

## Japan and Korea in China–US Relations

Core working group workshop: 17-18 December 2019  
National Library of Korea, Seoul

### Overview

Japan–Korea relations have of late been attracting international attention in their intensifying clash over history that has spilled over to the economic and security sphere, notably over GSOMIA. Yet, the impact of deteriorating Japan–Korea relations is perhaps not properly appreciated outside the region, as the international community’s interest in this bilateral relationship is cursory at best, more often than not eclipsed by developments in China–US relations. While no-one (in the West) would question the global importance of China–US relations, in the hierarchy of other important bilateral relations Japan–Korea relations is perhaps underrated and under the radar when it should warrant more critical attention.

There has always been a significant interest and knowledge gap about the political and security situation in Northeast Asia in the Atlantic community-driven discourse on international security compared to, for example, the situation Middle East, as the different handlings of Iran and North Korea’s nuclear programmes demonstrate. While there are various historical and geopolitical factors that contribute to this situation, to the extent that most newsworthy stories coming from East Asia have been about economic development and success, perhaps such lack of attention is inevitable. Moreover, after the Cold War, East Asian nations also nurtured the idea that increasing economic interdependence among states would allow for peaceful inter-state relations to eventually prevail in the region. Casting our eyes to this economic sphere, however, China’s rise has been both a blessing and a bane to the other three (and for the region as a whole), which brings us to the challenges associated with China’s sabre-rattling in the last decade, its hostile outlook toward the West and the post-war status quo in Asia, that is the US-led liberal order and the San Francisco system. On the other hand, the inability of China, Japan and Korea to reconcile over history after more than 70 years of war and colonisation (despite some earnest attempts) is in no small measure due to the divisive San Francisco system that has not allowed these three countries to bring closure to the past together. Instead, each country is now in throes of memory politics, chasing historic missions separately: China with its “100 years of humiliation”, Korea revisiting the 1965 agreement with Japan, and Japan with the revisionist history of denial.

The idea of regional peace through economic interdependence has not materialised. Rather the opposite is beginning to happen, with China’s unwillingness to be part of the liberal order (while benefitting from it) and revanchist claims on maritime territories, a situation compounded by the challenges of North Korea’s nuclear ambitions and the future of the Korea Peninsula. (What is perhaps astonishing is that in late 2017, military tension over North Korea rose suddenly in a rapid escalation akin to the Cuban missile crisis. The case spoke vividly of the failure by all parties to recognise—or address—the problem of lacking any confidence building steps to prevent such an escalation.) As the situation with North Korea deteriorated, the inherent fragility of Japan–Korea security relations within the US hub-and-spokes system also became harder to ignore.

However, while the weakness of Japan–Korea relations as a vital component of US strategy in Asia is certainly worrying it is not the only problematic aspect in the international politics of Northeast Asia. That the bilateral relationship is bogged down by inward looking nationalist policies and unsettled scores in history also has external systemic causes. The asymmetry of power among the countries constantly informs Northeast Asian international politics, where the Japan–Korea axis may be a potential fault line. But neither Japan nor Korea is in full control of its own actions or destiny in the larger power politics taking place between China and the US. Moreover, looking at the five bilateral

parts (China-US, China-Japan, China-Korea, Japan-US, Korea-US, Japan-Korea), it is difficult to dismiss the fact that they are all changing in ways that are not necessarily for the better. Even though some may still hope for the Japan-US security alliance to maintain its position as the “pillar of stability” in East Asian security, it would also be unrealistic to treat Japan–US relations as any more stable than the other bilateral relationships just because of Japan’s high dependence on the US for its national security. In the post-Cold War world, cumulative US influence on Japanese politics is becoming precisely the problem that may unravel the alliance. Similar situation may be observed in Korea’s relations with the US, but in Korea’s case its willingness to cultivate closer relations with China is a cause of concern for Japan and the US.

China and the US are each influential in the domestic politics and international outlook of Japan and Korea, and are significant factors shaping how Japan and Korea perceive and treat each other at the both political and societal levels. The intertwined, entangled and asymmetrical nature of the quadrilateral relationship between China, US, Japan and Korea (that in turn shape Japan–Korea relations) makes it extremely difficult to stabilise Northeast Asia’s international politics and security, let alone build peaceful relations based on mutual trust. Here again, the Japan–US relations may appear to enjoy a time-honoured level of trust, but whatever trust in the alliance that was accumulated over the Cold War decades is fast depleting, especially since President Donald Trump’s reckless management of US commitments overseas severely undermining the basis of being allied to the US but also through the Bush and Obama years when the US policy toward China failed to quell regional anxieties toward a rapidly expanding Chinese influence. As the edifice of the Cold War alliance structures appears to be crumbling away, Northeast Asia’s post-war international relations are informed more than ever by layers of history and memories attached to relations or systems lying underneath it.

Given the complexities of the international environment surrounding Japan and Korea, policies, measures and actions aimed at improving the bilateral relationship alone are clearly inadequate. They will not even achieve the intended goal of improving relations. Without changing the dynamics of the other relationships, and designing a quadrilateral forum can revisit the idea of an East Asian in a meaningful way, Japan–Korea relations will continue to be beholden to the quadrilateral relationship dominated by the exigencies and demands of China and the US and will not be able to realise the potential to play effective leadership roles in global politics.

### **Workshop timeline and agenda**

The primary objective of this two-day workshop is to identify topics to be address in the symposium planned for mid-March 2020 in Osaka and also to discuss preliminary ideas and topics for the book/journal special issue project planned for the year 2020-21 (funding from Korea Foundation pending).

Timeline: This workshop in Seoul gathers participants based in Korea. Seoul workshop will be followed by a short workshop via Skype or television conference connecting 3 other participants based in Singapore (Nanyang Technological University) and Tokyo (Waseda University) in mid-January or early February, possibly linking the East Asia Institute/NUS.

At the end of the symposium in Osaka, we will compile a short policy report based on the discussions that will be separate from the individual articles/chapters to be written in the course of the next year.

We may also discuss the possibility of organising a panel at the AAS-in-Asia 2020 in Osaka in June 25-27, the Association of Asian Studies’ conference leg in Asia that was originally going to be hosted by the Chinese University in Hong Kong.

**Topics for the workshop:**

**Please prepare short talking points (about 10 mins each) on the following points from (1)-(3). The sub-topics/questions are only intended as guidelines.**

**Tuesday 17 December (10:00-13:00)**

1) The future of the international liberal order:

- Are China's global strategy and America's global strategy fundamentally at odds with each other? If so (or otherwise), what are the roles of Japan and Korea to both China and the US?
- Democracy versus authoritarianism or something else? (Where are Japan and Korea in the values debate?)
- Global economy and the future of free trade
- Beyond *bandwagoning versus balancing*, and the world in binaries.

2) Multilateralism, functional cooperation and SDG:

- Beyond *institutionalism versus informal networks* (EU versus the East Asian/ASEAN model)
- UN and global governance: alignment with which part of the P-5?
- Peacebuilding and human security: spill-over effects of functional cooperation

**Wednesday 18 December (10:00-13:00)**

3) San Francisco system, its legacies and limitations

- Positive and negative legacies of the San Francisco system (who benefits from maintaining the system)
- Revisiting and reforming the San Francisco system: confronting history, open archives, and reconciliation
- The Asian century of China-Japan-Korea cooperation in the making?

4) Discussion: East Asian modernity and the global history perspective

## Directions to the Research Information Services of the National Library of Korea (RINK)



For full details on public transportation and parking: <http://www.nl.go.kr/english/c1/page7.jsp>

Directions for access to the RINK Seminar Rooms 1 & 2:

1. Signing in: **Please bring a government-issued photo-ID** to access the library. In exchange of the ID, you will be given an access card to enter the main gate and the RINK seminar rooms on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor. You need not register as a member, but will need to sign in at the front desk for both days (17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>) on the 1<sup>st</sup> floor of the Main Building. A list of names of the attendees has already been submitted to the RINK and the front desk concierge at the National Library of Korea.
2. After passing through the gate, please take either the stairs or the elevator to the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor.
3. Proceed towards the end of the corridors past the Periodicals Room and the restrooms. The Seminar Rooms 1 and 2 are housed within the Research Information Services Room on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor.
4. Leaving: When you leave the main building, **please remember to retrieve your photo-IDs and return the access cards** on the 1<sup>st</sup> floor after passing the main gate.

Tips on facility use at the National Library of Korea:

1. Wireless computer connection to the large full HD display (1080 pixels) powered by VIA Connect PRO (Kramer AudioVisuals) is available. If you wish to present your slides, you could connect your computer or mobile device to the large screen regardless of OS type, or bring it in a USB.
2. Coffee is available for purchase at Grazie Café on the 1<sup>st</sup> floor and can be carried into the seminar rooms if it is covered with a lid. There is a bigger Grazie Café outside the main building towards the main road along the giant staircase.
3. Meals are available for purchase at the Book Restaurant and there is also a CU convenience store next to it outside the Main Building.