Tokyo and Seoul are indisputably Washington’s two most important allies in Asia. They are not only central to America’s security architecture for the region, they are also important economic partners and share common values such as democracy and a commitment to the rule of law. And yet the prospect of a deep and effective trilateral relationship among the three countries has proved elusive. Is there a path forward?

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China’s Rise, North Korea and Trilateral Co-operation

A US Perspective

America’s Recalcitrant Allies and Obstacles to Closer Ties

By T.J. Pempel

Japan and South Korea have been central players in the US framework for security in Asia, with significant American troop deployments and a dense web of economic, political, cultural and social ties linking the US to both countries.

But the thorny issues standing in the way of closer ties between Japan and South Korea remain one of the major impediments to achieving US policy goals in the region. T.J. Pempel examines the complexity of those issues.

Nevertheless, the US does want to present itself as leading a common effort to push back against what it sees as increasingly provocative Chinese behavior. Meanwhile, it is hard to treat North Korean behavior — as irksome as it may be to its neighbors — as a prelude to a major military confrontation, the outcome of which would undoubtedly be the quick defeat and obliteration of the current regime. US policy-makers thus fear that unwarranted Japanese and South Korean agitation over what divides them risks ignoring what should bring them together, thus preventing deeper trilateral collaboration on sanctions, ballistic missile defense and other common security tasks.

American efforts to wrangle its two key allies into closer co-operation now confront the additional uncertainties emanating from the new administration of US President Donald Trump. Trump focused his electoral campaign and his early post-election statements almost exclusively on ISIS and “radical Islamic fundamentalism” as America’s greatest security threat, at the expense of global climate change, Russia, China or even North Korea. Trump’s most prominent statements concerning American interests in the Asia-Pacific involved a disjointed set of lamentations about the allegedly bad deal that America was getting from its trade relations with China as well as Japan; imagined losses from American involvement with the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP); false claims that Japan and South Korea were not providing financial support for forward-deployed troops; the cavalier suggestion that the United States should not be upset if Japan and South Korea were to become nuclear powers.

Against this backdrop, at least three facets of American policy toward East Asia complicate its ongoing ties to Japan and South Korea, and threaten to widen the current fissures.

American Strategic Ambiguity
First, American strategic policy, particularly since the end of the Cold War, has hardly been a model of consistency. Spastic switches from one administration to the next, particularly when the political party occupying the White House changes, take on greater convulsions when the executive and the legislative branches are at odds, as they were from the 2010 elections until the current Republican dominance. Policy swings were sharp when George W. Bush replaced Bill Clinton and when Barack Obama replaced Bush. And executive-legislative battles were a complicating constant until the 2016 elections, which surprisingly gave the Republicans control of both houses of Congress as well as the White House.

Adding to the zig-zag quality of American policy, powerful domestic actors perceive “American national interests” in radically different ways, with some, for example, prioritizing traditional military security, while others prioritize economic or financial interests, and still others advocate multilateral co-operation on diverse issues from climate change to cybersecurity to ISIS.

Whether single-party dominance will spawn more cohesive US policies remains unclear, but intra-Republican tensions on issues such as security, budgets and trade have by no means been erased by the 2016 election.

It is worth examining strategic policy since Obama took office as a way to see not only the current baseline but the shifts that may be forthcoming. The Obama administration sought, with at best partial success, to end the Bush administration’s heavy commitment to the Middle East and Afghanistan; to revitalize the US domestic economy; to enhance multilateralism; to pursue an array of diplomatic goals; and in all of these, to emphasize the centrality of Asia-Pacific relations. The broad idea was expressed in the “rebal-
ancing” or “pivot” toward Asia, first articulated in a speech given by Obama in November 2011 in Canberra, Australia.

Early reactions to the policy shift concentrated extensively on America’s alliance structure and the plans to reposition additional naval forces in East Asia, spanning many facile conclusions, not least within China, that the pivot was no more than a thinly concealed effort to thwart China’s rise. Many American policy-makers were indeed motivated to react militarily to the rapid modernization of Chinese military forces, but the White House, in contrast, viewed the pivot as more nuanced and multidimensional.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton spelled out the diverse goals of rebalancing as involving “six key lines of action: strengthening bilateral security alliances; deepening our working relationships with emerging powers, including with China; engaging with regional multilateral institutions; expanding trade and investment; forging a broad-based military presence; and advancing democracy and human rights.”1

Ramped-up American involvement was manifested by, among other things, frequent visits to Asia by top US leaders; the US decision to sign the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Co-operation; the appointment of a US ambassador to ASEAN; the behind-the-scenes encouragement of regime change in Myanmar; American entry into the East Asia Summit along with its reinvigorated participation in the ASEAN Regional Forum and the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation forum; multilateral co-operation in police, disaster relief, and counterterrorism efforts; the vigorous pursuit of investments in the region and the more explicit embrace of geo-economics as an integral component of America’s regional strategy. The latter included the bilateral Strategic and Economic Dialogue with China, the Korea-US free-trade pact (KORUS), and, perhaps most critically, the Obama administration’s vigorous pursuit of TPP.

The geo-economic dimension proved the hardest as domestic American political divisions, including within the Democratic Party, helped stymie what was once a key tool of American foreign policy, namely, national economic and financial muscle. Domestic economic disagreements, most noticeably over the TPP, added to doubts about the US commitment to the region. Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong told an August 2016 meeting before the US Chamber of Commerce: “the ratification of the TPP would serve as “a litmus test of [American] credibility.”2 Now, of course, Trump has pulled the US out of TPP.

In contrast to a relatively unified China, any US strategy of issue linkage will be problematic to achieve, largely as the consequence of the deeply fragmented nature of US domestic politics. This obstacle is now bolstered by the Trump administration’s quick embrace of trade protectionism and its announced preference for bilateral over multilateral engagement with all countries. Neither Japanese nor South Korean policy-makers have shown high levels of confidence in America’s ability to provide unambiguous regional leadership; their worries have multiplied since the election of Trump.

Most countries in Asia were pleased with Obama’s repositioning, statements about America’s commitment to the region and the TPP. But the depth of that commitment has been questioned due to America’s ongoing engagement in the Middle East, now boosted by Trump’s priority on “defeating ISIS”; China’s unchecked maritime expansion, along with its willingness to pour large resources into Asian infrastructure development, and most recently, the realization that years of painful multilateral negotiation to complete the TPP have been upended by Trump’s termination of American participation.

American efforts to wrangle its two key allies into closer co-operation now confront the additional uncertainties emanating from the new administration of US President Donald Trump. Trump focused his electoral campaign and his early post-election statements almost exclusively on ISIS and “radical Islamic fundamentalism” as America’s greatest security threat, at the expense of global climate change, Russia, China or even North Korea. Trump’s most prominent statements concerning American interests in the Asia-Pacific involved a disjointed set of lamentations.

US POLICY TOWARD CHINA
Second, of special salience to American relations with Japan and South Korea is the US generally, and the Obama administration specifically, had pursued a multi-dimensional and complex effort to shape China’s global and regional behavior. While both Japan and South Korea would like clear signals from the US regarding China, both are at times frustrated by mixed messages of “containment” and “engagement,” even if the two countries often differ in their approaches to China. America’s China policy for a decade or more has rarely provided unambiguous telegraphing of its foreign-policy goals. Economic and security relations between the US and China have been multi-dimensional and complicated, and they are only becoming more so. Economic interdependence can be mapped across numerous dimensions, but essentially, Chinese capital and products are indispensable to the funding of America’s debt and the low prices paid by its consumers. In turn, US investment and technology are equally vital to China’s long-term economic development. Adding complexity are the two countries’ numerous overlapping interests on non-traditional security issues such as global warming, pandemics, human trafficking, ISIS terrorism, piracy and others. Offsetting such unifiers are deep differences over security, cyber-hacking and human rights, among other things. The US, particularly under Obama, attempted to balance these competing elements, while seeking to get China to align its interests more closely with the existing regional and global order.

When asked by Jeffrey Goldberg, in his famous interview with The Atlantic magazine, which country he considered the most vital to US interests, Obama unhesitatingly said: “China.” Elaborating, he added: “If we get [the US-China relationship] right and China contin-
ues on a peaceful rise, then we have a partner that is growing in capability and sharing with us the burdens and responsibilities of maintaining an international order.” He concluded: “I’ve been very explicit in saying that we have more to fear from a weakened, threatened China than a successful, rising China … where China’s actions are undermining international interests … We have been able to mobilize most of Asia to isolate China in ways that have surprised China, frankly, and have very much served our interest in strengthening our alliances.” 3 Or, as Assistant Secretary of State Danny Russell put it more succinctly: “We need to build on areas where our interests converge and manage areas where our interests may conflict.” 4 This mixed orientation did not always resound well in Japan and South Korea, both of whom often define their policies toward China differently. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, convinced of China’s rising military threat, for example, is anxious to have the US declare its unambiguous support for Japanese claims of sovereignty over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. South Korea, less worried about China as a security challenge and lacking explicit maritime disputes, worries that US pressure to introduce the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile system into South Korea will trigger retaliatory Chinese economic sanctions.

This division is sure to worsen if the Trump administration continues moving toward confrontation with China, either exclusively over trade and currency issues or, as US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has suggested, by confronting China over its island builds in the South China Sea. A US-China trade war would inevitably damage Japanese and South Korean companies invested in China. An escalation in security tensions would likely see Japan rushing to embrace the US for “finally” acknowledging the dangers posed by China. South Korea is almost certain to be far more cautious, worried both about its economic ties with China and the possible implications of a US-China confrontation on intra-Korean relations.

**The US should endeavor to convince leaders in both countries to downplay what divides them and play up areas of agreement. This will not be easy given their recent interactions. The tenuous warming of relations between Japan and South Korea offers some hope, but Japan’s deeply divisive nationalism is unlikely to abate, given the strong likelihood that Abe will remain prime minister for several more years. And none of the probable replacements for President Park express a desire to improve ties with Japan.**


**Brokering Japan-South Korea Ties**

Third, the issues that animate Japanese and South Korean politicians to castigate one another have little resonance in US foreign-policy circles. The most powerful drivers of American foreign policy are found in ahistorical, pragmatic and unemotional calculations. Consequently, American policy-makers show little empathy for mythologized historical “memories” that reignite old grudges and resuscitate attempts at historical score-settling. American alliance managers view such behavior as particularly nettlesome in respect to the continual recrudescence of such “memories” to Japan and Korea, even as such issues have been most poisonous to joint Japanese-South Korean co-operation for much of the past 20 years.

Japanese-South Korean tensions are somewhat ironic, given that virtually all of the non-strategic issues that pull the US and China into interdependence are similar for Japan and South Korea. China is the major trade partner of each; South Korean and Japanese firms are deeply invested in China and their bilateral trade and investment ties with one another are longstanding and ongoing.

In 2012, all three countries even signed a trilateral investment treaty. Furthermore, both Japan and South Korea have specific co-operative projects with China on the environment, fisheries, maritime security and a host of other issues. In addition, the Trilateral Security Summits and the Seoul-based secretariat that supports them have institutionalized positive connections among all three and provide a further impetus for Japan-South Korea co-operation. Tokyo and Seoul also acknowledge a common security challenge from North Korea’s missile launches and growing nuclear arsenal. For South Korea, the military threat and ultimate reunification take top billing; for Japan, the issue of Japanese abductees periodically muddies the hard-core security picture, but both Seoul and Tokyo share a common anxiety about provocative North Korean military actions. Moreover, both countries have longstanding security alliances with the US, host major American military bases and participate with the US and one another in joint military exercises such as the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC). From a US policy perspective, these powerful communalities should ensure that Japan and South Korea move forward on parallel tracks.

Nevertheless, bilateral Japanese-South Korean relations have been pockmarked by problems throughout the postwar period. In June 1965, after years of negotiations, the two countries signed a normalization treaty under which Japan provided US$800 million in assistance to its former colony. Over the next three decades, bilateral relations ebbed and flowed until something of a high point was attained in October 1996 with the Kim-Obuchi summit. Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo issued an official apology for the suffering Japan had caused its former colony while President Kim Dae-jung, in turn, praised Japan for its post-war achievements and promised to “put history behind us.” When South Korea and Japan co-hosted the World Cup in 2002 and there was an explosion in cultural exchanges, it seemed to herald an improved bilateral trajectory.

An ironic wedge was driven into US-Japan-South Korea relations, however, that roughly corresponded to the overlapping tenures of George W. Bush, Koizumi Junichiro and Kim Dae-jung (and to some extent Roh Moo-hyun). Under its animated reaction to the “axis of evil,” the Bush administration broke with President Bill Clin-
tions and diplomatic rapprochement with North Korea. The new American hard line ran directly counter to Kim’s Sunshine Policy of economic and diplomatic engagement with North Korea. Meanwhile, Koizumi used the attacks of 9/11 to tighten US-Japan security relations, enhance the status and muscularity of the Japanese military and dispatch Japanese Self-Defense Forces into combat areas in Afghanistan and Iraq for the first time. For the US, closer ties with Japan were offset by worsening ties with China and South Korea, as Koizumi followed through on his campaign promise to resume official visits to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine, after a 20-year hiatus of such prime ministerial visits. These shrine visits were seen by Korea (and also by China) as raising the red flag of Japanese nationalism.

Following further undulations, there was some demonstrable improvement in Japan-South Korea relations during the presidency of Lee Myung-bak because of his close relations with Japanese foreign minister Aso Taro. The two met as many as eight times between the last quarter of 2008 and the first quarter of 2009. Additionally, in early 2009, Japan and South Korea signed their first formal defense pact, covering a wide range of military co-operation measures.

Bilateral Japan-South Korea ties were, however, poisoned under Prime Minister Abe Shinzo and President Park Geun-hye. Relations were damaged by Abe’s visit to Yasukuni, his persistent calls for constitutional revisions, his periodical assertions of Japanese sovereignty over the Korean-administered Dokdo islands (known in Japan as Takeshima) and his wink-and-nod skepticism regarding the Japanese military’s behavior in the Second World War.

President Park played her part, however. Frostiness between the two leaders was evident in the fact that their first post-inauguration phone call did not come until March 2013, a month after Park was sworn into office. Previously scheduled high-level meetings were cancelled by South Korea, and Park refused to meet bilaterally with Abe, describing him as not having a “correct understanding of history.” She continually stoked nationalist sentiments against Japan, and South Korean public opinion of Abe plummeted to a level even below that of Kim Jong Un.2

In addition, Park was the only leader from an industrial democracy to attend China’s ceremony celebrating the 70th anniversary of the “victory over imperialism and fascism” (read: “Japan”). Her administration further insisted on rewriting history textbooks to convey “correct” history to younger Koreans, a view laced with castigating assertions of Japanese apologies of varying depth and domestic nationalists rather than continue earlier moves toward improved bilateral ties.

It is clear that the US faces an ongoing set of challenges in Northeast Asia that will now be the responsibility of the Trump administration. Relations with China will remain testy. North Korea’s “bad behavior” is unlikely to dissipate. But equally problematic will be efforts to reassure its two allies, Japan and South Korea, of America’s longstanding commitment to the region as well as to their interests. To this end, the US should endeavor to convince leaders in both countries to downplay what divides them and play up areas of agreement. This will not be easy given their recent interactions. The tenacious warming of relations between Japan and South Korea offers some hope, but Japan’s deeply divisive nationalism is unlikely to abate, given the strong likelihood that Abe will remain prime minister for several more years. And none of the probable replacements for President Park express a desire to improve ties with Japan. In that instance, American efforts to weave Japan and South Korea into its broader regional agenda are bound to remain daunting, particularly in the face of the Trump administration’s “America first” bluster and apparent skepticism about alliances and multilateralism. Finally, the singular security focus of Trump on ISIS along with his fascination with Vladimir Putin suggests that the US is unlikely to expend much policy-making energy in shepherding its two most important Asian allies toward greater co-operation in the pursuit of common trilateral goals.

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1. Japan since her father has long been criticized for being too close to Japan. And surely, the Abe administration’s regular tilts to the political right facilitated Park’s efforts. More problematic is the fact that official actions by the South Korean government have been stymied of late due to Park’s impeachment and the absence of any official presidential commitment to improved bilateral ties.

2. To all of this can be added the most recent bilateral dustup over statues of comfort women in South Korea. Japanese government officials have recently been insisting, despite all evidence to the contrary, that the December 2015 bilateral agreement on comfort women included an official South Korean commitment to ensure removal of the comfort woman statue placed in South Korea. Japanese government officials have been stymied of late due to Park’s administration’s regular tilts to the political right.

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