

Fresh Opportunities for Japan-Korea Cooperation

By Jonathan Berkshire Miller

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A recent joint-poll from Japan's Genron NPO and Korea's East Asia Institute paints a grim picture of Japan-Korea relations. Nearly 55 percent of Japanese expressed a negative image of Korea, while over 70 percent of Koreans had negative feelings about Japan. Even more troubling is that nearly half of Koreans identified Japan as a "military threat" – numbers that dwarfed Koreans' concerns about China.

Those results track developments – or the lack thereof – in the relationship. The first 18 months of the "Abe-Park" era have been disappointing even to the most cynical observers of Japan-Korea relations. Both sides have traded barbs, either overtly or through nationalist gestures. Abe Shinzo and Park Geun-hye have met on a few occasions, but they have been frosty encounters, as evidenced by the awkward photos from last year's Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation leaders' meeting. Ties have become so strained that Park said that a summit with Abe would be "pointless," a position that appears to have been vindicated by Abe's decision to visit Yasukuni Shrine at the end of 2013. Abe's contentious views on history have only widened the divide between the two countries.

Disagreements between Tokyo and Seoul damage much more than the Japan-Korea relationship. Sour ties also undermine efforts with the US to maintain a united trilateral front against North Korean provocations, as well as preparing for conflict with or regime collapse in the North. Greater trilateral security cooperation between the United States, Japan, and Korea is critical because: it can strengthen Washington's extended deterrence commitments to Japan and South Korea, which have a shared interest in containing future provocations by Pyongyang; while not aiming to contain China, it can provide a more reliable hedge against Beijing's efforts to exploit fissures in the US alliance network; and finally, trilateral cooperation in nontraditional security areas, such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), will complement the US rebalance to the Asia-Pacific.

There are other strategic implications beyond deterrence of Pyongyang, however. For example, the broken relationship between Japan and Korea has opened the door to stronger ties between Seoul and Beijing. This reinvigorated relationship was on full display when Park Geun-hye welcomed Chinese President Xi Jinping to Seoul in July 2014 for an official state visit, the symbolism of which was magnified by both leaders' refusal to meet with Abe. Abe's stance on history, along with

other factors such as Beijing's disenchantment with North Korea, has helped bring together Korea and China.

Against this backdrop, it is critical to look at other ways in which Japan and Korea can work together, on issues that transcend the focus on trilateral deterrence with Washington. By focusing narrowly on either historical grievances or bare-bones cooperation to deal with North Korea, both Tokyo and Seoul are missing out on a host of useful areas of collaboration – many of which have strong roots but lack proper nurturing. There are a number of promising avenues for non-sensitive cooperation, including counter-piracy, energy security, and ties between inter-parliamentary groups. These areas can complement the essential drive for a unified position and the sharing of information to deter provocations by Pyongyang.

One positive move would be for both countries to better utilize their inter-parliamentary groups as a 'human hotline.' These groups, which have a long history in Japan-Korea relations, can help contain political controversies by serving as a consultation mechanism to ruling parties. Another prime area for cooperation is energy security. Japan and Korea both receive over 80 percent of their primary energy consumption from abroad. Both nations have a national security interest in securing a stable supply of energy and resources, increasing their usage-efficiencies, and preventing environment pollution.

Another area for cooperation is joint work on counter-piracy and securing sea lanes. Japan and Korea are two of the world's largest trading nations and each has more than \$1 trillion in total global trade annually, the majority of which is conducted by sea. It would be beneficial for Tokyo and Seoul to enhance bilateral efforts to guarantee the safety of sea lines of communication. Japan and Korea could adopt a small-scale version of the US-Canada Shiprider Program in which officers from one Coast Guard are delegated to vessels of the other for a period of time. Initially, this could be limited to the duration of bilateral or multilateral drills. Later, both the number of crew members on such 'exchanges' as well as the duration of each stay could increase, ultimately achieving active involvement in regular operational activities of the other force.

These initiatives must be complemented by parallel efforts at the political level that would bring Seoul and Tokyo together in a mutually acceptable compromise over historical and territorial issues. As a start, both sides must recognize that incremental change is better than no change. A 'grand bargain' may not be realistic now, but both sides can work toward this goal through a reduction of the current trust deficit. In this sense, Japan and Korea should continue to look.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.