



***ABE SHINZO AND THE JAPAN-SOUTH  
KOREA RELATIONSHIP: NEAR- AND  
LONG-TERM LEGACIES***

**BY JADA FRASER**

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Under former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, Japan's relationship with South Korea had its ups and downs, mostly downs at the end. But the broad actions that Abe took to shore up Japan's regional role have laid the basis for a promising renewal of security cooperation under Prime Minister Kishida Fumio and the new South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol.

Over his eight years in office, Seoul-Tokyo relations went from bad to worse. The region also evolved during those eight years as overlapping minilateral and multilateral groupings brought Japan and South Korea closer together, even if by accident. Abe was responsible for both—that is his complicated legacy.

As Japan's longest-serving prime minister, Abe spent time alongside four South Korean presidents, but his legacy will likely be cemented by the developments in relations that took place under the tenure of conservative former President Park Geun-hye (2013-17) and progressive former President Moon Jae-in (2017-22). Numerous historical grievances frustrated progress in improving relations during Abe's time in office, as each government took antithetical views over reconciliation on issues surrounding [forced labor](#)

and the "[comfort women](#)" (wartime victims of sexual slavery).

In the weeks to come following Abe's assassination there will be countless pieces published that focus, rightly, on Abe's [ideological bent](#) which often manifested itself in revisionist personal and political actions that damaged the country's relations with South Korea. Yet, Abe's strategic re-shaping of the Indo-Pacific region will continue to elevate the role of regional powers, like South Korea, in shaping and defending the rules-based international order. As threat perceptions in [South Korea](#) and [Japan](#) converge to drive closer strategic alignment, Abe's transformation of Japan's security and defense architecture can enable the two countries to work together more seamlessly. With an eye to the future, the legacy Abe leaves behind is a strong foundation on which his successors can build.

Abe is often quoted for the famous line he delivered to former Secretary of State Richard Armitage [in 2013](#) at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) that "Japan is not, and will never be a Tier-two country...I am back, and so shall Japan be." As the intellectual godfather in the conception of the [Indo-Pacific and the Quad](#), a central stakeholder in keeping the [Trans-Pacific Partnership](#) alive after US withdrawal (and renamed the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership), a main player in moving Japan towards a "[values](#)" [based foreign policy](#) centered on democracy and human rights, and a leading figure in seeing Japan become the [most trusted strategic partner](#) in much of Asia, Japan's proactive leadership role in the region under Abe unquestionably accomplished this goal.

While bilateral relations between Japan and South Korea during Abe's tenure did not see the same levels of progress, another quote from his 2013 CSIS speech underscores Abe's view of the strategic importance of the relationship, "Even with the existence of issues...the ties between Japan and Korea is something that cannot be severed." Many of Abe's successes in elevating Japan's security and economic role and re-shaping Indo-Pacific regional architecture have set the groundwork for the two countries to take the bilateral relationship to new heights. These

developments have evolved as South Korea, too, has sought a greater security and economic leadership role in the region.

Abe played a large role in re-envisioning the region's [hub-and-spokes](#)-style regional architecture to encompass minilateral groupings. These minilateral arrangements have proven adept and flexible in responding to challenges and organizing collective action. Smaller memberships facilitate stronger consensus-building. As I have argued elsewhere, pursuing regional peace and stability through [minilateral engagement](#) allows countries to cooperate where their interests align, without the fear of being trapped in a formal and binding structure. Conflicting views on issues outside the distinct remit of a minilateral grouping do not jeopardize cooperation.

Abe's leadership in elevating minilaterals to center-stage in the Indo-Pacific has direct implications for future Japan-South Korea relations, as the likely main vehicle for near-term cooperation is the US-Japan-South Korea trilateral. Progress is already happening on this front, as the three countries announced last month that they would [restart trilateral ballistic missile defense-tracking exercises](#), the first such trilateral exercise in three years.

The shared threat from North Korea is an obvious motivation for these exercises, but both countries similarly share concerns regarding China's assertiveness and provocative actions in the East and South China Seas and across the Taiwan Strait. Both countries' leaders have joined President Biden in joint statements emphasizing the importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, representing a significant shift from prior US-Japan and US-ROK joint statements. While it was [Suga Yoshihide](#), Abe's successor as prime minister, who issued the first US-Japan joint statement that mentioned Taiwan for the first time since 1969, no one made greater [efforts](#) than Abe to bring the two Asian democracies closer together. The significance of both progressive former [President Moon](#) and conservative incumbent [President Yoon](#) joining Japan to include mention of Taiwan in respective joint statements with the US cannot be overstated.

Economic security is another realm in which Abe spearheaded efforts to minimize risks to Japan from supply chain vulnerability, industrial espionage, and economic coercion by [launching](#) an economic division at the National Security Secretariat in April 2020, becoming the largest of the seven divisions in the NSS. As both Japan and South Korea have felt the screws of China's economic coercion, the South Korean government has taken similar steps and [launched](#) a center dedicated to economic security that will be housed under its foreign ministry. In another promising development to link these efforts through US-Japan-South Korea trilateral cooperation, the three countries' senior officials discussed ways to [enhance cooperation](#) on economic security during a June 2022 meeting.

While Abe's often ultra-nationalist and revisionist actions in office should not be downplayed as his legacy on the Japan-South Korea bilateral relationship is recounted, his time as prime minister was instrumental in shaping the region to the benefit of both countries' national interests. The growing policy alignment in Japan and South Korea owes much to the path Abe charted in modernizing Japan's national security state and enabling greater international security engagement. Whether converging threat perceptions and growing policy alignment in Japan and South Korea can translate to substantial cooperation remains unclear, but these past few months have seen promising developments in the bilateral relationship.

All three countries have a responsibility to capitalize on the momentum in both Japan-South Korea and US-Japan-South Korea senior official engagements and invest sustained attention towards incrementally upgrading cooperative activities based on the shared national security interests of all three countries. Abe Shinzo laid much of the groundwork for this. It is now up to Prime Minister Kishida to build on it.

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