Can Young Japanese and South Koreans Bridge the Gap?

David Tully, Professorial Lecturer, The George Washington University

April 2018

With similar views on regional security issues, can younger generations of Japanese and South Koreans set aside historical issues to work together on shared interests? Do they even believe they need to?

To casual observers, Japan and South Korea have significant overlapping security interests and would make natural allies. Both nations are long-time treaty allies of the United States and both host a large American military presence, which the public in both countries view as important to their security. Both count China among their top trading partners, but are wary of Beijing’s rising influence. And both publics broadly express confidence in their alliances with the United States to deter North Korea and ensure stability in the region. But many South Koreans balk at security cooperation with Japan, and the Japanese public is growing exasperated with Seoul. This does not preclude multilateral or trade agreements both believe are beneficial—large majorities continue to endorse bilateral and regional free trade agreements and have for more than a decade.\(^1\) Mutual interests will not be enough to overcome public animosity, especially as younger generations\(^2\) have been socialized into constant conflict over unresolved historical issues and learned how to leverage those conflicts for domestic political advantage. Building trust between the two countries is not impossible, but it will require more than mutual interests.

**Koreans and Japanese Confident in US Security Commitments**

Young Japanese and Koreans broadly agree in their perceptions of the security environment in Northeast Asia. Publics in both Japan and South Korea—including youth—expect continued US engagement and express confidence in Washington to

---


\(^2\) For the purposes of this paper “young Koreans,” “young Japanese,” “youth,” and “younger generations” mean the populations in each country under 40 years old.
guarantee stability and security, despite a shared distrust of the Trump administration. The current US president is deeply unpopular in both countries—most hold unfavorable views of him and lack confidence he will do the right thing in international affairs. Roughly 4 in 10 in both Japan and South Korea expect bilateral relations between their country and the United States to worsen under his tenure.3,4

Despite their lack of confidence in US leadership, 77 percent of young South Koreans still trust Washington to follow through on its diplomatic and security commitments, more than any other country. Polling shows large majorities of both Japanese and South Koreans continue to express confidence in the US military to come to their defense in the case of an attack by North Korea, believe that the US presence in the region is important for their security, and majorities of both South Korean and Japanese youth have faith that the US alliance effectively deters an attack from North Korea. Neither young Japanese nor young Koreans think of the regional security architecture as trilateral, preferring to avoid direct security cooperation and rely on their common ally (the United States) to bridge the gap between them.

Japanese and Korean Publics See Similar Threats

Japanese and South Koreans share similar perspectives on regional threats, but have diverged somewhat on North Korea in recent months. And according to polling from Jiji released last year, 54 percent of Japanese prefer to pressure Pyongyang, compared to 40 percent who favor engagement.5 Still, even with amped up pressure, Japanese are pessimistic about the prospects of resolving the North Korean nuclear issue. According to a 2017 survey, most (81%) think North Korea will keep its nuclear weapons no matter what and will not accept negotiated terms for their elimination, and in a Genron NPO poll released in January 2018, two-thirds believe that there will be no resolution to the North Korean nuclear issue. Only 10 percent think it can be resolved in the next five years.6

Half of young Koreans in a survey taken last year say their government should take a tougher line on the North, and 20 percent say it should maintain the status quo. But a quarter (28%) think Seoul should go easier on Pyongyang. South Koreans are slightly more likely to express an optimistic view of the North’s willingness to compromise; one-third believe Pyongyang might give up its nuclear weapons for political or economic incentives, though like the Japanese, most (57%) do not.

Still, most South Koreans are inclined to believe that even if they will not receive concessions from engagement with North Korea, talks could still be worthwhile. Most prefer a mix of pressure and engagement to deal with Pyongyang, and when forced to choose a dominant strategy, a majority prefer engagement. Since 2013, upwards of 8-

---

5 Jiji, “54% support pressure tactics over dialogue for North Korea: Jiji poll.” The Japan Times, November 18, 2017.
in-10 have favored direct talks as a way to deal with Pyongyang, either through a bilateral summit or through resumption of the Six-Party Talks. This view is likely bolstered by the perceived success of President Moon’s Olympic diplomacy, with 53 percent of Koreans telling Gallup in March that the move to engagement represents a real change in DPRK policy. And South Koreans are more optimistic on the margins for solving the North Korea nuclear crisis—29 percent think it could be solved in the next 10 years. April’s North-South summit will no doubt shape future views of engagement.

Koreans and Japanese views of China are now closer to alignment than they have been in recent years. While territorial disputes with China have held favorable Japanese views of China consistently under 10 percent, South Koreans views of China only fell to historic lows last year. This was in response to Beijing’s imposing informal sanctions on Korea’s tourism, culture, and cosmetics industries in retaliation for Seoul deploying a missile defense battery on the Korean peninsula that Beijing claims can be used to monitor activity in China. Beijing’s stoking of nationalist sentiment against both Japan and South Korea have convinced publics in both countries that China is not a trustworthy partner.

**Persistent Historical Disputes Have Shaped Younger Generations’ Views**

Despite so many shared perspectives on regional security—the strength and importance of the US alliance, little trust in Beijing’s intentions, and mix of anxiety and fatalism about the situation with North Korea—disputes over how and whether to remember Japan’s colonial occupation of the Korean peninsula and WWII atrocities split the two countries, and over the last decade disputes over these issues have overwhelmed the discussion and shaped the views of younger Koreans and Japanese. Though many would not say it this way, younger generations in both countries have grown up thinking of both countries as wealthy, developed, scientifically advanced nations in their own right, with little to learn or gain from deeper cooperation.

**Young Koreans Don’t Need Japan**

South Koreans’ opinions of Japan have been consistently negative for years, a legacy of Tokyo’s perceived failure to make adequate amends for the “comfort women” issue and continued tension over disputed territory. South Korean favorability of Japan has improved somewhat from a recent low in 2012, but just 26 percent say they view Japan positively and 22 percent say they have good relations with Tokyo. Half of younger Koreans (51%) view Japan as either unfriendly (40%) or an outright enemy (11%), and a majority (60%) do not trust Tokyo to follow through on its diplomatic and security commitments. Younger Koreans are much more likely than their elders to prefer pressing historical issues with Japan at the expense of deepening relations. In a 2017 survey, 69 percent of young Koreans said increasing pressure on Tokyo over historical issues was preferable to deepening ties, while 59 percent of those over 50 favored setting aside those issues. This reflects a generational divide in domestic

---

Korean politics. Older Koreans, who have tended strongly conservative and put a premium on national security, were willing to accept cooperation with Japan within the US alliance framework. Among the young, preference for pressure on Japan increased from 2015 to 2017. Young Koreans share their elders’ national security concerns, but they were more likely to mistrust Park Geun-hye, and leveraged anti-Japanese sentiment against her. Young Koreans think of security in terms of the US alliance—not a trilateral that includes Japan. So, there is no security risk to alienating Tokyo.

This was not always the case. For years, younger Koreans were the only age cohort that was occasionally more likely to express positive rather than negative views of Japan. However, after the Fukushima triple disaster and ensuing rows over textbooks, comfort women, and the Liancourt Rocks, all that changed. The March 2011 Fukushima triple disaster sparked an outpouring of support from South Korea, especially the youth. Seoul was among the first to send rescue workers, and South Korea was among the largest donors to the rescue and relief effort. Mobilization of support for aid to Japan was widespread and enthusiastic. Even the comfort women who had been staging weekly protests outside the Japanese Embassy donated money to the effort. However, by the end of that month, Japan’s Education Ministry released its review of textbooks, highlighting Tokyo’s claim to the Liancourt Rocks and replacing Koreans’ newfound sense of goodwill towards Japan with outrage. A December 2010 Office of Opinion Research poll showed 19-29 year old Koreans were the only cohort with a majority positive rating of bilateral relations (58%). But by June of 2011, after the Fukushima triple disaster and the textbook dispute that followed, young Koreans rating of Korea-Japan relations had fallen 19 points to 39 percent. Among older cohorts, ratings of relations started and stayed majority negative. Youth views of Japan have not recovered.

In a June 2015 Asan Institute survey, Koreans were asked what they primarily associated with Japan. Unlike their elders, pluralities of young Koreans (45%) said their primary association with Japan was the “the Fukushima Crisis and other natural disasters”—more than twice as many as mentioned Japanese colonialism or nationalist politicians. Though pride in coming to Japan’s aid in a time of crisis is surely part of why the incident is the most associated young Koreans’ image of Japan, it was also interpreted as confirmation that Seoul was at least Tokyo’s equal as a regional force and no longer a more junior player. In general, young Koreans are less willing to compromise because they feel there is nothing that Japan can do, show, or give them that they cannot do for themselves or that the alliance with the United States does not already do. Simply put, improving relations with Japan is not incentive enough for the

9 “South Korea Steps Up Aid Effort to Japan After Disasters,” Voice of America, March 16, 2011.
10 Cheol Hee Park, “Post-Earthquake Japan-Korea Ties: Japan’s stance on the Dokdo/Takeshima issue has quickly shifted South Korean attitudes post-earthquake and tsunami, from sympathetic to ambivalent,” The Diplomat, April 18, 2011.
12 Shih Hsiu-chuan, “Japanese denials over war-time sex slavery are ‘deplorable,’ MOFA says,” Taipei Times, August 26, 2012.
South Korean public to let Tokyo dictate their own understanding and commemoration of history.

The December 2015 deal to resolve the comfort women issue “once and for all” failed spectacularly to persuade the South Korean public to put the issue aside. One of the main hurdles in implementing the deal has been the comfort women statue outside the Japanese Embassy in Seoul. Moving the statue is a non-starter for the Korean public, with 86 percent opposed—even if it meant foregoing funds for survivors. The deal overall was unpopular, highly partisan, and generational. Younger, anti-conservative South Koreans in particular used the deal to rally against Park Geun-hye before the Choi Sun-sil scandal broke.

Young South Korean participants in focus groups were uniformly pessimistic about the future of ROK-Japan relations. Most opposed the 2015 agreement and argued that President Moon should invalidate it and renegotiate, and in a 2017 survey, 86 percent of young South Koreans still opposed the deal. Most focus group participants still hoped for an apology from Tokyo they might consider sincere. As one politically young participant from Seoul put it, “the problem is, even if Japan makes an apology, Koreans won’t believe it’s sincere.”

Focus group participants did not see a bilateral resolution to these disputes or a way for the United States to help reconcile its allies. Instead, they hope to overcome Japan’s influence by making South Korea more prominent and “promoting [Korea’s perspective] internationally.” One young woman from Busan put it like this: “We should grow our power, and that will naturally tip the balance in our favor.”

**Young Japanese Don’t Understand Koreans’ Grievances**

A substantial number of Japanese feel unfairly criticized by South Korea, and that’s driven Japanese views of Korea to near record lows. More than half of Japanese in the 2017 Genron NPO survey cite “anti-Japan education”, “anti-Japan media”, and “South Korean aggression over historical issues” among the issues standing in the way of better relations.¹⁴

Young Japanese think about historical issues very differently from Koreans, if they think of them at all. Before 1997, there was no mention of comfort women in Japan’s state-sanctioned middle school textbooks. But even adults educated after this change (currently under age 40) are less aware of the issue than their elders, and in a 2014 poll, a quarter of young Japanese confessed they had never heard about it at all. Japanese in this cohort are as likely to say they first heard about it in the media as in school, and the media framing of the issue is inherently confrontational with Seoul, pitting Koreans’ criticisms against Japanese understanding of their own history, generating a backlash.

Recent calls from some in South Korea for a review of the comfort women agreement have reinforced the notion that Seoul will never be satisfied. According to a Yomiuri Shimbun poll released in January, 83 percent of Japanese think Tokyo should refuse further concessions to Seoul—up 9 points from the previous May—with younger

---

Japanese as likely to say so as older Japanese.\textsuperscript{15} Increasing majorities say Tokyo has already done enough to make amends for its wartime past with South Korea (75\%, up from 64\% in 2014). In the past, many Japanese hoped the two nations could get along despite their perception that Seoul was unable to set aside historical issues, but focus group discussions show young Japanese have grown frustrated with the constant criticism from Seoul, eroded confidence that Korans will accept the issues as settled, and convinced some that engaging with Korea is not worth their time.

**Will Younger Generations Overcome Historical Grievances and Work towards Deepening Bilateral Ties?**

In the short-to-medium term, the answer is simply, “no.” The youth in both countries share many common perspectives, but those shared views are not enough to overcome animosity or intransigence over historical issues they have been socialized into. While the young in both Japan and Korea largely agree about the North Korean threat, younger Koreans are growing more hopeful about the possibilities of engagement with the North, which likely dampens the urgency that might otherwise incentivize bilateral cooperation. However, as long as Washington does not act to destabilize the region, youth in both countries will likely continue to support a strategy that places US security commitments at the center of Northeast Asia and accept arrangements that force Japan and South Korea together indirectly. Rather than conceiving of the region as a US-Japan-Korea trilateral, they prefer to view the United States as a hinge that joins Korea and Japan together. With the credibility of US leadership at a low ebb among both publics, and especially among the younger set, there is little Washington can do directly to foster better relations.

While the younger generations view direct security cooperation as both unnecessary and undesirable, there are issues on which young Japanese and South Koreans can agree. Both view regional and bilateral free trade agreements as a means to expand their economies. Eighty percent in both countries believe in the importance of multilateral engagement, even when that multilateral involves working directly with the other country.\textsuperscript{16} Young Japanese and Koreans overwhelmingly want their countries to continue to play a greater role in the world, so greater involvement in multilateral organizations and agreements that highlight Tokyo’s and Seoul’s shared interests in trade, environmental improvement, and science and technology could help bring the countries closer together.

In the long term, some progress might be made towards building mutual understanding. Civil society and cultural exchange, business ties, and tourism have all survived the last decade of tumult in Japan-Korea relations, and there is no reason to believe person to person connections will not continue and foster new avenues for communication.

Reconciliation will not come easily. Both sides are deeply entrenched within their own narratives, and politicians and activists have proven adept at leveraging these

\textsuperscript{15} The Yomiuri Shimbun, “83 per cent of Japanese reject further demands from South Korea over comfort women; Poll,” *The Straits Times*, January 16, 2018.

narratives for political advantage. If Tokyo is able to embrace their history, negotiate a common narrative with South Korea, and uncomfortably wrestle with it, with time reconciliation may be possible. For its part, Seoul needs to welcome and encourage any steps Tokyo might take towards a shared understanding of history and treat each step towards one another as a step in the right direction rather than an incomplete journey.

The views represented in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. This paper was made possible by the generous support of the Consulate General of Japan in Chicago.