination. The three countries can open a new horizon of cooperation, especially in the area of global commons or international common goods.

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Cheol Hee Park is a dean and professor at the Graduate school of International Studies (GSIS). He was a director of Institute for Japanese Studies (IJS) at Seoul National University between 2012 and 2016. Dr. Park is a globally-known Japan specialist and widely covers the research areas of Korea-Japan relations and international relations in East Asia. He advises Korean Foreign Ministry, Unification Ministry and Defense Ministry. He also plays advisory functions at the Korea-Japan Parliamentary League, Joint Committee for Korea-Japan Cooperation, and Korea-Japan Friendship Society. He is an executive member of Seoul forum for International Affairs. He serves as an executive secretary of Korea-Japan forum, government-sponsored opinion leaders' forum. In his personal capacity, he serves as a board member of a few key think-tanks in Korea, including Sejong Institute, Asan Institute for Policy Studies, and East Asia Foundation. Dr. Park is a regular columnist at Chosun Ilbo since 2014 and Tokyo Shimbun since 2012. He is frequently interviewed by global media like New York Times, CNN, BBC, Asahi, Yomiuri and other newspapers regarding international relations in East Asia. He authored two books independently: *How Japan's Dietman Is Made* (Bungeishunju, 2000); and *LDP Politics and the Transformation of Postwar System in Japan* (SNU Press, 2011). He published many articles on East Asian politics and international relations in Korean, Japanese, and English at various journals, including *Asian Survey*, *Japanese Journal of Political Studies*, and *Korean Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies*. He is a co-author of several books, including *National Identities and Bilateral Relations* (Stanford, 2013), *Changing Power Relations in Northeast Asia* (Routledge, 2011), *US Leadership, History, and Bilateral Relations in Northeast Asia* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), *East Asia's Haunted Present* (Praeger International Security, 2008), and *Japan's Strategic Thought toward Asia* (Palgrave, 2007). He received his Ph.D. from Columbia University.

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