



Camp David Diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific: Improving Korea-Japan Relations

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Figure 1: Camp David Summit, Picture Courtesy CNN

Abstract

This paper examines the complex diplomatic relations between South Korea and Japan within the broader regional dynamics of the Indo-Pacific. The relationship between Japan and Korea has been rooted in historical contentions arising from Japan's colonization of the Korean Peninsula, the bilateral relationship has been marred by periodic tensions, with issues like wartime aggressions and the sensitive topics at the forefront. However, there have been recent attempts to improve this relationship and alleviate these tensions. The trilateral summit held at Camp David on August 18, 2023, with

the United States marked a crucial juncture, aiming at enhancing collective defense strategies against threats from North Korea and China. Central to these discussions was Japan's controversial decision to release treated radioactive water from the Fukushima nuclear plant. This move saw mixed reactions in South Korea, illustrating Seoul's endeavor to strike a balance between domestic concerns and international diplomacy. The paper underscores the need for both nations to transcend their historical differences, emphasizing the broader implications such a collaboration would have in shaping the future of the Indo-Pacific region.

Introduction

The historical entwinement of the Republic of Korea (henceforth South Korea) and Japan is multifaceted, encompassing both partnership and contention. Their dynamic interplay, particularly influenced by wartime aggressions and territorial disagreements, has resulted in intermittent diplomatic skirmishes. A longstanding political and trade dispute between South Korea and Japan traces back to the bitter legacy of Japan's colonization of the Korean peninsula between 1910 and 1945, still reverberates today, epitomized by disputes over forced labor and the painful chapter of "comfort women".¹ Even though Japan posits the issue's resolution through a 1965 treaty, tensions resurfaced in recent years. For instance, in 2018, South Korea's court demanded that a Japanese firm compensate Koreans used as forced labor. In August 2019, Japan escalated tensions by removing Seoul's favored trade partner status, and Seoul responded by ending an intelligence-sharing pact.² In this context, the summit in Seoul, bringing together South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, assumed profound significance. It

¹ The Associated Press. (2023, May 8). Leaders from Japan and South Korea vow better ties following summit. NPR.

² BBC News. (2019, December 2). South Korea and Japan's feud explained.

underscored the necessity for cooperation, setting the stage for the subsequent trilateral dialogue with US President Joe Biden.³

Trilateral Summit and the Indo-Pacific Security Framework

The Camp David Trilateral Summit, hosted at the U.S. presidential retreat, signified a pivotal shift in international diplomacy, emblematic of the transforming tripartite relationship between the U.S., Japan, and South Korea.⁴ Given the unpredictability of North Korea and China's escalating influence, this alliance is indispensable to the maintenance of Indo-Pacific stability. Strengthening ties between Seoul and Tokyo amplifies the potency of the trilateral bond, positioning it as a cornerstone of regional balance. The participating nations unanimously acknowledged that any threat to one constituted a threat to all, emphasizing the need for coordinated intelligence dissemination and policy harmonization.⁵ Opposing perceptions, primarily from China and North Korea, misconstrue this pact as a formal military or collective defense commitment. These countries allege the U.S. intends to create an Asian "mini-NATO," an assertion U.S. representatives vehemently deny. Instead, the focus is on reinforcing trilateral defense partnerships and fortifying economic security. Such an agreement would be untenable without a rapprochement between Japan and South Korea. Their multifaceted past notwithstanding, the recent initiatives by the Yoon and Kishida administrations have accentuated mutual security challenges over historical grievances.⁶ South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol's remarks encapsulated this renewed spirit of collaboration, emphasizing a partnership anchored in mutual values and objectives.

However, such a monumental accord would have been inconceivable without a thaw in relations between Japan and South Korea. Despite their

³ BBC News. (2019, December 2). South Korea and Japan's feud explained.

⁴ The Associated Press. (2023, May 8). Leaders from Japan and South Korea vow better ties following summit. NPR.

⁵ Widakuswara, P. (2023). Camp David Trilateral Summit Cements US-Japan-ROK 'Commitment to Consult' in a Crisis.

⁶ The Associated Press. (2023, May 8). Leaders from Japan and South Korea vow better ties following summit. NPR.

complex shared history, the recent diplomatic overtures between the Yoon and Kishida administrations have emphasized mutual security over persistent historical grievances.

Responding to North Korean Provocations

Amid escalating military actions by North Korea, the global community grapples with formulating an effective response to these belligerent acts. This concern has been further accentuated by a series of alarming developments including recent nuclear tests, multiple missile launches demonstrating extended ranges, cyberattacks against international targets, and aggressive rhetoric against neighboring countries. The Camp David Trilateral Summit, involving the United States, Japan, and South Korea, emerged as a strategic response, underscoring a united front against potential regional threats. An established consultative framework was put in place to ensure swift intelligence dissemination and cohesive policy response in the face of imminent threats.⁷

This reinforced alliance manifests at a time when regional dynamics are particularly charged. Highlighting the volatility, Pvt. Travis King, a US Army personnel, crossed into North Korean territory from the Joint Security Area (JSA) in an unauthorized manner.⁸ The rationale behind such a daring move remains enigmatic, but its implications are indisputably profound. Concurrently, North Korea has been assertively showcasing its military prowess by testing nuclear-capable intercontinental ballistic missiles, including the Hwasong-18.⁹ Amplifying the regional apprehension, a nuclear-armed US

⁷ Britzky, H., Bertrand, N., Bae, G., Lendon, B., Picheta, R., Liptak, K., Liebermann, O., & McCarthy, S. (2023, July 19). "US soldier believed to be detained by North Korea after 'willfully' crossing border." CNN.

⁸ Britzky, H., Bertrand, N., Bae, G., Lendon, B., Picheta, R., Liptak, K., Liebermann, O., & McCarthy, S. (2023, July 19). "US soldier believed to be detained by North Korea after 'willfully' crossing border." CNN.

⁹ Britzky, H., Bertrand, N., Bae, G., Lendon, B., Picheta, R., Liptak, K., Liebermann, O., & McCarthy, S. (2023, July 19). "US soldier believed to be detained by North Korea after 'willfully' crossing border." CNN.

submarine anchored at the South Korean port of Busan for the first time in decades.¹⁰

The collaborative security initiatives between Japan and South Korea not only complement the objectives of the United States but also significantly enhance the collective defense mechanism of the Indo-Pacific.¹¹ Such coordination is exemplified by North Korea's missile launch on the summit's inaugural day, reflecting the regime's trepidation over the reinforced Japan-South Korea alliance.¹² To conclude, the escalating military posture of North Korea accentuate the imperative of a synchronized international strategy. The collaborative endeavors, such as the Camp David Trilateral Summit, emphasize the criticality of a united stance in this precarious geopolitical landscape.

China's Influence

The evolving dynamics between Japan and South Korea are shaped by the shared apprehensions regarding China's maritime assertiveness and its domestic political trajectory. Additionally, Beijing's contention with Seoul, rooted in the latter's stance on Taiwan and its affiliations with Tokyo and Washington, further complicates the regional fabric.¹³

Many interpret the Camp David summit as the inception of a nascent "mini-NATO" in East Asia, envisaging a more consolidated trilateral alliance to counterbalance China's dominance. Such an alliance would potentially deepen defense cooperation among the U.S., Japan, and South Korea, especially proximate to China's strategic corridors.¹⁴

Beijing's discernment of this geopolitical evolution is unequivocal. They perceive the fortifying Japan-South Korea alliance as a stratagem, spearheaded

¹⁰ Britzky, H., Bertrand, N., Bae, G., Lendon, B., Picheta, R., Liptak, K., Liebermann, O., & McCarthy, S. (2023, July 19). "US soldier believed to be detained by North Korea after 'willfully' crossing border." CNN.

¹¹ Aum, F. & Galic, M. (2023, March 21). What's Behind Japan and South Korea's Latest Attempt to Mend Ties? CNN.

¹² Aum, F. & Galic, M. (2023, March 21). What's Behind Japan and South Korea's Latest Attempt to Mend Ties? CNN.

¹³ Bell, C. L., Collinson, E., & Shi, X. (2023, May 31). The China Factor in Japan-South Korea Rapprochement. *The Diplomat*.

¹⁴ Scimia, E. (2023, August 18). Deepening cooperation between US, Japan and South Korea provides economic and strategic hedge against China. *South China Morning Post*.

by the U.S., to curtail China's ascendancy through a web of strategic partnerships.¹⁵ This sentiment is resonated in remarks by Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin, cautioning nations against undermining regional peace for security pursuits. Further amplifying Beijing's apprehensions is the historic rapprochement between Tokyo and Seoul, both nations which traditionally share a fraught past. In essence, China remains acutely vigilant of geopolitical maneuvers that could potentially challenge its regional supremacy.¹⁶

South Korea's Complex Stance on Fukushima Water Release

President Yoon Suk Yeol of South Korea has been proactive in his endeavors to strengthening ties between South Korea and Japan. A testament to this was the groundbreaking meeting between Yoon and Japan's Prime Minister, Fumio Kishida, in Seoul.¹⁷ This summit focused on reconciling historical disputes stemming from Japan's colonization of the Korean Peninsula and aligned both nations towards tackling contemporary challenges such as North Korea's nuclear threats.

However, this positive trajectory was tested with Japan's decision to release treated radioactive water from the Fukushima nuclear plant into the ocean, sparking significant unease within South Korea.¹⁸ The public sentiment was vivid, with surveys revealing potential shifts in seafood consumption habits due to contamination fears.¹⁹ Local governments in South Korea responded by bolstering radiation tests on seafood imports. Despite the official stance reassuring the public about the safety of Japan's decision, opposition figures, notably Democratic Party leader Lee Jae-myung, lambasted the government's

¹⁵ Scimia, E. (2023, August 18). Deepening cooperation between US, Japan and South Korea provides economic and strategic hedge against China. South China Morning Post.

¹⁶ Scimia, E. (2023, August 18). Deepening cooperation between US, Japan and South Korea provides economic and strategic hedge against China. South China Morning Post.

¹⁷ The Associated Press. (2023, May 8). Leaders from Japan and South Korea vow better ties following summit. NPR.

¹⁸ Kim, J. (2023, August 23). Protests mount in South Korea over Japan's plan to release Fukushima water. Reuters.

¹⁹ Kim, J. (2023, August 23). Protests mount in South Korea over Japan's plan to release Fukushima water. Reuters.

seeming acquiescence.²⁰ South Korea's Foreign Minister, Park Jin, highlighted that the waters affected would take years to reach South Korean shores and that their radioactive tritium levels would be inconsequential.²¹ However, he stressed that this acknowledgment didn't signify an endorsement of Japan's plan.

The dichotomy in South Korea's response was accentuated against the backdrop of international reactions. While the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) vouched for the safety of Japan's approach, China was vocally critical.²² In this context, Dr. Nagao offered a perspective that emphasized the logical disposition of South Korea's approach. He articulated that, given the IAEA's validation, President Yoon Suk-yeol prudently navigated the situation by exclusively relying on empirically substantiated data, thereby moving past the prevailing anti-Japan sentiment prevalent in South Korea. Ahead of the water's release, Seoul adopted a tactful position, understanding Japan's scientific rationale but withholding outright endorsement. This approach is emblematic of the delicate path President Yoon must tread—strengthening ties with Japan while acknowledging domestic sentiments, especially concerns over seafood safety.²³

On the eve of the water's release, South Korea articulated a nuanced position. While Seoul recognized no scientific or technical issues with Japan's approach, it stopped short of endorsing or supporting the plan. This diplomatic dance mirrored Yoon's administration: pursuing improved relations with Japan while remaining sensitive to potential domestic backlash.

In light of the impending water discharge, South Korea's stance reflected caution. Seoul acknowledged the scientific rationale behind Japan's decision but refrained from outright endorsement. This nuanced approach epitomized President Yoon's dual challenge: fostering amicable ties with Japan yet heeding

²⁰ Kim, J. (2023, August 23). Protests mount in South Korea over Japan's plan to release Fukushima water. Reuters.

²¹ Kim, J. (2023, August 23). Protests mount in South Korea over Japan's plan to release Fukushima water. Reuters.

²² Kim, J. (2023, August 23). Protests mount in South Korea over Japan's plan to release Fukushima water. Reuters.

²³ Kim, J. (2023, August 23). Protests mount in South Korea over Japan's plan to release Fukushima water. Reuters.

domestic concerns, particularly the looming apprehensions about seafood safety.²⁴

Towards a Cohesive Future

Such intricacies underline the challenges in the South Korean administration face. While historical grievances with Japan have been a recurring obstacle, new challenges, like the Fukushima water release, add layers to the bilateral relationship. As Yoon Suk Yeol navigates these challenges, he must continue his diplomatic balancing act, considering both domestic concerns and broader regional dynamics.

The trilateral summit involving South Korea, the U.S., and Japan was indicative of these efforts. Beyond fostering collaboration against external threats, the summit also underscored the challenges originating from Japan's historical actions and South Korea's internal politics.²⁵ Seoul's stance on the Fukushima issue is a clear display of its nuanced diplomatic maneuvers, emphasizing the importance of aligning international responsibilities with domestic sentiments. With effective communication, such decisions can pave the way for transcending past animosities and forging stronger ties based on trust.

The South Korean endorsement of Japan's wastewater release decision demonstrates Seoul's nuanced diplomacy. Balancing international obligations with domestic sentiments is a challenge. However, such decisions, if communicated effectively to the public, can pave the way for deeper bilateral ties, overcoming historical grievances and fostering mutual trust.

Conclusion

The trajectory of Korea-Japan relations holds profound implications for the wider Indo-Pacific region. Confronted with shared challenges, both nations

²⁴ Kim, J. (2023, August 23). Protests mount in South Korea over Japan's plan to release Fukushima water. Reuters.

²⁵ The Associated Press. (2023, May 8). Leaders from Japan and South Korea vow better ties following summit. NPR.

must navigate the legacy of their history while exploring avenues of cooperation. Their collaborative efforts promise not only mutual benefits but also contribute to shaping a positive narrative in global diplomacy.

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