



Memo to Prime Minister Aso: Build Trilateralism
by Brad Glosserman and Scott Snyder

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Japan's new prime minister, Aso Taro, takes office facing many difficult if not intractable problems, not least of which is securing a ruling coalition for his Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Beyond politics, the situation is equally bleak, given Japan's moribund economy, global financial volatility, and a pervasive gloom that has descended over the country. But, based on elite surveys and interviews we conducted in Japan and South Korea during the past year, we believe the new government could make a bold initiative that would pay important dividends both domestically and internationally.

There is a real opportunity to stabilize and strengthen relations between Japan and South Korea. This may seem counterintuitive, given the ill will that dominates relations between the two countries and Aso's record of provocative statements denying aspects of Korean suffering during the Japanese colonial period. There is a basis for such an initiative, however. Moreover, realization of this proposal would open the way for the United States to knit together the two alliances on the basis of a commonality of interests derived from values – the common ties the United States, South Korea, and Japan have as prosperous, stable democracies – and could even serve as the cornerstone of a larger, regional security framework.

A basis for action

At first blush, the idea of stabilizing the South Korea-Japan relationship and strengthening trilateral relations with the United States and South Korea may seem hopelessly optimistic (if not naïve) in light of their history. However, our data suggests there is a stronger foundation for this initiative than is commonly believed and could pay real dividends for Japan and the region. Such a move would build on the efforts of Aso's immediate predecessors, Prime Ministers Abe Shinzo and Fukuda Yasuo, who made improving relations with South Korea, which were much damaged during the Koizumi years, a priority.

Any effort to promote a regionalized approach to security in Northeast Asia is in large part dependent on Japan. In Tokyo, the feasibility of any security effort begins with its alliance with the U.S. Fortunately, the state of the alliance is

good. Overwhelming majorities of respondents say the U.S. is Japan's most important security partner and that the alliance is vital to Japan's security. More than 90 percent believe the U.S.-Japan alliance is a force for regional stability and security. Three-quarters of our respondents say the U.S.-Japan relationship is excellent or good.

Second, Japanese and Korean elites appear to recognize the need for strong ties between their countries. While they have a tangled and troubled history, they remain intimately linked with overlapping concerns and interests. Both are trading nations that rely on commerce to keep their economies going. They have similar interests in and commitments to open markets, fair competition, and safe and secure sea lanes of communication. Japan's security imperatives require a positive relationship with South Korea to forestall the emergence of forces on the peninsula that might be hostile to Japan's security. They also face similar threats from North Korea and possibly China, depending on how the security situation develops. For all these reasons, enhanced cooperation between Japan and South Korea has real attractions, regardless of the past.

In fact, there is a surprising convergence in thinking among Japanese and Korean security and foreign policy experts that provides a foundation for cooperation. While a third of Japanese respondents to our survey (34 percent) believe their values are most similar to those of the U.S., only slightly less (32 percent) said their values were most like those of South Korea. China and North Korea are overwhelmingly identified as the two largest threats to Japan.

Among Koreans, slightly over one-third (35 percent) said their values are most similar to those of the U.S., while one-third (33 percent) picked Japan. Forty-three percent say their interests are most like that of the U.S., while 23 percent picked Japan (making it the second most popular choice). Like Japan, China and North Korea are identified as the two biggest threats, although Koreans put North Korea first and Japanese put China first.

Most important, our survey reveals a reservoir of good feeling (or at least better than we expected) between Japan and South Korea. In Japan, our thermometer – which tests the warmth of feelings toward countries, the warmer the better on a scale of 100 – for South Korea shows 59.96 (the U.S. read 81). Seventy-three percent believe South Korea plays a "positive" or "somewhat positive" role in resolving key problems in Asia. More than half trust Korea somewhat or a great deal. Three-quarters agreed that Japan and South Korea should be allies; 70 percent thought an alliance was a good idea even after unification.

In Korea, our thermometer gives Japan a 63.17 rating (the U.S. recorded 77.85). Fifty-nine percent say Japan plays either a "very positive" or "somewhat positive" role in resolving

Asian issues; 63 percent trust Japan somewhat or a great deal. Surprisingly, 87 percent think South Korea and Japan should be allies and 89 percent favor an alliance relationship with Japan post Korean-reunification. In short, there is a foundation for a stronger relationship.

Institutionalize trilateralism

Our survey data suggests that if disputes over territorial and historical issues can be contained, there is an opportunity to deepen the relationship between Japan and South Korea, as well as trilaterally among those two countries and the U.S. There should be efforts to institutionalize bilateral and trilateral cooperation on a broader range of issues than currently exists. This should be a broad-based approach and include officials from the security, economics, commerce, science and technology, and cultural communities.

The Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG), which helped coordinate positions among the three governments on North Korea, is an example of a trilateral effort – and proof of both its potential and the need to insulate it from partisan politics. But trilateral coordination should be much more inclusive, involving a wider range of institutional interests and addressing a much broader agenda. Topics should include alliance interests, security cooperation, nontraditional security threats, trade and economic concerns, financial stabilization, North Korea, and China, to start just a short list.

The Pacific Command's multilateral security exercises should serve as the basis for an initial consideration of opportunities for trilateral operational cooperation. There should be a careful examination of what the three militaries are doing and what more they can do together to combat specific regional threats. Another focus is out of area efforts that would explore ways to enhance cooperation and maximize the efficient use of assets.

Obstacles ahead

We recognize that sustaining, strengthening, and expanding this relationship will require greater efforts on both sides. In Japan's case, taking the initiative to reach out to South Korea and showing restraint to avoid words or actions likely to inflame South Korean opinion would be a welcome first step. For South Korea, it is time to show similar restraint in taking political advantage by stirring the embers of anti-Japan sentiment in South Korea.

As Pacific Forum President Ralph Cossa has argued, when it comes to the Dokdo/Takeshima island dispute, there are two Japanese reactions that are equally improbable: One would be for Japan to renounce its claim; the other would be for Japan to try to take the ROK-held islands by force. Neither is likely to happen and Seoul knows (or should know) this. Thus, as Cossa argues, the proper Korean response to periodic Japanese statements regarding the islands should be: "Dokdo is ours; we own it. We are going to keep it." Frantic demonstrations and declarations of "defending to the death" a piece of territory that no one is likely to attack reflect unfavorably on Korea's image in the rest of the world.

A second concern is China. China invariably will complain that coordination among the U.S. and its allies is a precursor to a containment strategy. Beijing will likely try to

impede such an initiative. But coordination between Japan and the ROK – and the U.S. – does not have to aim at China. It makes sense to maximize the efficient use of resources in all three countries to accomplish shared objectives. Given the extent to which U.S., Japanese, and South Korean shared interests stem from the social convergence that derives from shared commitments to democracy and common prosperity, there is little reason to focus on China as a shared threat.

The benefits of this initiative will make the effort worthwhile. For Prime Minister Aso, it would demonstrate real leadership. (And he should truly lead by taking a zero-tolerance approach to inflammatory statements and provocations – within the limits of constitutionally protected free speech.) It would help transform his image at home and abroad. In addition to building better relations with a key neighbor and ensuring greater efficiency in tackling regional and global problems, it will constitute a form of burden sharing in the Japan-U.S. alliance, as Tokyo assumes a burden in getting Seoul on board for broader regional and global security efforts. This effort can also help set standards for multilateral cooperation more broadly within a value-oriented framework and one that focuses on issues.

While the primary burden for building this relationship belongs on Japanese and South Koreans, Americans should welcome and support a stronger, more stable relationship between Japan and South Korea. If Japanese and South Koreans take a long hard look at themselves, we believe they will see more in common than that which differentiates them. The question is whether political elites in both countries are prepared to act on the impulses shown in our survey, and show the political leadership necessary to bring along their respective publics.