

Including Japan in South Korea's "Trustpolitik"

By Leif-Eric Easley¹

How can Seoul and Tokyo break their current cycle of mistrust? President Park Geun-hye has been in office over a year, and her administration has kept her campaign promise of framing South Korean foreign policy according to the concept of "trustpolitik."² The Park administration has taken a principled approach toward North Korea and made some progress on economic and social exchanges with Pyongyang, even while strengthening military deterrence. Outreach toward China has been reciprocated by Beijing, and Seoul's alliance with Washington remains strong. But South Korea's relations with Japan have suffered a notable decline in trust. Park long refused to meet with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, citing the need for Japan to deal with history issues.³

A meeting among Park, Abe and President Obama on the sidelines of the Nuclear Security Summit at the Hague in March 2014 offers an opportunity to improve relations. Trust is a two-way street and the ball rests in no one country's court. Troubled relations between Tokyo and Seoul are against the national interests of South Korea, Japan and the United States.⁴ Two key American allies improving trust between them will help realize shared efforts for dealing with North Korea, alleviate political tensions in Northeast Asia, and secure the regional stability needed for continued economic growth. Progress on functional issues of mutual interest will, in turn, reinforce levels of trust in a virtuous cycle of cooperation, dispelling ominous comparisons of Asia today with Europe in 1914 or 1938.⁵

To rebuild trust between Tokyo and Seoul, this article offers three sets of recommendations. The first set is about preventing the situation from getting worse. Practicing diplomatic restraint is a matter of being strategic about national interests, not sacrificing core principles. The second set involves expanding and demonstrating the value of functional cooperation. By racking up bilateral accomplishments, policies can have positive feedback on perceptions. The third set of recommendations focuses on historical reconciliation. Meaningful commitment displayed in symbolic gestures, and sustained respect for each other's national identities, can enhance a politically powerful sense of community and shared future.

1. Restraint on matters of history and territory

1.1. Yasukuni Shrine is a matter for Japanese, not international criticism, to decide

Yasukuni is a domestically contested memorial, with many Japanese disagreeing about who should or should not be honored there, and whether a new secular memorial is needed. The vast majority of millions of souls enshrined at Yasukuni were not war criminals; every nation has the right to honor its dead, and respect is usually afforded to the personal convictions of leaders to do so. Private expressions of international concern over revisionist elements associated with Yasukuni (such as the version of history offered at the Yushukan Museum) can be helpful, but public criticism from other governments is counterproductive to a domestic process whereby Japanese gradually resolve how to offer tribute to fallen warriors without glorifying the evils of past wars.

In the meantime, a critical mass of Japan's foreign policy experts believe that, for Japan's own national interests, a sitting Japanese prime minister should not visit Yasukuni until the Japanese people resolve the "tainted monument" issue. Prime ministerial visits to Yasukuni strain ties with Seoul and hand Beijing a hammer to swing at Japan. It may be unreasonable to expect a prime minister to publicly commit to avoiding Yasukuni, as this would elicit domestic charges of disrespecting the nation's war dead and caving to international pressure. But returning to the policy of not going without promising not to go, while allowing government liaisons to offer assurances of "no surprises," would do much to avoid further deterioration in Japan's diplomatic relations.

1.2. Avoid internationalizing history disputes

The Chinese government maintains an unabashed strategy of using Yasukuni and other history issues as a diplomatic weapon against Japan. Tragically for Seoul-Tokyo ties, the South Korean government has undertaken a policy of supporting civil society groups that promote anti-Japanese sentiment abroad. Japanese diplomats are thus coming under domestic pressure to counter overseas Korean efforts to erect “comfort women” statues and revise American textbooks to label the Sea of Japan as the “East Sea” of Korea.

However, it would be self-defeating for the Japanese government to quarrel with Korean-Americans on American soil. Such efforts are likely to fail and incur damage for Japan’s reputation. Instead, Japanese-Americans can make clear that actions that divide the Asian-American community are misguided, and leaders in Washington can provide political cover for local governments by stating that the textbooks of American children and parks of American towns are not appropriate battlegrounds for feuding international friends. Korean concerns about history merit careful attention from Tokyo, but by taking its grievances global, Seoul will see its own reputation suffer. Women’s rights and Korea’s reputation would both be better served if, instead of taking historical grievances to the UNHRC and UNESCO, Seoul focused on improving Korea’s position from last place in OECD rankings on gender equality.⁶

1.3. Engage in “self-policing” to prevent nationalist spirals

Both Japan and South Korea are vibrant democracies, so consensus of opinion is not possible or even desirable within either country. But citizens and particularly public figures on both sides need to criticize and hold accountable their countrymen who make extremist and nationalist remarks. Citing “personal freedom of speech” is no excuse for allowing inflammatory and revisionist statements to go unchallenged. Self-policing is needed for civil public debate and to prevent a rapid spiral in diplomatic relations driven by the interaction of hardliners focused on parochial interests and selfish political gains. Both Korea and Japan ought to abstain from pushing patriotic education in public broadcasting, textbooks, and instructional guidelines. Japanese leaders can do more to protect the Kono and Murayama statements to ensure that Japan’s official remorse for the past is understood internationally. Meanwhile, more Korean opinion leaders need to stand up and explain publicly why productive relations with Japan are in Korea’s national interests.

1.4. Minimize actions over disputed islets

The Liancourt Rocks have great importance in terms of identity politics, but much less material value in the context of larger issues at stake in Japan-Korea economic and security relations. While a territorial understanding is possible between Seoul and Tokyo, conditions will not be ripe for the foreseeable future. As Korea controls the islets and Japan responsibly refrains from physically contesting that control (in contrast to Chinese behavior over the Senkakus), the issue can be managed if both sides tone down their competing public relations campaigns. This would mean not increasing mention in official documents or educational texts, sticking to existing articulations of policy when the issue comes up in parliament or in press conferences, and abstaining from elevating government participation in “Takeshima Day” and “Dokdo Day.”

Korean government officials would be prudent to remind the Korean media that Japan has made no physical provocation concerning the islets, so Korean diplomacy should not hype the issue, as doing so actually suggests there is a territorial dispute where Seoul maintains there is none. Many other countries disagree about a line on the map between them, but manage to prevent the issue from spilling over into areas of significant mutual interest. Toward that end, South Korea and Japan can better enforce fisheries agreements and avoid wasting money on public campaigns that cause both sides to lose trust, not only with each other, but also with other countries.

2. Increase functional cooperation

2.1. Resume high-level bilateral diplomacy to empower the working-level

To overcome strong anti-Japanese sentiment in Korea and growing anti-Korean sentiment in Japan, positive signals are needed from the heads of government. The resumption of summit meetings will help set the bilateral agenda and provide momentum for working-level negotiations. Professional diplomats and government officials who know well how to represent and advance national interests in Japan-Korea relations have had their hands tied because their bosses were not talking with each other. Many domestic political actors matter, but it is up to Park and Abe to set the tone for diplomacy. U.S. officials are wise to avoid taking sides or sounding like history teachers, but President Obama's April visit to Asia could be an action-forcing event for coordination among the three countries.

2.2. Deepen trilateral cooperation with the U.S.

There is much to discuss in terms of trilateral cooperation. Frequent working-level consultations, such as those among Six-party Talks representatives, are key for coordinating regional and international security policies, including dealing with North Korea. More combined exercises, from trilateral search and rescue, to multilateral military exercises such as RIMPAC, will improve readiness and interoperability. Defense trilateral talks are an important mechanism for pursuing maritime and missile defense cooperation. When political conditions improve, South Korea and Japan can sign a General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) for intelligence sharing, and an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) providing logistical basis for further contingency planning.

Working-level progress could culminate in a trilateral security statement at a 2+2+2 meeting of foreign affairs and defense ministers. In the meantime, a Track-1.5 consultative mechanism organized by policy think tanks would be useful for transparency of the planned revision of U.S.-Japan alliance guidelines. Those revisions are of interest to South Korea as they may involve cyber, space, upgraded exercises, disaster relief, capacity building, and Japan possibly exercising its right of collective self-defense. On the trade side, the Trans-Pacific Partnership will not be easy to conclude, but could also enhance U.S.-Japan-Korea trilateralism, especially in terms of norm and standard setting in the Asia-Pacific.

2.3. Strengthen commitment to Japan-Korea-China trilateralism

Advancing international norms and standards is particularly urgent in the context of Japan and South Korea's relations with China. There is already much functional integration among the three countries, driven by business interests. Governments can do more by agreeing on standards for air pollution reduction, intellectual property protection, and crisis communication in case of a maritime incident, natural disaster or pandemic disease. A coordinating body already exists — the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat in Seoul — but its efforts have been hampered by a failure of national leaders to meet each other. For building trust and stability in Northeast Asia, the governments of China, Korea and Japan should agree not to cancel trilateral meetings because of bilateral disputes or domestic political calendars.

2.4. Coordinate development assistance

South Korea is becoming an influential player in overseas development assistance (ODA). South Korea joined the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the OECD in 2009 — the first former aid recipient country to do so. South Korea since pledged to double its ODA, which is significant when many countries' aid budgets are under downward pressure. However, South Korea's aid policy is experiencing growing pains, especially given an apparent priority of benefiting Korean companies. As one of the world's top donors, Japan has much experience in improving aid programs and policies, and can be an

important partner for Korea. The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) can do more to coordinate on best practices, efficiency, and effectiveness of development assistance in Myanmar, Africa and elsewhere. Such coordination will benefit recipient countries, and will help build trust between Japan and South Korea regarding each other's international contributions.

3. Redouble efforts at reconciliation

3.1. Recall past accomplishments

The South Korean and Japanese governments, and especially the Korean media, do not sufficiently recognize and remind their publics of past bilateral accomplishments. These include rapid and integrated economic development and technological advancement, trade promotion policies, trilateral cooperation with the U.S. over North Korea's nuclear program, and coordinated engagement of China and ASEAN. Tokyo and Seoul often support each other in hours of need, including during the Asian Financial Crisis, in the face of North Korea's 2010 attacks on South Korea, and after Japan's March 11, 2011 earthquake and tsunami. The two sides should recall the understanding on matters of history achieved by the 1998 Kim-Obuchi statement.⁷ These accomplishments ought to be celebrated in 2015 as Japan and Korea mark fifty years since diplomatic normalization.

3.2. Korea-based compensation for Korean wartime labor

The 1965 Korea-Japan normalization treaty legally settled all claims related to Japan's colonization of South Korea. However, the treaty remains controversial because the then Korean government did not disburse the large amount of money paid by Japan to all deserving individuals in Korea. Instead, the funds were mostly invested in modernizing the Korean economy. Recently, the Korean government has moved away from recognizing the 1965 agreement as having closed compensation claims, and Korean courts have ruled in favor of new compensation for wartime laborers. If such rulings are upheld after appeal, there would be serious repercussions for Korea-Japan political and economic relations.

President Park often recalls the legacy of her father, former President Park Chung-hee, in building the economic "Miracle on the Han River." Park could also address how her father's government used the enormous sums that came with normalizing relations with Japan. The current Korean government would be judicious to uphold the 1965 treaty, while setting up a public-private fund for outstanding compensation of wartime laborers. Japanese companies could then voluntarily contribute to the fund.

3.3. Peace for women scarred by war

Japanese government officials are not in a moral position to argue about details of "comfort women" history (e.g. how many were coerced by Japanese, how many by Koreans, how many volunteered and were compensated, to what extent other countries committed comparable atrocities, etc.) At the same time, Seoul ought to avoid pushing an oversimplified history of "sex slaves" where all Koreans were good and all bad actions were committed by Japanese. Nationalism stands in the way of reconciliation, as in the 1990s when the Asian Women's Fund failed to achieve its mission, in part because some Korean activists wanted to continue using the "comfort women" as an anti-Japanese symbol.

In 2012, Japan was close to offering a new apology, taxpayer funded compensation, and a visit by the Japanese ambassador to each survivor. As a matter of human rights and decency, these women deserve closure, and as they are advanced in years, their number dwindles every month. The Korean government should make clear what gesture it will accept, and then help implement and domestically defend the agreement, so that a final Japanese gesture for the "comfort women" can be realized without delay.

3.4. Joint commemorations, academic and media projects

Joint commemorations and shared understandings of war have facilitated the establishment of a security community in Europe. Europeans know well the image of German Chancellor Willy Brandt falling to his knees before the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes in Warsaw in 1970, and of German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and French President François Mitterrand grasping hands at the Douaumont cemetery at Verdun in 1984. Japanese and Koreans need a similar reconciliation event photograph in their textbooks.

Joint textbook publishing remains difficult given the gap between official histories, but cooperative Japan-Korea research can be encouraged and supported by the respective governments. Educational and cultural exchanges should be expanded rather than held hostage to political cycles. Regular study trips by legislators and journalists would promote stronger ties and informed policymaking. Media cooperation could include a joint public broadcasting channel similar to the European Cultural Channel ARTE, a successful collaboration of French and German public broadcasting. Mutual respect of cultures and shared understandings of history are the foundations for building agreement on Asia's future.

Conclusion: toward a shared vision of regional order

All these recommendations involve Japanese and Korean responsibility. Tactics of delay, isolation, and exchanging recriminations run counter to national and regional interests. Lack of trust is preventing Tokyo and Seoul from acting on shared values, mutual security concerns, and broad agreement on international norms. By deepening trust, South Korea and Japan will not only enhance their own security and economic prospects, they will gain leverage in dealing with North Korea, be able to more productively engage China from a position of strength, and fortify relations with the United States. Restoring trust first requires that leaderships do no further harm to bilateral relations over historical and territorial sensitivities. Officials can then demonstrate the value of bilateral relations via expanded functional cooperation. Finally, leaders with strategic vision can invest political capital in sustained reconciliation to see that Asia's future greatly improves upon its past.

Notes

¹ Assistant Professor, Division of International Studies at Ewha University and Research Fellow, Asan Institute for Policy Studies in Seoul. The author appreciates valuable feedback from numerous scholars and policymakers, including during a visiting fellowship at the Japan Institute for International Affairs (JIIA). The analysis presented in this article is solely that of the author and does not represent the views of any affiliated institutions.

² Geun-hye Park, "A New Kind of Korea: Building Trust Between Seoul and Pyongyang," *Foreign Affairs*, September 2011; <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/68136/park-geun-hye/a-new-kind-of-korea>. Park has labeled trustpolitik at the regional level as the "Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative."

³ Jiyoung Kim, Karl Friedhoff, Chungku Kang and Euicheol Lee, "Korea-Japan Relations in 2014," Asan Institute for Policy Studies, March 2014; <http://en.asaninst.org/challenges-and-opportunities-for-korea-japan-relations-in-2014>.

⁴ Leif-Eric Easley, "Korean Courage to Deal with Japan," *American Foreign Policy Interests*, Vol. 36, No. 1, January/February 2014, pp. 25-33; <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10803920.2014.879516>.

⁵ Keith Bradsher, "Philippine Leader Sounds Alarm on China," *New York Times*, February 4, 2014; <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/06/world/asia/philippines.html>.

⁶ Statement by South Korean Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se at the 25th Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), March 5, 2014; <http://www.mofa.go.kr/webmodule/htsboard/template/read/engreadboard.jsp?typeID=12&boardid=14137&seqno=313472>; "S. Korea wants 'comfort women' on United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) list," *Taipei Times*, January 16, 2014; <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2014/01/16/2003581394>; for an interactive representation of Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) data on gender equality, see *The Economist* "Glass Ceiling Index" at <http://www.economist.com/news/business/21598669-bestand-worstplaces-be-working-woman-glass-ceiling-index>.

⁷ Japan-Republic of Korea Joint Declaration: A New Japan-ROK Partnership towards the Twenty-first Century, October 8, 1998; <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/korea/joint9810.html>.