

The Koreas between China and Japan

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Edited by

Victor Teo and Lee Guen

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CHAPTER ONE

CONTEXTUALIZING THE KOREAS BETWEEN CHINA AND JAPAN

VICTOR TEO

On December 19, 2012, the official announcement of North Korean supreme leader Kim Jong-il's demise was finally issued, two days after his purported death on December 17, 2012. A week after this announcement, on Christmas day, Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda began a two-day working visit to Beijing to discuss, amongst other things, the impending fortieth anniversary of the Sino-Japanese normalization of relations. These claims notwithstanding, there was no question that at the top of the Sino-Japanese diplomatic agenda was the situation on the Korean Peninsula. This was especially pertinent given the domestic developments within the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) over the past decade, as well as the challenges of her very rocky relations with the major powers in the region. After the death of the DPRK leader Kim Jong-il, the Korean Peninsula situation was once again catapulted to the top of Northeast Asia's security issues—and especially between China and Japan, North Korea's closest neighbors. Long recognized as one of the three hotspots in East Asia (the other two being the Taiwan Straits and the Spratly Islands dispute in the South China Sea), the contrast between the two political entities cannot be greater.

South Korea, one of the four roaring “tiger economies” with a population of 48.8 million, has an annual Gross Domestic Product of USD \$1.5 trillion (USD \$31,000 on a per capita basis). South Koreans enjoy one of the highest standards of living in East Asia, and the Republic of Korea today is world-renowned for her technological expertise, demographic vibrancy, and forward-looking social policies. Located within Northeast Asia, South Korea is one of the main areas of world economic growth. The last decade has seen a sharp spike in the popularity of Korean cultural products across Asia, and the *Hangul* wave is the driving force behind South Korea's soft power. In contrast, the images we

encounter of North Korea in our everyday narratives are strikingly negative. From the relatively scarce news reports emanating from the DPRK, it is clear that North Korea's economy is in an abysmal state. The DPRK government has difficulty feeding its population of 24 million. North Korea's GDP per capita was higher than South Korea's at the end of the Korean War; but by 2011 the average North Korean was earning only one-thirtieth of the average wage of a South Korean. Human rights abuses are rampant within the DPRK and many freedoms that South Koreans enjoy are unheard of in North Korea. Communist propaganda and personality cult programs dominate the airwaves, as opposed to the K-pop and Korean drama shown daily on television in South Korea. In short, everyday life in North Korea is best summarized by the Hobbesian formulation—it is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.” The difference in political and economic systems and social institutions that originated from the armistice, in place since the 1950s, has created two Korean nations constantly at odds with each other, to the extent that it is now increasingly said that, perhaps, North and South Korea should remain as two separate political entities in perpetuity.

This volume examines the question of the Korean Peninsula in the context of changing relations between Japan and China during the era of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il. The trajectory of Sino-Japanese relations over the past decade has left many concerned scholars and policymakers wondering if there could be any issues of strategic importance that Japan and China can agree upon. These two East Asian giants have disagreed on almost every single issue that has cropped up between them in the past decade: China's nuclear tests in 1995; the Taiwanese independence movement and the Taiwan Straits Crisis in 1995/96; the annual disputes over the Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands; the demarcation of their sea border; sovereignty and drilling rights in the East China Sea from 1999 onwards; and, in addition, a host of historical issues, ranging from textbooks to apologies. Given the volatile political nature of Sino-Japanese relations over the past decade, it is difficult to perceive how Sino-Japanese relations can move concretely beyond diplomatic niceties to substantive cooperation on items of major strategic importance. But there is one issue that China and Japan do not have significant differences over—the security situation on the Korean Peninsula. The North Korean issue is one of the main areas where both China and Japan can work together to enhance strategic cooperation. This is indeed not only desirable but necessary, as it builds political trust between these two strategic rivals, and also provides a critical platform for China and Japan to engage with each other, on an issue of mutual interest in their foreign relations.

Technically, North and South Korea are still at war. Their 1953 ceasefire has produced an abnormal situation, in which the uneasy tension belies the facade of peace and tranquility on the Peninsula as well as the continuing rise in prosperity in Northeast Asia more generally. North Korea has shown that it is increasingly willing to disrupt this fragile peace, with its nuclear belligerence throughout the 1990s, its firing of the Taedopong-1 missile over Japan, and its incursions into South Korea. Almost two decades have passed since the Berlin wall collapsed, but the predictions that the Communist regime in the DPRK would implode have not materialized, and Kim Dae-jung's sunshine diplomacy seems to have had little effect beyond his and President Roh's tenure. On the other side of the thirty-eighth parallel, South Korea has spent a disproportionate amount of resources preparing for reunification across a wide range of possible scenarios—from the collapse of the regime in North Korea to reunification with a "one country two systems" scenario; or from a peaceful political settlement to all-out war. At the same time, it has also ambivalently sent aid worth billions of won to North Korea annually. In practical terms, any security scenario or political solution between the North and the South is not simply an issue of the two Koreas. Any negotiation, conflict, or settlement will involve the great powers in the region—namely the United States, China, Japan, and Russia. Of these four powers, China and Japan stand to be the most affected by any settlement, as the Korean Peninsula effectively straddles the strategic location between China and Japan. As such they are intimately concerned, as neither wishes to be dragged into a war started by Korean belligerence, South Korean aspirations, or US adventurism. The situation of Korea, thus, has the same critical salience for both China and Japan and, hence, this is one of the most pressing issues which could upset both their developmental agendas and political aspirations.

In Chapter Two, "Leadership Rivalry and Crisis-Driven Cooperation: Dynamics among Mutually Distrustful China, Japan and Korea," Dong Xiang Rong, from the Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, provides an overarching historical analysis of the situation on the Korean Peninsula. This chapter argues that due to historical, ideological, and other causes, the relations between China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea have never been ordinary "triangular" relations. After the collapse of the Imperial Tributary System centered on ancient China, Japan sought to play a leading role in the region through the colonization of Korea and the invasion of China. During the Cold War, Japan and Korea kept close alliances with the United States, and so what China faced were not two individual countries, but an alliance or quasi-

alliance. After the end of the Cold War, the essence of such a structure has not changed: in the case of military conflicts erupting, Japan and Korea will follow the United States and fight against China. However, there is some evidence to suggest that over the last decades the framework has changed to become an ordinary triangular relationship. The three countries are working together to resolve the Korean nuclear issue, build a multilateral security regime, and prevent the emergence of military conflicts. Dong further argues that in the last two decades, ASEAN has played a crucial role in regional cooperation, while the big three—China, Japan, and Korea—have been relatively marginalized under the “10+3” framework. Negative historical legacies have caused civilian hostilities and national rivalry between China and Japan, and this has had spillover effects into their competition for regional leadership. ASEAN’s driver seat in the regional cooperation framework is the by-product of the leadership rivalry between China and Japan. It would appear that the possible way forward for cooperation in Northeast Asia is “crisis-driven” cooperation. This means that China, Japan, and Korea are more likely to be pushed towards institutionalized economic cooperation and security cooperation, whilst ignoring civilian mistrust and negative sentiments and other domestic political factors, when they are faced with nuclear threats and financial crises.

Leonid Petrov’s chapter deals with an important source of conflict between the countries in Northeast Asia—historical controversies. Petrov notes that even as Japanese colonial and nationalist historians in China and Korea have clashed over the origins of their nations, there have been a variety of different historiographical conflicts that divide the regions. Petrov groups these historiographical conflicts into three categories: those that involve the possession of cultural assets of past civilizations and dynasties, those that pertain to the ways in which certain military forces colonized and maltreated the peoples of neighboring countries, and finally those that concern contemporary debates about the issues outlined in the former two categories. These conflicts, however, do not exist in vacuum and are often incited, exaggerated, and intensified by competition between these states today. This is currently the case even between North and South Korea. In particular, the Koreans are engaged in such disputes with both China and Japan. Petrov suggests that in order to achieve reconciliation and advance regionalism, issues of the past should be properly addressed and closed. This chapter suggests that history writing in East Asia, based on the democratic principle of deliberation, should be encouraged in order to engender an ethics of difference and tolerance. This

approach would erode the monopoly of states in the writing of history textbooks, and help transnational interpretations cross borders more easily.

Kim Sung-chull, of the Institute of Peace and Unification Studies at Seoul National University, continues the analysis of the Koreans between China and Japan by looking at the issue through the normalization of Sino-Japanese relations, and the implications of the Koreans from the period 1972 to 1975. Kim argues that the Sino-Japanese normalization in 1972 provided Japan with a chance to expand the scope of its policy toward the Korean Peninsula (hereafter its “Korean policy”). The impact of the Sino-Japanese normalization on the Korean Peninsula was greater than that of the US-China rapprochement. Right after US President Richard Nixon’s July 1971 announcement of his planned Beijing visit, Japanese “China fever” developed into high expectations about Sino-Japanese normalization. Given this situation, another fever emerged in Japan: the rising enthusiasm among North Korea-friendly politicians and businessmen regarding the expansion of economic and cultural exchanges with the North. For Japan, the Sino-Japanese normalization in 1972 meant expansion of the scope of diplomacy. For the two Koreas, the core element of the normalization was Japan’s abandonment of Taiwan, a strategic front to which the United States has never given up its security commitment. Evidently, the normalization—and Japan’s abandonment of Taiwan—contributed to facilitating Japan’s “two Koreas” policy, by which Japan played a balancing role between the two Koreas. Japan’s policy forced South Korea to accept the reality of the *de facto* existence of two Koreas, on the one hand, and emboldened North Korea to actively launch peace initiatives towards the South, Japan, and the United States, on the other. Japan’s policy toward the Korean Peninsula was independent of the South Korean government’s demand, wish, or protest, despite the fact that the South Korea-Japan quasi-alliance anchored by the United States remained intact.

Nonetheless, the dynamics of what is happening on the Korean Peninsula cannot be attributed only to Chinese or Japanese policies. South Korea is arguably one of the most important actors in directing events on the Korean Peninsula and, by extension, within Northeast Asian regional politics. In Chapter Five, Lee Sang-hyun, former Director-General for Policy Planning at South Korea’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade and Director of the Security Studies program at Sejong Institute, examines the development of South Korea’s role under the Lee Myung-bak government. Lee argues that South Korea seeks a constructive role in Northeast Asian regional politics under the Lee Myung-bak administration. The Lee government’s foreign and security policies are

collectively referred to as “pragmatic diplomacy.” Among the items on this agenda, President Lee Myung-bak has placed the highest priority on revitalizing the ROK–US alliance and peacefully solving the North Korean nuclear crisis. Although the ROK’s foreign policy is predominantly focused on restoring the domestic economy, developing the ROK–US strategic alliance, and making substantial progress on the North Korean nuclear issue, South Korea is turning its eyes to other regions of the world. Naturally, Asia comes first, not simply because Asia is where South Korea belongs geographically, but also because the region is becoming strategically important to South Korea’s national interests. Although Asia is not yet a theater at peace, the region is, indeed, experiencing a burgeoning network of governments, corporations, and institutions, both formal and informal, across the region. At the same time, Asia is facing the risk that it will fail to develop the structures of cooperation necessary, both to seize the opportunities and master the threats that come with globalization and interdependence. Furthermore, the emergence of new, more powerful economic and military actors may generate rivalry and even conflict, manifesting itself in the classic security dilemma that has characterized much of Asian history. To avoid such dangers, it is imperative for Asian nations to develop a rich web of cooperative networks throughout the region. South Korea, indeed, wants to contribute to the creation of a thick web of networks between China, Japan, and Korea. South Korea can contribute in two ways: firstly, by helping find a breakthrough to the North Korean nuclear crisis using cooperative networks among Asian nations—particularly among China, Japan, and Korea; and secondly, by playing a mitigating role in the case of a potential rivalry between China and Japan.

In Chapter Six, “Sino–Japanese Relations and the Diversification of South Korea’s National Interests,” Park Ihn-hwi of Ewha Womans University examines the interface between South Korea’s national interests and China and Japan in general, and Sino–Japanese relations in particular. The chapter begins by surveying the Korean Peninsula against the backdrop of Northeast Asia’s political developments. Park raises the question whether the rise of China has been centered on the “regional security complex” of Northeast Asia in the post–Cold War era. Beyond that, this chapter also raises the question as to whether or not China would try to aggressively expand her external power in East Asia, and if so, whether the target area could be territorial integration in Taiwan, deeper diplomatic influence in South Korea, or invisible but realistic economic integration with many of the Southeast Asian countries. The chapter argues that in order to grapple with this problem, South Korea needs to

define her national interests very carefully, and then separate them into two dimensions: regional and global. As a relatively small state surrounded by major regional powers, particularly China and Japan, South Korea needs to pursue parts of her national interests within a regional framework, and parts of Korea's national interests beyond the regional framework. Diversifying Korea's national interests, the country may apply theoretical rationale and policy options according to the nature of the issues, such as the Korea-US alliance, East Asian regional institutions, Korea-Japan political alignment, Korea-China economic interdependence, etc.

Jiang Lifeng, Professor Emeritus and previous Director of the Institute of Japanese Studies (incorporating Korean Studies), provides a very insightful analysis into the developing situation on the Korean Peninsula. Jiang's chapter argues that the Korean Peninsula issue has had tremendous implications for the development of Northeast Asia and Japan, and that China's cooperation would be vital for the eventual peaceful reunification of the Koreans. This issue of reunification is, however, still a matter for North and South Korea to work out in accordance with their own interests and timetable, and the Six-Party Talks remain one of the viable mechanisms to bring North Korea back into the community of nations in East Asia. Jiang's chapter lays the groundwork for the subsequent discussions on the viability of the Six-Party Talks as a mechanism for managing intra-Korean relations.

Zhu Zhiquan, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Chair in East Asian Politics at Bucknell University, provides an interesting take on the Six-Party Talks. Instead of looking at whether the talks will improve the situation on the Korean peninsula, he examines whether the talks could actually improve Japan-China relations. Zhu starts off by proposing that peace on the Korean Peninsula is one of the very few things that Japan and China are in agreement over. Third parties play a significant role in international conflict resolution. Major third parties include sundry nation-states, individuals, groups, and organizations. What is lacking in the current literature is discussion of other potential but less common forms of third-party facilitators. This chapter explores whether an issue, a forum, or a platform, in which both conflicting parties have vested interests and through which they frequently interact, can serve as a facilitator or mediator in conflict resolution. The research uses the Six-Party Talks as a case study for potentially mediating in the troubled China-Japan relations.

Ties between China and Japan have always been difficult because of their different interpretations of history, territorial disputes, and geopolitical rivalry. The two countries do not seem to be able to overcome

these problems by themselves. Major state-level third parties in East Asia that can help include the United States, the two Koreas, and Taiwan. Strictly speaking, none of these parties has played the role of a mediator nor actively pushed for the improvement of China–Japan relations. Often these third parties actually perpetuate China–Japan disputes either by taking sides or by pursuing their own problems with one or both main actors. One wonders whether other forms of third party intervention, such as that represented by the Six-Party Talks, may help. This chapter suggests that historical baggage, opposing approaches, and different expectations, have rendered the Six-Party Talks a lost opportunity for Japan and China to move forward. It can be argued that this new form of third-party facilitation, like other mediators, can only work if Japan and China themselves have the political will and domestic support for improving bilateral relations.

Lee Guen, Professor of International Relations at the Graduate School of International Studies at Seoul National University, presents an alternative take on the case of the Six-Party Talks in his chapter “The Clash of Soft Powers between China and Japan: Synergy and Dilemmas at the Six-Party Talks.” Lee investigates the dynamics of two different types of soft powers revealed during the Six-Party Talks, particularly involving China and Japan. In retrospect, the Six-Party Talks are the results of multilateral efforts by the United States, China, Japan, Russia, and the two Koreas to resolve the problem of North Korea’s nuclear program, and the involved countries have applied various tactics aiming at both common goals and individual domestic and foreign policy goals. As the Six-Party process is based upon a premise that the nuclear question on the Korean Peninsula must be answered with peaceful measures, the whole process has been more of an arena for soft tactics rather than hard ones. That does not mean that coercive “hard power” was completely missing during the process, but rather that the strategies and tactics applied to the Six-Party processes relied more upon “ideational” resources than material resources such as military options or economic sanctions. The Six-Party processes have been mostly about venue-making, agenda-setting, facilitating and mediating, idea-seeking, and word-finding, followed by (supposedly) material incentives or disincentives.

Japan’s soft-power strategy at the Six-Party Talks produced what Lee conceptualizes as a “soft-power dilemma”—the term referring to a situation within which soft power, despite being appealing and attractive to the domestic audience, engenders a threatening or negative external environment. Imperialistic nationalism is a typical example. Even if such nationalism mobilizes the domestic audience by its appealing nationalistic

elements and slogans, that same nationalism can threaten other countries by sending aggressive signals to them. Japan's recent conservative turn may have appealed to the Japanese public by raising the issue of Japan's history textbooks, politicians' visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, taking a tough stance towards China, close cooperation with the United States, and the expansion of the Self Defense Force's international roles; but such a conservative turn also created much tension in relations with its neighboring countries, particularly Korea and China. On the other hand, China's soft-power strategy has manufactured what Lee terms "soft-power synergy." China's improved status on the international stage, and the acceptance of China as a responsible stakeholder by international society, particularly by the United States, has not only improved its security but also amplified the domestic pride of the Chinese people. The China threat thesis was gradually replaced by China's "peaceful development," and China became an essential player at the Six-Party Talks. Now it would be unimaginable to resolve the North Korea nuclear crisis without the presence of China. In a nutshell, this chapter argues that during the Six-Party Talks on North Korea, China adroitly used its diplomacy to produce "soft-power synergy" while Japan became stuck with a "soft-power dilemma." Borrowing from Robert Putnam's "two-level game" metaphor, this chapter tries to reveal the two-level dynamics of soft power by developing a refined conceptual framework of soft power and also by explicating a case study of Chinese and Japanese diplomacy at the Six-Party Talks.

Alexander Zhebin, Director of Korean Studies at the Institute of Far Eastern Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences, provides an interesting analysis of the Koreans' role between China and Japan from a Russian perspective. In his chapter "Overcoming Obstacles for China-Japan Cooperation over the Korean Problem" the prospects for furthering regional cooperation and establishing a new peace regime in Northeast Asia are dependent, to a large degree, on China and Japan's ability, together with the United States and Russia, to reach a common vision for a future united Korea's place in the regional security system, a place mutually acceptable to the four "big countries." Of particular importance is the position of China and Japan. The heritage of numerous Sino-Japanese conflicts on the Korean Peninsula, starting from Toyotomi Hideyoshi's invasion in the sixteenth century, repelled with China's assistance, remain among the main obstacles for the development of Sino-Japanese cooperation over Korea. Beijing and Tokyo have different approaches to the solution of the nuclear problems on the Peninsula. These disagreements begin with responsibility for the current situation, the scope

of the DPRK's nuclear programs, what part of them should be eliminated (only those meant for military use, or all of them, including those intended for peaceful use), the scale and depth of forthcoming inspections, conditions and character of security guarantees, and the economic assistance which the DPRK could be given. Beijing and Tokyo have differing visions of the future place of a united Korea in the regional and global systems of international relations. Tokyo sees this place within the framework of a tripartite alliance with Washington and Seoul. Such an approach can hardly satisfy Beijing, as she is likely to perceive such an alliance as a mechanism of containment or even deterrence against China. Tokyo is well aware of China's influence on the Peninsula and recognizes China as an important player in the region. However, the Japanese side, as a rule, prefers to forget about China's own legitimate security interests on the Peninsula and attempts to utilize China's influence almost exclusively for exerting additional pressure on Pyongyang. In spite of the above-mentioned differences, it is possible to identify a number of similar, or even identical, goals for China and Japan in Korea.

Hirosayu Akutsu of Japan's National Institute for Defense Studies contributes a chapter on "Japan-China Cooperation in Future Scenarios for the Korean Peninsula: Soft-Landing, Collapse and Muddling-through Cases." This chapter illustrates some major future scenarios leading towards a reunified Korean Peninsula and discusses Japan-China strategic relations in each of those scenarios. As an initial intellectual exercise, this paper focuses on two divergent cases, that is, soft-landing and hard-landing cases. The first case involves a situation in which the current North Korean nuclear missile controversy and other related issues are settled through the Six-Party Talks resulting in a unification of the two Koreas. The other case examines a scenario in which the collapse of the North Korean regime leads to an unstable or chaotic situation on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia. Possible responses of the United States, South Korea, China, Russia, and Japan, in both scenarios, are also discussed. This chapter then focuses on the likely course(s) that Japan-China strategic relations may follow in each of those scenarios, and points out several key issues stemming from the events and processes in the scenarios. In drawing up policy implications for a future Japan-China strategic relationship, based on mutual benefits regarding stabilization and peace-building on and beyond the Korean Peninsula, this chapter concludes that Japan and China could find many areas of cooperation and suggests that more advanced scenario studies should be developed between Japanese and Chinese experts.

This volume concludes with Victor Teo's chapter on the role of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea between China and Japan. The chapter outlines the evolution in Japan's and China's post-Cold War thinking and argues, contrary to what is commonly assumed, that North Korea's behavior is important for China's and Japan's grand strategy and foreign policy posture. At the same time, this presents an important opportunity for China and Japan to cooperate on an issue affecting their national security. Unfortunately, because of the domestic constraints and inertia of previous policy stances, these two powers have yet to capitalize on the opportunity provided to prevent the improvement in the strategic environment and work hand-in-hand to help ameliorate the issue on the Korean Peninsula. This approach illuminates how the DPRK is perceived by Tokyo and Beijing in a comparative perspective. This allows us to gain an insight into how North Korean issues are evaluated, interpreted, and manipulated in both capitals, while isolating and distinguishing their views from the United States' considerations is critical. Unless, and until, one understands how the Chinese and Japanese view the DPRK-related issues, one cannot be reasonably clear how Chinese and Japanese interests are juxtaposed against those of the United States, the dominant actor in East Asian politics.

This has important implications: Japan is often discounted as an international actor in DPRK-related issues because of the Yoshida doctrine, a cardinal pillar in Japan's foreign policy since the end of the Pacific War, that mandates Japan follow the United States in foreign and strategic affairs. China is often discounted as the patron and ally of the DPRK, suggesting that China can hardly act independently and judiciously when North Korean issues are concerned. These general assumptions are maintained surreptitiously in many narratives that dominate op-eds, media reports, and editorials. Some of these analyses are fairly accurate, while others are hardly fair portrayals of reality. Most of them make assumptions about the roles of the powers which must be scrutinized carefully.

This chapter highlights the important role of domestic politics in Japan in enhancing our understanding of North Korean issues, and argues that Japan's normalization agenda could be construed as the principal driver in her approach towards the DPRK issue. In other words, even though DPRK threat to Japan is a real, it is important to note that right-of-center Japanese politicians use it to drum up public opinion and electoral support, and predominantly to justify the normalization agenda. The normalization agenda, in part, drives Japan's DPRK posture. Likewise, in the DPRK, the united front posed by the US-Japan security alliance is an important theme in the DPRK's propaganda and official narratives. Japan, in particular, is

significant as the “eternal” enemy, and remains essential to the official legitimating myths and in the DPRK leadership’s exhortations for people to continually “sacrifice” in order to stave off threats from Japan and her allies. The differences in Japan’s responses to the DPRK from the United States’ position reveal, at best, cracks in Japan’s long-professed stance in following the United States and, at worst, the beginning of an era where Japan is maturing strategically and might adopt eventual interdependence.

This chapter also argues that international opinion overestimates China’s influence in North Korea. In understanding how the DPRK is debated and perceived through Chinese strategists’ thinking, it reveals a schism in China’s ability to operationalize its doctrine of Peaceful Rise and its image of a responsible power and the geo-strategic realities she faces. China has consistently refrained from “constraining” the DPRK, downplaying many real bilateral issues that dogged the Sino–DPRK relationship for many reasons. A regime collapse in the DPRK affects the People’s Republic of China more than any other East Asian power—it has the most unthinkable consequences for China’s northeastern region—economically, strategically, and demographically. Beyond that, the DPRK issue weighs heavily on China’s often repeated principle of “non-interference” in the business of others. Even though the DPRK represents an important opportunity for China and Japan to cooperate and improve Sino–Japanese relations, domestic circumstances and strategic realities have made it difficult for both Beijing and Tokyo to seize this opportunity.

CHAPTER TWO

LEADERSHIP RIVALRY AND CRISIS-DRIVEN COOPERATION: DYNAMICS AMONG MUTUALLY DISTRUSTFUL CHINA, JAPAN, AND KOREA

DONG XIANG RONG

Introduction

China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea (hereafter Korea or South Korea) are three leading and vibrant countries in East Asia. According to the World Bank GDP rankings, in 2010 these three countries stood in second, third, and fourteenth places, respectively.¹ They account for more than three-quarters of the region's economic activity. However, in the regional cooperation map of East Asia, it appears that ASEAN plays a more critical role. China, Japan, and Korea are marginalized under the "10+3" framework. This abnormality needs to be investigated as it goes against the grain of theories on international relations. Why would a relatively strong China, Japan, and South Korea accept such a regional arrangement led by ASEAN? Why is greater cooperation among the three major powers in East Asia so difficult to achieve? The keywords here are leadership, rivalry, and mistrust.

As Gilbert Rozman has noted, while the EU paid increasing attention as to how power should be balanced in its horizontal composition, the struggle over East Asian regionalism has been much more about hierarchy

¹ "World Development Indicators: GDP (current US\$)," The World Bank (2010): http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?order=wbapi_data_value_2010+wbapi_data_value+wbapi_data_value-last&sort=desc.

and its vertical structure.² In order to become the accepted leader of the regional framework, China, Japan, and the ASEAN countries (Korea may also be included) have competed with each other under the shadow of the United States' hegemony over the last three decades. Now ASEAN is in the driver's seat and plays a central role, while China and Japan, both major powers, are still contesting the leadership position in the region.

In addition, institutional cooperation requires members of this community to surrender part of their sovereignty in order to accommodate supra-institutional arrangements that would benefit all three countries and the region. This implies that in order for China, Japan, and Korea to work together, something must be done on the basis of regional cooperation, and this is derived from a common sense of history, mutual trust, and "voting weight" (or voice) proportional to their national power. All of these elements are difficult to find in the relationship between these three countries.

It is a cliché to say that history offers invaluable insights for the study of international relations. However, it is necessary to examine the long history between China, Japan, and Korea to ascertain the root of the mistrust between them and the way forward for regional cooperation.

The Sino-centric Imperial Tributary System and its Effect

In ancient Asia, China was the leader of the tributary system for many years. The imperial tributary system, lasting from the Han Dynasty to the late Qing Dynasty,³ was the system through which ancient China conducted foreign relations with other nations. The system is premised upon the basic assumption that Chinese civilization, particularly its Confucian ethics and writing system, was superior to that of the "barbarians" outside its borders. Therefore, barbarians who wished to join the Chinese civilization were required to recognize the Chinese emperor as the supreme ruler of all mankind. Representatives of foreign countries acknowledged this relationship by bringing local produce as a tribute, and in turn receiving an official seal, recognition, and gifts from the emperor.

It is worth mentioning that the imperial tributary system is not built on the principle of equality of countries in the Westphalian sense, but rather it is one premised upon a hierarchical China-centered framework. The

² G. Rozman, "Post Cold War Evolution of Chinese Thinking on Regional Institutions in Northeast Asia," *Journal of Contemporary China* 19, no. 66 (2010): 605–620.

³ F. He, "A Study on 'Imperial Tributary System,'" *Journal of Peking University (Humanities and Social Sciences)*, no. 6 (1998): 30–45.

elements of Chinese civilization were introduced to Japan through Korea; thus, Korea played a bridge role in this process. That is to say, ancient China was at the core of this system, Korea occupied a semiperipheral position, and Japan was on the periphery or sometimes considered “out” of the system altogether.

The Chinese hold a positive view of the tributary system in general. Most are very proud of the leadership role played by ancient China. Historically, the successive Chinese dynasties paid very little attention to the sentiments of the states bordering China. The Chinese often took for granted that the neighboring countries held similar views on the tributary system and were simply grateful to be part of the civilizing influence of China. This, unfortunately, is a wrong view. According to research in Korea conducted in 2009 and 2010, although the Koreans recognize the positive civilizing influence of the tributary system, they mainly believe that Korea was oppressed, and even invaded, by ancient China and they hold a negative view on Sino–Korean relations.⁴ It is unclear to what extent contemporary Koreans hold such a view. What is certain is that such a view is totally different from the Chinese point of view. This may help us to understand why the neighboring countries have been so cautious in accepting China’s rise to becoming a regional power over recent decades.

The tributary system has left a negative legacy for international relations in Northeast Asia, which in turn has caused severe mistrust between Korea, Japan, and China. The Koreans and Japanese, as well as the neighboring countries in Southeast Asia, are apprehensive of China’s perceived ambition to rebuild the tributary system. China’s foreign policy towards neighboring countries in the twenty-first century is described officially as *Mulin Anlin Fulin*, which means to “build an amicable, tranquil, and prosperous neighborhood.” China’s main purpose is to preserve peace and stability in her “near abroad” so that economic development can proceed. This should, in theory, give no cause for criticism if coming from a smaller country. However, the articulation of such a thought is often perceived and understood to be a call for the re-emergence of the imperial tributary system. According to Eric Teo Chu Cheow, a Singaporean scholar:

There are echoes of the ancient tributary system in certain geopolitical trends in Asia. The stabilization of China’s immediate external environment is proceeding at an impressive pace ... ASEAN–China free

⁴ X. Dong, X. Wang, and Y. Li, *How the Koreans View China* (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press).

trade project could be perceived as a continuation of China's tributary system across Southeast Asia ... China has conceded trade surpluses to its smaller Asian neighbors—including Japan since 2003—in line with the tributary principle of “give more, take less.” These trade surpluses are funneling economic growth to the smaller countries, thus confirming China as the heart of the Asian economic system today.⁵

Historical conflicts, such as the controversial claim regarding the ancient warrior kingdom of *Gaogouli* (Koguryo, 37 BC–688 DC), can also block regional trust-building in Northeast Asia. The kingdom encompassed modern-day North Korea, part of South Korea, and northeastern China. Some Chinese scholars have insisted that *Gaogouli* was a local minority of the ancient Chinese empire, while Korean scholars have strongly opposed this view and argue that Koguryo is an integral part of Korea's history. This is one of the more negative issues in the dispute between China and Korea over the last decade, causing damage to their civil relationship.

Being on the edge of the Sino-centric world order, the Japanese people were traditionally and dismissively treated as “eastern barbarians” or “dwarf bandits” by ancient China. Japan, for her part, understood herself to be part of the Sinic-cultural zone, but never saw herself as part of China's traditional world order, nor did she perceive herself to be part of the tributary system. This has caused misunderstanding and conflict between these two nations.

Japan-centric “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere” and its Legacy

While China declined, during the late Qing Dynasty, Japan rose and played a leading role in the region. Japan defeated China in 1895 and annexed Korea in 1910, initiating thirty-five years of colonial rule on the Korean Peninsula. The Japanese rule experienced resistance and revolt from the Korean people. Japan embarked on an invasion of China in 1931, and it was not until Japan came to face the military pressure of the United States and the Soviet Union that Japan was forced to surrender in August 1945. This period of Japanese imperialism brought disaster and suffering to the Chinese and Korean people, and although Japanese politicians have expressed regret over the past decades concerning their actions, the Chinese and the Koreans are far from satisfied.

⁵ C. C. E. Teo, “Paying Tribute to Beijing: An Ancient Model for China's New Power,” *New York Times*, January 21, 2004.

Today, it is evident from Chinese and Korean hostility that many people have not forgiven Japan for her past misdeeds, regardless of the fact that Japan has a more developed economy and shows advanced technological progress. The thirty-five years of colonial rule brought an obvious division to Korean society: the conservative Japanophiles are extremely friendly to Japan, while the progressive elements hold strong nationalistic sentiments and are both hostile to and sensitive about Japan. Such sentiments affect Korea–Japan relations and domestic politics in Korea.

Even though there were many traitors in China during the Sino–Japanese War, China is probably not as polarized as Korea and most of the Chinese people do not possess a friendly view of Japan. At the core of the problems Japan has with China and Korea is Japan’s inability to sincerely apologize to China and Korea for her past misdeeds, and this stems from a conviction on the part of the Japanese that she was defeated neither by the Koreans nor by the Chinese. Expressions of such resentment and discontent on the part of the Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans can now be found on the Internet.

Japan and the United States officially signed the San Francisco Peace Treaty in 1951, while Korea and China were excluded from the outset of the process. The United States parted company with the United Kingdom in the decision to invite representatives from mainland China or Taiwan, and eventually neither of them were invited. Korea was asked to attend the meeting; however, Korea was not treated as a member of the alliance, but rather as a colony of Japan.⁶ Shortly after the conclusion of the San Francisco Peace Treaty, Japan was asked to rejoin the Western community led by the United States. Her participation and integration into the US-led bloc came without first dealing with the war legacy. Thus, Japan was unable to improve its bilateral relations with its most important neighbors, Korea and China, for a long time. When Korea normalized relations with Japan in 1965, with China following suit in 1972, the historical issues were treated with ambiguity and later became a hindrance to building trust between the three countries.

The Focus of Controversy: The Yasukuni Shrine

The Yasukuni Shrine was established to commemorate and honor the achievements of those who sacrificed their lives for the Japanese Empire during national crises, such as the Sino–Japanese and Russo–Japanese

⁶ Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, *The Contemporary and Modern History of Three East Asian Countries* (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2005).

wars, World War I, and the Greater East Asian War (World War II), amongst others.⁷ These people, regardless of their rank or social standing, are considered to be completely equal to, and worshipped as, venerable divinities of Yasukuni.⁸ This is the case according to the inscription on the shrine, and from the perspective of the Japanese people.

However, to Japan's neighbors, especially Korea and China, such a belief is an outright offense. Class-A war criminals of World War II are honored in the shrine, and this has turned Yasukuni into a symbol of Japanese militarism, and of the wartime atrocities committed against the Chinese and Koreans. Therefore, any Japanese politician who visits the shrine is perceived to lack an appropriate degree of reflection upon history, and such behavior is interpreted as a sign of rising militarism.

To the Koreans, the Yasukuni Shrine commemorates the Japanese soldiers and civilian workers who spearheaded the invasion and colonization of Korea, as well recalling the approximately 21,000 Koreans who were forcibly mobilized and sacrificed for Japan's war of aggression.⁹

The Chinese show a much stronger antipathy toward the shrine than the Koreans. After Japanese Premier Koizumi's visit to the shrine on the first day of 2004, the then Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, lodged solemn representations over Koizumi's visit and condemned the act immediately. Wang stressed that the shrine honors Class-A war criminals whose hands were smeared with the blood of the people of China and other Asian countries. Prime Minister Koizumi's visit to the shrine not only went back on his promise to reflect upon history, but also impaired the political basis of Sino-Japanese relations. The Chinese people cannot accept such actions by a Japanese leader.¹⁰ Wang's arguments

⁷ "The origin of the Yasukuni Shrine was the Shokonsha established at Kudan in Tokyo in the second year of the Meiji era (1869) by the will of the Emperor Meiji. In 1879, it was renamed the 'Yasukuni Shrine.' When the Emperor Meiji visited the Tokyo Shokonsha for the first time on January 27 in 1874, he composed a poem: 'I assure those of you who fought and died for your country that your names will live forever at this shrine in Musashino.' As can be seen in this poem, the name 'Yasukuni,' given by the Emperor Meiji, represents wishes for preserving peace for the nation. Currently, more than 2,466,000 divinities are enshrined at Yasukuni Shrine. These are the souls of men who made the ultimate sacrifice for their nation since 1853. See Yasukuni Shrine: <http://www.yasukuni.or.jp/english/about/index.html>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ The Northeast Asian History Foundation: http://english.historyfoundation.or.kr/?sub_num=81&state=02_J04.

¹⁰ "Koizumi's Shrine Visit Criticized," *Xinhua News Agency*, January 2, 2004. <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2004/Jan/83755.htm>.

reflect not only China's official standpoint but also the voices of ordinary people in China.

Are there any methods to resolve the Yasukuni Shrine issue? Would it be acceptable to the Chinese and Koreans for the Japanese Prime Minister to visit the shrine if the Class-A war criminals were removed? Would the Chinese and Koreans be satisfied if Japanese officials sincerely apologized for Japan's war crimes? The answer is possibly no; at the core of this issue is neither the Class-A war criminals nor the apologies, but rather it is about who "won" the war. In Japan, it is very common to hear the expression "it was neither China nor Korea, but the United States that defeated us in the war." This view, however, is only partly true. Although China and Korea strived vigorously in their campaign against Japan, Japan only surrendered when faced with direct pressure from the United States and the Soviet Union. In doing so, the regional leadership was not transferred from Japan to China and Korea, but to a country that lies outside the geographical scope of this region, the United States. China and Korea did not defeat Japan in the war, and had no opportunity to exact "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," i.e., to vanquish Japan. Therefore, the resultant tensions and dissatisfaction amongst the Korean and Chinese civilians can hardly be ameliorated.

Cold War and After: The United States-centric Order in Northeast Asia

There is no doubt that the United States has been the hegemonic power in Northeast Asia since the end of World War II. During the Cold War, neither China nor Japan played a leading role in this region's security arrangements. From a military and security point of view, it was the United States that played the leading role, mainly through her respective alliances with Japan and Korea. The Security Treaty between the United States and Japan was signed in 1951, and subsequently revised as The Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security (1960), and again revised in 1996 when President Clinton met with Prime Minister Hashimoto. The 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty between South Korea and the United States is the second pillar of US strategy in Asia. Even though Korea and Japan have had many contradictions and conflicts, they belong to the same camp. What this essentially means is that, in *de facto* terms, China is not dealing with two individual countries, but rather with a quasi-alliance. The term "quasi-alliance" was coined by Victor Cha, and characterizes the relationship of South Korea and Japan as two unallied countries, which are related to each other as quasi-allies through their alliance with the United

States.¹¹ After the end of the Cold War between the United States and the former Soviet Union, Northeast Asia has possibly become the last Cold War frontier in the world, where millions of North and South Korean soldiers still confront each other along the thirty-eighth parallel. The essence of the Korea–Japan quasi-alliance has not changed that much; in the case of military conflict in Northeast Asia, Japan, together with South Korea, will follow the United States against China.

In analyzing the economic development of Eastern Asia during the Cold War, scholars have used the “Flying Geese Pattern” led by Japan. I would call this a development echelon rather than a regional regime. Japan is deemed to head the flying formation, leading the second tier of newly industrialized economies consisting of South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong. After these two groups come the main ASEAN countries: the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia. The third tier consists of the least developed major nations in the region: China, Vietnam, etc. Therefore, if we look at this region in terms of economic linkages, it is also plausible to attribute the economic rise of these countries to the technology and market access of the United States. Even though this is the case, both Sino–Japanese and Sino–Korean relations have much improved since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1972 and 1992, respectively.

The two decades after 1972 seemed like the “heyday” of Sino–Japanese re-engagement.¹² During this time, Japan gave China considerable aid and transferred much-needed technology in lieu of reparations for Tokyo’s aggression in the 1930s and 1940s. Also during this period, Japanese cultural products, such as movies, dramas, and cartoons, were imported to China. Beijing’s larger strategic agenda, at home and abroad, resulted in cooperation and the minimization of “history” as an issue between the two countries. However, Sino–Japanese relations experienced a downward spiral after the mid-1990s, when Japan began to shift its official development assistance (ODA) from China to Southeast Asia, and a resurgence in Japanese nationalism began to surface. The Chinese public’s perception of Japan’s purported lack of remorse over the atrocities committed by the Imperial Armed Forces—created by revisionism in textbooks, the Yasukuni Shrine visits, and disputes over the facts and

¹¹ V. Cha, “Abandonment, Entrapment, and Neoclassical Realism in Asia,” *International Studies Quarterly* 44 (2000): 261–291.

¹² M. McDevitt, “China’s Role in the World: Is China a Responsible Stakeholder?” Hearing before the US–China Economic and Security Review Commission, Panel VI: China’s Relationship with Northeast Asian Neighbors, August 3/4, 2006 (revised final) <http://www.uscc.gov/>.

figures of the Nanjing massacre—led to a rapid deterioration of bilateral relations. The Chinese leadership had to postpone, reduce the frequency of, or even cancel, their visits to Japan on different occasions. From the Japanese perspective, China has failed to adequately express her thanks to Japan for the huge amount of ODA received, and has persisted in what appears to be an incessant demand for the Japanese to apologize for past war crimes; and many Japanese are growing weary of this.¹³ Since then, Sino-Japanese relations have been characterized by “hot economics and cold politics.” Yet perhaps China and Japan have experienced such a prolonged period of dispute not only because of arguments over “history” but, more importantly, because of the competition between them over leadership in East Asia.

China and Korea also experienced a decade of warm relations after they established diplomatic relations in 1992. The decision to normalize relations with Seoul was not an easy one for China, as China had to persuade her traditional friend, North Korea, to accept this situation. Since then, Sino-Korean trade has grown at an annual rate of over 20 percent, and by 2003 Beijing had supplanted the United States as Seoul’s number one trading partner. China and Korea issued a joint statement in May 2008 upgrading their “comprehensive and cooperative partnership” to a “strategic cooperative partnership,” which implies stronger ties in foreign affairs, security, economy, society, culture, and personnel exchanges. At the same time, political and economic interactions have generated cultural and social interactions between China and Korea. There are reportedly more than 700,000 Koreans living in mainland China in recent years and forming increasingly numerous Korean communities in Beijing, Shanghai, Qingdao, and other cities in Eastern China. At the same time, there are approximately 600,000 Chinese working or studying in South Korea.

Regardless of these improvements, the Sino-Korean relationship has also suffered a downward spiral similar to that experienced in Sino-Japanese relations over the last decade or so. These two countries have had some trade issues, such as the short-lived “Garlic war” of 2000 and the “Kimchi war” of 2005. Even more so, the *Gaogouli* dispute has cast a shadow over the bilateral relationship since 2003. These episodes are symptomatic of a larger fear, on the part of the Koreans, of the rise in power of the Chinese, even though the ROK also stands to gain from Chinese economic development.

¹³ Satoshi Amako, *China in Japanese Eyes* (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2003), 22–41.

Crisis-driven Cooperation in Northeast Asia

Even though the United States is still the most influential power in Northeast Asia, China and Japan appear to have become embroiled in a rivalry over being recognized as Asia's leading power. It would appear that neither Tokyo nor Beijing is content to be the number two regional power in East Asia, and it could be decades before one of them emerges as the recognized number one. The reality is, therefore, that both China and Japan seek to ignore each other's leadership claims, while at the same time trying their best to coexist.

Negative historical legacies have caused civilian hostilities and national rivalry between China and Japan, and this has had a spillover effect into their competition for regional leadership. After the 1997 financial crisis, Asian governments have been considering strengthening regional monetary and financial cooperation. Ironically, it turns out that ASEAN played a crucial role in regional cooperation, while the big three (Japan, China, and Korea—the three economic giants—account for more than three-quarters of the region's economic activity) have been relatively marginalized under the "10+3" framework. This is partly due to mistrust between these three countries caused by historical disputes, as mentioned above. In other words, ASEAN's driver seat in the regional cooperation framework is the by-product of the leadership rivalry between China and Japan.

It would appear that the only possible way for cooperation in Northeast Asia is "crisis-driven" cooperation. By this I mean that leaders in these three countries can only be pushed into economic and security cooperation in a big way whilst ignoring civilian mistrust and negative sentiments and other domestic political factors—and this can only happen when crises occur, such as during the 1997 and 2008 financial crises, and so on. There is an ancient Chinese aphorism, *Tongzhou Gongji* (同舟共济), which essentially means: "When on a common boat crossing the river, everyone must pull their weight and cooperate peacefully to perform the task at hand."¹⁴ This is a metaphor for the situation in which China, Japan, and Korea now find themselves, faced with nuclear threats and financial crises.

The historic China–Japan–Korea Summit, held on December 13, 2008, in Fukuoka, was a good case for such crisis-driven cooperation. It is a milestone for regional cooperation in Northeast Asia. The summit, which

¹⁴ This alludes to an ancient episode in which soldiers from the warring states of Wu and Yue found themselves on the same boat on a river in a storm and agreed to put down their arms to make a common passage.