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Master's Thesis of International Studies

**Submerged Sources of Conflict
between Korea and Japan:
Diverging National Security Issue in Coping with
a Rising China**

한일 갈등의 잠재적 요소:
중국 부상에 대응하는 안보문제의 불일치

August 2023

**Graduate School of International Studies
Seoul National University
International Area Studies Major**

Hyunjun Brian Kim

국제학석사학위논문

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서울대학교 국제대학원
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김현준

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Abstract

What caused severe deterioration of South Korea-Japan bilateral relations in the late 2010s? Many analyses have attempted to pinpoint sources and conditions that create tension between the two East Asian neighbors, with issues of history taking center stage. Indeed, the 2018 Supreme Court Decision ordering the compensation for forced labor victims was a major catalyst that took South Korea-Japan relations to an all-time low. Yet the primary focus on history can risk simplifying the dynamic nature of bilateral relations, as both countries are linked not only by history matters, but also by other various matters. Moreover, the cases in which South Korea and Japan shared close relations and cooperation demonstrates that history issues, although holding significant influence, are not the ultimate factor that determines the relation status.

My research proposes that there is another underlying factor that influences cooperation/conflict between South Korea and Japan, namely contextual matters of security based on the contemporary international security environment of a rising China. As China's rise and intensification of US-China rivalry became evident, the matter of security and national survival became a priority for the two East Asian states caught in the middle. My paper argues that South Korea and Japan's diverging threat perceptions toward China and the misaligned security alignment preferences cause conflict, as both countries fail to establish strategic trust and therefore have little incentive to cooperate. South Korea and Japan view China under a different light, and security alignment preferences are less overlapping as Tokyo opts to prioritize partnership with the US and other liberal democracies, while Seoul prefers balanced partnership with Washington and Beijing. My paper examines four different periods since the 2010s: 2013-2015 period, 2016-2017 period, 2018-2021 period, and 2022-2023 period, all of which demonstrated different patterns and conditions resulting in either cooperation or conflict between South Korea and Japan.

Keyword : South Korea-Japan Relations, Rise of China, Threat Perceptions, Security Alignment Preference, Indo-Pacific Region, US Alliance

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Chapter I: Introduction

1. Background

South Korea and Japan share interesting relation dynamics that are multilayered and complex. The two geographically proximate countries share commonalities as liberal democratic states, serving as East Asian strongholds allied with the United States, yet not allied with one another. Economic ties have been firm as South Korea was Tokyo's third-largest trading partner since 2001 with high trade values.¹ People-to-people exchange and tourism were active with tourists in Japan consisting 27.8% Koreans and tourists in Korea consisting 35% Japanese by 2010.² Military exchange and security cooperation were also realized through the first Search and Rescue Exercise (SAREX) in 1999,³ and strengthened further with the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) signed in 2016.⁴ However, South Korea-Japan relations sometimes experience rifts and are marred by conflicts, particularly over history-related controversies. The colonial annexation of Korea by Japan remains a haunting memory, connected with a variety of controversies such as

¹ "South Korea: Japan's Third-Largest Trading Partner," *Nippon.com*. August 20, 2019. <https://www.nippon.com/en/japan-data/h00516/south-korea-japan%E2%80%99s-third-largest-trading-partner.html>

² 문화체육관광부 홍보지원국, "일본이 궁금해 하는 한국관광 급성장 비결" *대한민국정책브리핑*, 2010.12.17.

<https://www.korea.kr/news/policyNewsView.do?newsId=148703355>

³ "S. Korea, Japan to Stage Biennial Joint Naval Drill," *The Korea Herald*, November 7, 2011. <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20111107000759>

⁴ Reuters Staff, "South Korea, Japan Agree Intelligence-Sharing on North Korea Threat," *Reuters*. November 23, 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southkorea-japan-military-idUSKBN131068>

territorial disputes over the Dokdo/Takeshima Islands, the question of coercion behind comfort women mobilization, and compensation for forced laborers, to list a few. Sharing a mixture of amicable features and conflicting sources, South Korea and Japan's bilateral relationship tend to fluctuate from time to time.

While there were certain rifts and conflicts in previous years, it wasn't until the late 2010s during the administrations of South Korea's Moon Jae-in and Japan's Abe Shinzo that bilateral relations deteriorated further, taking a drastic turn for the worst in recent years. The immediate, visible cause derived from issues related to historical tensions: the Korean Supreme Court rulings in late 2018 that the Nippon Steel & Sumimoto Metal Corporation and the Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, responsible for mobilizing Korean laborers during World War II, were to compensate for the victims. The court ruling was an evident starting point that signified the sharp deterioration of bilateral relations. A series of controversial events ensued, including South Korea's announcement to disband the Reconciliation and Healing Foundation founded by Japanese compensation funds per the Comfort Women Agreement, the diplomatic dispute over a radar lock-on between a Korean naval vessel and a Japanese aircraft, and later Japan's tightening of control over exports to Korea in July 2019 along with the removal of Seoul from Tokyo's "whitelist" of preferred trade partners, which led to a trade dispute. South Korea-Japan bilateral relations would be casted into abysmal levels with summit talks ceasing since the end of the 2019, remaining so for three years until resumption with

succeeding administrations of South Korea's Yoon Suk-yeol and Japan's Kishida Fumio in 2022.

What is especially intriguing about this phenomenon is that historical woes and controversies have somehow overlapped into different fields in which South Korea and Japan originally cooperated with. The whitelist removal and trade sanctions demonstrated a deterioration in economic cooperation. The radar lock-on dispute and the near termination of GSOMIA demonstrated deterioration in security cooperation. The boycott on both traveling to Japan and consumption of Japanese products by Korean citizens was a deterioration of people-to-people exchange. In the multilayered, complex bilateral relationship in which originally Korea and Japan experience conflict in one field and cooperation in another, now presents conflict and friction in all fields. Moreover, the leaders of both countries have made little effort to alleviate tensions, as if neglecting the deteriorated relations.

2. Puzzle and Argument

South Korea and Japan had experienced frictions over historical controversies during the Cold War and the first decade of the 2000s, but conflicts were relatively mild compared to the phenomenally abysmal deterioration of relations during the Moon and Abe administrations as seen above. The puzzle of this research is, why have South Korea-Japan bilateral relations deteriorate so much in the late 2010s? Why have leaders neglected the state of deteriorated bilateral relations and made little effort to improve them? On the surface, it would appear that historical woes and controversies (i.e., the 2018 Supreme Court Decision) were the major sources. This matches with the commonly accepted description that historical controversies determine the fate of South Korea and Japan's relations.

There is no denial that historical issues take a prominent role in shaping cooperation or conflict between South Korea and Japan; however, such centralized focus on the matter of history and its link with the cooperation/conflict prospects cannot cover the full dynamic picture of South Korea-Japan relations. As it would be discussed further in the "Theoretical Overview" section, Seoul and Tokyo managed to cooperate or at least take an initiative to do so despite lingering unresolved issues of history. The Normalization Treaty in 1965 was signed despite strong domestic opposition deriving from historical woes. The "Joint Declaration of 1998" by President Kim Dae-jung and Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo was

issued at a time when bilateral relations were severely deteriorated due to history controversies amplified by previous administrations. In other words, while history issues can significantly affect the prospects of cooperation or conflict, there are other underlying factors of interest at play that also control motivations for cooperation. It is one among these underlying “submerged” factors that my research will focalize as the source of cooperation/conflict: the issue of national security.

In particular, my research intends to focus on the rise of China and the deepening of US-China competition as the international context influencing drastic deterioration of relations in the 2010s. With the emergence of China as a rising assertive state in the Indo-Pacific region and potential challenger toward the US-established status quo, Seoul and Tokyo find themselves required to devise their own security policies to address the rapidly changing international environment. As both states are reliant on security partnership with the United States and other regional players, foreign policy and security strategies receive prominent attention as it is linked to national survival. The issues at hand are how both countries understood the current international setting, how they perceived forces of threat, and whom they considered as reliable strategic partners. My research will argue that South Korea and Japan held diverging threat perceptions regarding China and opted for different security partnership alignment preferences to address security matters. The mismatch of threat perceptions and security alignment preferences obstruct the establishment of strategic trust, thus creating weak incentive for bilateral cooperation.

Chapter II: Theoretical Overview

1. Critical Literature Review

The nature of complexity in South Korea-Japan security relations have attracted the attention of academics and analysts, who made various examinations and offered valuable interpretations on the dynamics of this perplexing phenomenon in the East Asian region. In order to facilitate better understanding of my research's alternative argument examining the patterns of cooperation or conflict between South Korea and Japan based on threat perceptions and security alignments, it is first necessary for a thorough review of previous literatures that have addressed the same phenomenon.

One of the early, significant analysis of South Korea-Japan bilateral security relationship patterns came from Victor Cha's work, *Alignment Despite Antagonism*. Under the circumstances of the Cold War period, Cha presented the "quasi-alliance" model involving fear of abandonment and entrapment. Cha hypothesized that if the United States (the security provider and common ally of South Korea and Japan) appeared to falter in its commitment of alliance and security provision, the fear of abandonment by South Korea and Japan will exacerbate, leading to cooperation between the two states to alleviate this fear. On the other hand, should US commitment toward alliance and provision of security be perceived as guaranteed and assured, the fear of abandonment will decrease, but at the

same time, the constant factor of historical issues will emerge and weaken cooperation between Seoul and Tokyo. In summary, Cha's theory considers both external threat and "promise" (US security alliance commitment) as important factors that influence South Korea-Japan relations.⁵ While Cha's theory is profoundly sound, there are certain assumptions and limitations. Cha assumed that if the US were to abandon its alliance commitment, South Korea and Japan would share the same threat perception toward the Communist bloc and align together, leading to cooperation. He overlooked the possible case that threat perceptions and alignment approach could differ, and that South Korea and Japan could design different strategies in addressing the Communist bloc. The Nixon Doctrine and the détente period exemplified this when Japan's Tanaka administration took the opportunity to normalize relations with China in 1972. Seoul, on the other hand, refrained from normalizing ties with Beijing while panicking over Nixon's pulling of USFK troops out of South Korea. Even in the contemporary context in which the Trump administration deployed rhetoric that implied possible disengagement (if not outright abandonment) from Washington's allies, South Korea and Japan have different approaches toward China due to their divergent threat perceptions. Second, Cha's theory implied that history-related conflict was dependent on whether the United States was engaged or disengaged with South Korea and Japan. Yet the situation between Seoul and Tokyo in 2018

⁵ Victor Cha, *Alignment Despite Antagonism*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999): 48-49

demonstrated that regardless of US disengagement, historical controversies exacerbated, meaning that there is a different variable other than US engagement-disengagement that could potentially exacerbate historical controversy rifts.

Woo Seung-ji also contributed with his analyses on cooperation patterns between South Korea and Japan by introducing his “engagement-coalition politics” hypothesis. Similar to Cha, Woo argues that the US plays a powerful role in influencing cooperation but differentiates from Cha by arguing that Washington’s active engagement will contribute to cooperation, while disengagement will lead to conflict.⁶ Furthermore, Woo considers South Korea and Japan’s “coalition politics” as another independent variable, defining two different diplomatic preferences of the ruling elite: the alpha coalition, which advocates strong partnership with the US against the communist bloc, and the beta coalition, which advocates a balanced approach in relations with both Washington and communist bloc countries. In the condition that both ruling coalitions (especially alpha coalition) are in convergence and the US is actively engaged, there will be cooperation; however, if ruling coalitions diverged along with the US disengaged, there will be conflict.⁷ Woo’s hypothesis is a general improvement from Cha’s approach in that it acknowledges the agency of South Korea and Japan’s political elite and their direction of foreign policy.

⁶ 우승지, “냉전 시기 한국-일본 협력의 퍼즐: 불개입가설 대 개입-연합정치가 설,” *한국정치학회보* 37, No. 3 (2003): 130-131

⁷ *Ibid.*, 132-133

Yet it still gives much power to the influence of the United States, which may be more applicable in the Cold War context, but not in the contemporary context of the post-Cold War 21st century. There is no denial that the United States plays a prominent role in the trilateral partnership framework with South Korea and Japan, but the extent of influence would be limited as Seoul and Tokyo would ultimately make the decisions related to foreign policy and security. At best, the US influence as a variable would be intermediate in the contemporary context.

Park Cheol Hee offers an alternate insight on the patterns of bilateral cooperation in the post-Cold War context. Coined as the “convergence-management hypothesis”, Park suggests that there are two different variables contributing to bilateral cooperation or conflict: (1) the convergence/divergence of threat perceptions, and (2) management of historical controversies. Park suggested that if there is a convergence in threat perception and the domestic effort of the political elite managing historical contentions, then there will be cooperation.⁸ Park’s hypothesis is a further update of previous realist-centered frameworks of the Cold War era, involving a mixture of constructivist perspectives with the history factor. Yet some of the limitations lie in the context and applicability of the formula. For example, Park’s hypothesis primarily sets North Korea as the focus of threat perceptions from the early days of the post-Cold War until 2008. In the current context, the playing field is expanded with China

⁸ Cheol Hee Park, "Cooperation Coupled with Conflicts: Korea-Japan Relations in the Post-Cold War Era," *Asia-Pacific Review* 15:2 (November 2008): 20

looming over the international security environment as a rising (and to some, threatening) power. The addition of China and its linkage with North Korea creates an interesting dynamic that complicates threat perceptions held by South Korea and Japan, calling for further expanded examination, which my research intends to do. Whether South Korea and Japan would cooperate together or prefer to either cooperate with different states or opt to engage with the threat is to be seen further on in this paper. Another question that can be raised is the motive for the political elite to cause or allow escalation of historical contentions instead of de-escalating them for cooperation. On one hand, domestic forces such as public perception and national identity could be a causal factor. But another possible description could be the prioritized focus on threat perceptions and national security: if Japan or South Korea do not share threat perceptions or security approach, the incentive for security cooperation would weaken, thus giving the leadership less reason to avoid offending the other side by expressing their own historical perspectives and losing a partner whom they perceived as impossible to cooperate with in the first place. Though likely coincidental, Park's case studies have also shown a pattern in which divergence of threat perceptions occurred first before historical tensions escalated.

Constructivist scholars have placed more emphasis on historical issues and national identity in influencing patterns of South Korea and Japan bilateral relations. Thomas Berger argued that tension between the two countries (and in East Asia in general) are not rooted in geo-strategic

environment, but instead on cultural-ideational factors such as “historically-based suspicions” and nationalist sentiment that shaped divergent national identity conceptions.⁹ Brad Glosserman and Scott Snyder share a similar perspective with that of Berger, emphasizing the impact of national identity and psychology of the public on bilateral security relations. They express skepticism over the realist argument that external threat will be a determinant variable of bilateral security cooperation because it fails to take public opinion (especially public perception on national identity and history) into account. They argue that public opinion and national identity shape the interest of a country, and ultimately determine its foreign policy.¹⁰ In other words, both a strong public opinion that opposes the other country and a national identity that upholds a perception divergent to that of the other country will lead to the shaping of an antagonistic foreign policy. For methodology in backing this claim, Glosserman and Snyder analyze public opinion data to draw connections with identity-related issues and foreign policies deployed by South Korea and Japan.¹¹ To a certain extent, national identity can shape foreign policy, as seen in South Korea’s prioritized approach to deal with North Korea derives from the identity of a divided state and perceived commonality of the Korean nationhood.¹² The colonial experience from the

⁹ Thomas Berger, "Power and Purpose in Pacific East Asia: A Constructivist Interpretation," in G. John Ikenberry and Michael Mastanduno, eds. *International Relations Theory and the Asia-Pacific* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003): 388

¹⁰ Brad Glosserman and Scott Snyder, *The Japan-South Korea Identity Clash* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 14

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 95

¹² *Ibid.*, 15

20th century is also engrained deeply in national identity, placing South Korea and Japan at odds as public domestic forces and politics firmly vocalize their interpretations and perceptions of the past. Yet, there are certain limitations. Although public opinion and national identity can exert significant influence, the aspect of public opinion can risk being vague as the set of people in the data may not necessarily represent the whole population and the general outlook. Moreover, policy decisions of the political elite appear to override public opinion in some cases (assuming that it is the general majority), meaning that the latter does not always shape the former.

Kim Ji-young also argued that the identities of both countries formed by a history of hostility and negative interactions weaken the trust between them, thus failing to form strong security relations.¹³ Kim hypothesized that resolutions over history problems will contribute to the establishment of bilateral trust leading to security cooperation, while Japan's opening of historical wounds with nationalist policies or remarks will provoke the Korean political elite to bandwagon with the angered public sentiment and adopt hardline policies, weakening bilateral trust and the incentive for security cooperation.¹⁴ The limitation of the analyses is the assumption that Seoul and Tokyo had shared only negative interactions without taking into account moments in which both countries cooperated

¹³ Ji-young Kim, "Rethinking the Role of Identity Factors: the History Problem and the Japan-South Korea Security Relationship in the post-Cold War period," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, vol. 15 (2015), 484

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 485

and shared amicable relations. While Japan is significantly responsible for its past colonial perpetrations and causing conflict by making statements implying justification or denial of the past, Kim's analyses also overlook South Korea's potential role in exacerbating conflict with its proactive nationalism that drives Japan's so-called "apology fatigue".

As discussed earlier in the "puzzle and argument" section, there is no denial that history issues and national identity takes a significant portion in the dynamics of South Korea-Japan bilateral relations, but the limitations of the constructivist interpretation demonstrate that history issues alone cannot cover the whole picture, nor does it ultimately set conditions for cooperation or conflict. Thus, my research contends that there are instances in which different factors and dynamics are prominently at play, particularly focusing on strategic security factors that are fundamental to survival in the conflicting international environment.

2. Analytical Framework

My analytical framework consists of two key variables: threat perception and security alignment preference. The research will argue that the convergence-divergence of these two variables will determine whether South Korea and Japan will establish strategic trust, and the resulting incentive to cooperate. In order to effectively demonstrate this research's formula on the effects of these key variables, it is important to characterize threat perception and security alignment preference, applying them to the security situation of South Korea and Japan.

Threat perception is a state's estimation and fear of another state's potential to threaten its national interests, particularly its security. Certain sources that could influence threat perceptions, according to Walt, derive from "geographic proximity, offensive power, and aggressive intentions."¹⁵ Geographic proximity indicates that a nearby powerful state will likely pose a greater threat, as it is the case with China geographically located near the Korean Peninsula and the Japanese Isles, asserting significant influence on the shared East Asian region. Offensive power is characterized as a state's capability to challenge the sovereignty and territorial integrity of another state.¹⁶ For Japan, its territorial integrity is challenged and threatened directly by China's assertive claim over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, which Tokyo currently holds sovereignty over. For South Korea, China's interference and retaliation over Seoul's decision to install the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) could be seen as a compromise to sovereignty and right of defense, thus a threat (though this interpretation fluctuates depending on the administration's security strategy). Aggressive intentions refer to certain ambitions of a state that could be perceived as dangerous or provocative by others. Specifically, such intentions are measured by a state's attitude toward the status quo: if a state appears to challenge established international norms or cease to bound itself to legal restraints, such as the violation of peace treaties or

¹⁵ Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988): 21-26

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 24

non-aggression pacts, the state will be perceived as a threat.¹⁷ China's actions in the region (i.e. military maritime island fortifications in the South China Sea, Senkaku dispute in the East China Sea, and the tacit condoning of North Korea's nuclear development and aggression) are perceived as challenges to the established rule-based order.¹⁸

With the circumstance of China holding such capabilities and characteristics, South Korea and Japan have potential to perceive the rising Asian power as a threat, and security cooperation would be likely if both converge on their threat perceptions toward China. Yet perceptions could also diverge, as South Korea may centralize its focus on North Korea as the immediate threat than China, while Japan centers its focus on the latter. Divergence would inhibit Seoul and Tokyo's strategic coordination as they are not facing the same threat, weakening incentive to cooperate.

Along with South Korea and Japan's perception of threats, it is also important to define the direction and policy that South Korea and Japan deployed to address the rise of China and the growing intensification of the Washington-Beijing rivalry in security. With this context in mind, I focus and define the second independent variable: the security alignment preferences. Borrowing from Woo Seung-ji's "engagement-coalition politics" hypothesis, strategic alignment priorities bear resemblance with

¹⁷ Raymond Cohen, *Threat Perceptions in International Crisis* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979): 165-171; Jeffrey Legro, "Which Norms Matter? Revisiting the "Failure" of Internationalism," *International Organization*, vol. 51 (1997): 54-55

¹⁸ Mira Rapp-Hooper et al. "Responding to China's Complicated Views on International Order," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, October 10, 2019. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/10/10/responding-to-china-s-complicated-views-on-international-order-pub-80021>

“coalition politics” in which the political elite opt to prioritize full alignment with the United States and the wider network of liberal democracies or balance the alignment with both the United States and non-liberal democracies such as China (and in some cases, North Korea). I am cautious about creating a dichotomic image that implies characterization of the current emerging affairs as a new Cold War, as the relation dynamics between the two world powers is much more complex and intertwined together than the previous Cold War rivalry; however, in the realm of security, the misaligning security interest between the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific region is evident with both sides deploying firm rhetoric and security measures that raise alarm to one another. A clear divide in the security realm is created between the United States and China, and both seek to strengthen partnerships with countries against the rival (or discourage third party countries from joining partnerships with the rival). South Korea’s situation of being stuck in the middle conveys this intensified rivalry, receiving pressure from both Washington and Beijing that aim to keep South Korea in a position that will serve their security interest (for US, to keep strengthened alliance and prevent tilting toward China; for China, to prevent it from deepening alliance with US and joining the wider counterbalance effort).¹⁹

Under this context of intensifying rivalry between the United

¹⁹ Chung Min Lee, “South Korea is Caught Between China and the United States,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, October 21, 2020. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/10/21/south-korea-is-caught-between-china-and-united-states-pub-83019>

States and China, South Korea and Japan's political elite are required to evaluate and strategize their respective diplomatic partnerships to address security concerns. Since both countries share a formal military alliance with the United States, it is highly unlikely for either side to completely abandon Washington, but possible to take the course of balanced partnership with the US and the rivaling side. Borrowing Woo's terminology, I characterize the prioritized approach of full alignment with the United States and the wider network of liberal democracies as the "alpha (α) oriented alignment." On the other hand, the prioritized approach of a balanced alignment with both the United States and China (and in some cases, North Korea) is defined as the "beta (β) oriented alignment." I opt to characterize the variable as a policy preference instead of an engrained "ruling coalition" characteristic since administrations (especially that of South Korea) sometimes oscillated strategies depending on the shift of the security environment. My research will argue that Japan staunchly prioritized the alpha alignment, making efforts to align its security strategies with that of the United States and proactively widening its partnership with other democratic states sharing common values of a rule-based order. This is visibly demonstrated by Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy" framework, which was designed to closely cooperate with the United States and other democratic states that share a common cause in counterbalancing China.²⁰ On the other hand, South Korea's security

²⁰ Yuichi Hosoya, "FOIP 2.0: The Evolution of Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy," *Asia-Pacific Review*, vol. 26 (September 7, 2019): 20

alignment preference demonstrated certain shifts. Generally, the Park and Moon administrations would opt for the beta alignment by balancing its cooperation with the United States and China. South Korea would engage (or in some cases, placate and appease) China to prevent potential retaliation from Beijing and to strategically utilize it as leverage against North Korea. In cases in which the South Korean leadership deemed China as unhelpful in dealing with North Korea and even perceive it as a threat, the preference could shift to the alpha alignment. A convergence in alignment preferences signify a shared commonality in partnering countries, increasing the incentive for cooperation. A divergence in alignment preferences would weaken the incentive for cooperation, as the alpha alignment will view the beta alignment as compromising with (if not outright tilting toward) a threat, while the beta alignment perceive the alpha alignment as aggravating unnecessary tension with its antagonistic stance toward China.

With the characteristics of the key variables defined and established, the formula of my research's analytical framework is demonstrated as the following:

		Security Alignment Preference	
		Converge	Diverge
Threat Perception	Converge	Cooperation	Unstable cooperation
	Diverge	Unstable cooperation	Conflict

- *Converging Threat Perception (I₁) + Converging Security Alignment Preference (I₂) → Stronger incentive for cooperation (D)*
- *Diverging Threat Perception (I₁) + Diverging Security Alignment Preference (I₂) → Weak incentive for cooperation (D)*
- *Diverging Threat Perception (I₁) + Converging Security Alignment (I₂) → Partial incentive for cooperation with unstable foundation (D)*
- *Converging Threat Perception (I₁) + Diverging Strategic Priority (I₂) → Partial incentive for cooperation with unstable foundation (D)*

Based on the newly proposed formula, four different hypothetical outcomes are anticipated. If South Korea and Japan share a common threat perception (convergence) and a common security alignment preference (convergence), then both countries will establish strategic trust and have a higher incentive to cooperate. In contrast, if South Korea and Japan do not share a common threat perception (divergence) and do not share a common security alignment preference (divergence), then both countries will fail to establish strategic trust and thus have lower incentive for cooperation. The third and fourth outcomes are interchangeable: If either one of the independent variables converge while the other diverge, South Korea and Japan will have partial incentive for cooperation, but with risks of instability and prone to fluctuations.

In addition, my research also intends to add an intermediating variable of US intervention in South Korea-Japan cooperation. South Korea and Japan's security strategies involve coordination with the United States, the common ally holds certain leverage and agency in shaping cooperation with the two East Asian states. While Washington cannot force cooperation between its two allies, it can still exert influence through engagement and heighten chances for Seoul and Tokyo to cooperate. It can also opt to be disengaged and leave the two countries to their own devices, leading to possible conflict as there is no intermediating factor in the middle to discourage them.

My research will analyze the following time periods as case studies: (1) 2013-2015 [Park Geun-hye and Abe Shinzo Administrations]; (2) 2016-2017 [Park & Moon Jae-in and Abe Administrations]; (3) 2018-2021 [Moon and Abe & Suga Yoshihide Administrations]; and (4) 2022-2023 [Yoon Suk-yeol and Kishida Fumio Administrations]. These periods are selected based on the notion that the rise of China became more evident in the early 2010s. Each period demonstrated different patterns of cooperation and conflict in South Korea-Japan bilateral relations, as the political elite of both countries held their respective perceptions of threat and deployed different strategic approaches. The United States under the consecutive administrations of Obama, Trump, and Biden have also rotated between engagement and disengagement with its East Asian allies, yielding different outcomes with its partial mediating influence. I intend to utilize news reports, government documents, policy papers, and official

statements of both South Korean and Japanese administrations, particularly those published from the ministries affiliated with foreign diplomacy and defense. The order, length, and wording of such documents will demonstrate how both countries measured and perceived China (and North Korea) as a threat. It will also yield information on which countries South Korea and Japan opted to form partnerships with to ensure their security, thus demonstrating and establishing their respective security alignment preferences.

Chapter III: Park-Moon & Abe Administrations

1. 2013-2015 Period

The second Abe Shinzo cabinet and the Park Geun-hye administrations inaugurated during similar periods, in December 2012 and February 2013, respectively. By that time, bilateral relations had experienced a shift to negativity after the previous President Lee Myung-bak made a visit to Dokdo (disputed and referred to as “Takeshima” by Japan) and later mentioned that the Japanese Emperor’s personal apology is a prerequisite for a visit to South Korea in August 2012. The new administrations of South Korea and Japan were not eager to de-escalate tensions not only because of their steadfast outlook on history and national identity, but also because of the lack incentive for cooperation and low strategic trust caused by diverging security approaches addressing the new international environment.

At this time around the early 2010s, China had emerged as a rising power in the Indo-Pacific region, drawing attention and concern from both neighboring countries and the United States. Beijing’s rapid economic growth throughout the years had finally reached the point in which it had replaced Tokyo as the new number two world economy in terms of GDP after 2010. Along with economic development, China had grown active in its military buildup and activity, causing friction among states in the region with its assertion over maritime territory in the South China Sea. China’s

assertive territorial claims became evident as a challenge to the status quo of a rule-based order in the region, which the United States rebuked by advocating “freedom of navigation, open access to Asia’s maritime commons and respect for international law.”²¹ Under this international environmental context of a rising China, Japan and South Korea devised their own security strategies based on their threat perceptions and security alignment preferences, which were both in divergence in the initial stages of the Park and Abe administrations before 2016.

Japan had been following China’s rise carefully since the early 2010s. Along with the fact that it was overtaken by China as the world’s second economic power, Japan also found itself directly threatened by China in the security area after an incident near the East China Sea. Japan had directly scuffled with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, which Japan perceived as a challenge to both its territorial integrity and the status quo of a rule-based order. This was largely reflected in Japan’s Diplomatic Bluebooks that were published since the second inauguration of the Abe administration. On sections regarding China and the security environment, the Bluebooks annually recycled expressions such as China’s insufficient transparency in military capability advancement and its attempts to change the status quo by coercion especially in the East China Sea and South China Sea, followed by extensive paragraphs describing Japan’s legitimacy of its

²¹ Mark Landler, “Offering to Aid Talks, US Challenges China on Disputed Islands,” *The New York Times*, July 23, 2010.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/24/world/asia/24diplo.html>

territorial sovereignty over the Senkaku Islands.²²

Addressing China's threat, Japan opted to strengthen ties with the United States and other liberal democratic countries to counterbalance China. The Abe administration demonstrated its alpha security alignment preference by strategically emphasizing its goal to contribute to a wider regional stability as a "proactive contributor to peace" in partnership with the United States and like-minded democratic states that share common concern in the Indo-Pacific region. Abe's "Democratic Security Diamond," which was envisioned in November 2012, was explicit in pointing out China's coercive actions in the East China Sea and South China Sea as a threat to the region. It called for "Australia, India, Japan, and the US...[to] form a diamond to safeguard" the Indo-Pacific region, and even invited the United Kingdom and France to join in on the effort of strengthening the region's security.²³ The same message and sentiment was echoed by Abe's undelivered 2013 speech titled "The Bounty of the Open Seas: Five New Principles for Japanese Diplomacy", which became the basis for the future "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) framework, emphasizing cooperative partnership with the US, Australia, and India to ensure an international order "governed by laws and rules, not by might."²⁴ Japan's National

²² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Diplomatic Bluebook 2014*, 4; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Diplomatic Bluebook 2015*, 9-10; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Diplomatic Bluebook 2016*, 3-4; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Diplomatic Bluebook 2017*, 4-5; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Diplomatic Bluebook 2018*, 5-6;

²³ Shinzo Abe, "Asia's Democratic Security Diamond", *Project Syndicate*, December 27, 2012. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/magazine/a-strategic-alliance-for-japan-and-india-by-shinzo-abe>

²⁴ "The Bounty of the Open Seas: Five New Principles for Japanese Diplomacy," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, January 18, 2013.

Security Strategy released in December 2013 also highlighted Japan's priority to deepen cooperative relations with other like-minded countries to contribute to peace and stability in the international community with the "Japan-US Alliance as the cornerstone."²⁵ Furthermore, the Abe administration proactively appealed its attractive value as a strong security partner for both the United States and other liberal democratic partners by updating its security capacities. Since 2013, the Abe administration pushed for the reinterpretation of its Constitution to circumvent the restrictions on military activity, shifting from the limited use of military for individual self-defense to an expanded capability of "collective self-defense" that allows for Japan's enhanced military support for both the United States and other third-party countries that share "close relationship with Japan."²⁶ Overall, the consolidation of Japan's alliance with the United States and its widened range of partnerships with other democratic states demonstrated its alpha-oriented security alignment preferences, and ultimately its policy to counterbalance China.

South Korea's approach toward China differed from that of Japan in that threat perceptions were relatively low. South Korea's relatively low threat perception derived from two intertwined factors: (1) South Korea's threat perception was centered around North Korea; and (2) South Korea

https://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/pm/abe/abe_0118e.html

²⁵ Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, *National Security Strategy of Japan* (2013), 14. https://japan.kantei.go.jp/96_abe/documents/2013/_icsFiles/afiedfile/2013/12/18/NSS.pdf

²⁶ "Cabinet Decision on Development of Seamless Security Legislation to Ensure Japan's Survival and Protect its People," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, July 1, 2014. https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/page23e_000273.html; Christopher Hughes, "Japan's Strategic Trajectory and Collective Self-Defense: Essential Continuity or Radical Shift?" *The Journal of Japanese Studies*, 43, no. 1 (Winter 2017): 94

perceived China as a potential partner to be utilized as a leverage against North Korea. Aside from the fact that South Korea did not have territorial issues like that between Japan and China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands,²⁷ Seoul did not share the same concerns with Tokyo over Beijing's rising assertive activity in Indo-Pacific. Unlike Japan's expression of concerns regarding China's military build-up and its challenge toward the status-quo in the Indo-Pacific, South Korean diplomatic documents instead highlighted China's proactive diplomacy empowered by economic development and its cooperative relations with neighboring states.²⁸ Furthermore, in a similar fashion to Japan's diplomatic documents dedicating extensive paragraphs defending its territorial rights over the islands against China's challenge, South Korea dedicates a whole chapter titled "Securing Peace and Stability on the Korean Peninsula", addressing security issues with North Korea and describing Seoul's efforts to counterbalance it with both its independent initiatives and cooperation with other states.²⁹ In other words, South Korea and Japan's divergent threat perceptions were apparent with South Korea's focus centralized on North Korea and the potential threat it posed to security.

²⁷ There is a conflict between South Korea and China regarding territorial rights over the Socotra Rock (Jeodo), a submerged reef located in the Yellow Sea; however, it receives relatively less attention, along with the fact that the UNCLOS specified that submerged reefs are not subject to territorial claim by any country.

²⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Korea, *2014 Diplomatic White Paper*, 12. Similar expressions were used in consecutive Diplomatic White Papers, highlighting more of China's development and cooperation instead of conveying images that imply challenging the status-quo.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 30-68. Chapters titled "Preserving Peace and Stability on the Korean Peninsula" are used in consecutive Diplomatic White Papers, demonstrating South Korea's centralized focus on the Korean Peninsula and dealing with North Korean issues.

To address the security threat posed by North Korea, the Park administration did not narrow its cooperation to its traditional allied partner the United States and other democratic states, but instead aimed to enlist the help of non-liberal democratic states such as China, thus demonstrating its beta-oriented security alignment preference. Park's strategy of "Trust-Building Process on the Korean Peninsula", which aimed to deter Pyongyang's provocations based on "solid security posture" and gradually build up trust for inter-Korean cooperation, specifically listed certain states that Seoul aimed to cooperate with to realize the strategy, which included China and Russia.³⁰ Along with its formal ally the United States, South Korea also sought to establish strategic partnership with China, a country that held significant leverage over North Korea and could effectively exert pressure to denuclearize. The Park administration took its first step in strategically prioritizing China by sending special envoys to Beijing both before and after Park's inauguration, breaking from the previous customary practice of sending special envoys to Washington and Tokyo first.³¹ Park also formally announced her plans to "deepen cooperation" with China in order to address North Korea related issues in a Presidential Secretary meeting in May 2013.³² Months later, Seoul further

³⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Korea, *2014 Diplomatic White Paper*, 32-33

³¹ 김재철, "배반된 기대인가 과도한 기대인가 - 박근혜 정부의 '중국 변화론' 평가," *국가전략* 23권 4호 (2017): 119. Kim notes that the United States' "strategic patience" approach toward North Korea drove Park to strategically prioritize China, hoping to take more active action against Pyongyang; however, Kim also states that such strategic approach was not necessarily divergent from that of Washington, which also hoped to hold China accountable in the denuclearization process.

³² 김환용, "박근혜 대통령 "북한 문제 풀기 위해 중국과 더 공조"," *VOA*,

consolidated its strategic cooperative partnership with China through the South Korea-China Future Vision Joint Statement, confirming bilateral shared interest in stabilizing the Korean Peninsula and encouraging China's constructive role in contributing to denuclearization.³³ Park's calculations of strategically partnering with China appeared to be validated as Beijing demonstrated proactivity by not only agreeing to UNSC resolutions sanctioning North Korea's nuclear testing, but also taking its own initiative by both tightening restriction on 900 import/export materials that could be used for North Korean weapons development and terminating transactions between the Bank of China and the Foreign Trade Bank of North Korea. China also agreed to install a hotline between Seoul and Beijing unlike its previous hesitations since 2007, allowing for faster communication to deal with issues regarding North Korea.³⁴ South Korea and China's bilateral relations reached a peak in September 2015 when Park attended the WWII commemoration military parade in Beijing alongside President Xi Jinping, demonstrating both strong bilateral ties and South Korea's strategic balanced alignment with China.

In sum, South Korea and Japan diverged both in their threat perceptions and security alignment preferences between 2013-2015, thus creating weak incentive for cooperation. Japan and South Korea's threat

2013.05.27. <https://www.voakorea.com/a/1668982.html>

³³ “한-중 미래비전 공동성명(中韩面向未来联合声明)” *외교부*, 2013.07.01.

https://www.mofa.go.kr/www/brd/m_4076/view.do?seq=346617

³⁴ “한-중 국방부 간 핫라인 설치... ‘북한 문제’ 소통 강화 기대,” *KBS World*, 2014.07.24.

http://world.kbs.co.kr/service/contents_view.htm?lang=k&menu_cate=issues&id=&board_seq=260779&page=440&board_code=

perceptions were centered around China and North Korea respectively, thus obstructing deeper coordination in dealing with their potential threats. Although at least Park and Abe shared certain strategic commonality in exerting pressure against North Korea's nuclear development, Japan was less proactive in the effort than it was in counterbalancing China, rather passively passing the buck to South Korea and the United States on Korean Peninsula issues. Japan's exclusive concern with North Korea was more centered over the Japanese abductee issue, which in fact led to Tokyo and Pyongyang forming an agreement in 2014 to lift economic sanctions in exchange for setting up an official investigation committee searching for abduction victims, much to South Korea's chagrin.³⁵

Japan's recognition of coordination difficulty with a threat perception-divergent South Korea is also reflected in Abe's "Democratic Security Diamond" and "Bounty for the Open Seas", which excluded Seoul as a potential partner despite its status as a liberal democratic country. Defense Minister Han Min-goo's statement in 2015 supporting "freedom of navigation" and the resolution of conflict "within the framework of international law" in the South China Sea implied certain alignment with that of Japan, but it was limited and largely passive.³⁶ Seoul did not go

³⁵ 노효동, "'北日대화, 관련국들과 조율필요...발표 임박해 韓에 통보'," *연합뉴스*, 2014.05.30. <https://n.news.naver.com/mnews/article/001/0006934507?sid=100> South Korea complained that Japan did not notify of its compromise plan with North Korea in a timely manner and raised concerns that Japan's lifting of sanctions would weaken the overall joint effort to pressure North Korea's denuclearize.

³⁶ "Joint Press Briefing by Secretary Carter and Minister Han Min-goo in Seoul, South Korea," U.S. Department of Defense, November 2, 2015. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/627049/joint-press-briefing-by-secretary-carter-and-minister-han-min-goo-in-seoul-sout/>

further to proactively design a strategy in the disputed maritime region nor did it make such statement to counterbalance China, rather citing its personal interest of trade routes.

The divergence of threat perception is also intertwined with the divergence of security alignment preferences. Although South Korea's preference to balance its relationship with both the United States and China was aimed to enlist the help of world powers in dealing with the North Korean threat, Japan viewed the friendly gesture toward Beijing as a tilt toward China. Such perceptions were exacerbated further by Park's different response toward Abe and Xi Jinping, turning the cold shoulder toward the former while warming up to the latter, along with the evoking of shared historical experiences of victimhood under Japanese perpetration.³⁷ The visit to Beijing by Park to attend the ceremony commemorating the end of World War II was also depicted by Japan as South Korea's tilt toward China,³⁸ affecting negative perceptions of trust toward Seoul. From South Korea's perspective, Japan's active prioritization of cooperating with the United States and other liberal democracies to counterbalance China was perceived as aggravating tension in the region,³⁹ deepening distrust toward Japan and rendering its actions as a liability to

³⁷ Cheol Hee Park, "Sour Partners: Japan and South Korea's Uncomfortable Compromise for Cooperation," in *Japan's Foreign Relations in Asia*, ed. James D.J. Brown and Jeff Kingston (Routledge, 2018), 226; 박철휘, "동북아 평화를 위한 한국과 일본의 국가 정체성과 외교정책 방향" *일본의 국가정체성과 동북아 국제관계* (동북아역사재단, 2019년): 359

³⁸ Park, "Sour Partners," 228

³⁹ 박철휘, "동북아 평화를 위한 한국과 일본의 국가정체성과 외교정책 방향," 360

South Korea's security interest. With these prevailing divergent perceptions and mismatch over security alignment, South Korea and Japan were unable to establish strategic trust, thus weakening the incentive for cooperation.

Behind the scenes, the United States prioritized engagement with its East Asian allies under the Obama administration's policy of "pivot to Asia" (later "Rebalance to Asia"). In the process of its engagement, Washington worked to strengthen trilateral cooperation by bringing South Korea and Japan closer. In response to Abe Shinzo's visit to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine in 2013, the United States explicitly expressed its disappointment in the Japanese leader, stating that such action "exacerbate tensions with Japan's neighbors."⁴⁰ The explicit disapproval likely came as a shock to Abe, who later refrained from visiting the shrine at least during his tenure. This was also likely intertwined with the exclusion of a more nationalist, revisionist tone in the 2015 Abe Statement, reflecting Japan's aim to follow Washington's direction and to establish its credibility with its ally.⁴¹ US engagement also pushed South Korea to initiate engagement with Japan in May 2015, as Seoul feared that it may be diplomatically isolated from the alliance framework as Washington deepen ties with Tokyo.⁴² Summit and ministerial meetings between South Korea and Japan increased significantly in 2015 than from the start of 2013,

⁴⁰ David Jackson, "U.S. 'disappointed' in Japanese Leader," *USA Today*, December 26, 2013. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/theoval/2013/12/26/obama-japan-shinzo-abe-war-shrine-china-and-south-korea/4205441/>

⁴¹ 이정환, "아베 정권 역사 정책의 변용: 아베 담화와 국제주의," <아시아리뷰> 제 9권 1호 (2019), 181

⁴² Park, "Sour Partners," 227

evidently demonstrating that the US had been active in pushing its two allies to engage, if not entirely cooperate. The signing of the Comfort Women Agreement in December 2015 was the final fruit bore from the series of bilateral and trilateral meetings pressured by the Obama administration, who hoped to bring about reconciliation and strengthen potential for trilateral cooperation.⁴³ While US engagement and intervention did not serve as the definitive factor nor bring about full cooperation, it indeed set a temporary stage for partial cooperation in the 2016-2017 period.

2. 2016-2017 Period

The beginning of 2016 marked a temporary shift in security alignment preferences particularly for South Korea influenced largely by the shifting international security environment, thus creating partial incentive for cooperation between South Korea and Japan. The immediate catalyst that influenced the shift was North Korea's 4th nuclear testing in January, followed by multiple ICBM launches and a 5th nuclear testing later in September. Seoul and Tokyo partially shared threat perceptions, particularly toward North Korea, holding an immediate telephone summit talk to discuss counter measures against the provocation.⁴⁴ The communication was different from previous cases in that it was a summit

⁴³ Daniel Sneider, "Behind the Comfort Women Agreement," *The Oriental Economist*, January 10, 2016. <https://toyokeizai.net/articles/-/99891>

⁴⁴ "Japan-ROK Summit Telephone Talk," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, January 7, 2016. https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/na/kr/page4e_000373.html

exchange instead of ministerial level exchange, demonstrating heightened trust and strategic prioritization between the two countries. The number of bilateral and trilateral meetings held to address the North Korean issue significantly increased in 2016 than previous years, meeting a total of nine times.⁴⁵ A trilateral joint statement was also made in response to the 5th nuclear testing, showing that South Korea and Japan were willing to move beyond merely sharing concerns and take further cooperative action along with the United States to address a common threat.⁴⁶ Furthermore, Seoul and Tokyo signed the GSOMIA pact in November of 2016, allowing direct information exchange on security matters between the two countries.⁴⁷

The temporary cooperation was made possible for two reasons: (1) the intervention of the United States in previous years that set the stage for bilateral engagement, and (2) South Korea's temporary shift to the alpha-oriented security alignment preference, prioritizing partnership with its ally the United States and a fellow democratic state Japan. Regarding the second factor, Seoul faced obstruction and difficulty in cooperating with Beijing. Despite previous close ties in the period of 2013-2015, the year 2016 started on a low note with Xi's refusal to answer Park's hotline contact immediately after North Korea's 6th nuclear testing. This affected South Korea's distrust toward China and question its strategic reliability. A

⁴⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Korea, *2017 Diplomatic White Paper*, 46-47

⁴⁶ "Joint Statement Following the Japan-U.S.-ROK Trilateral Ministerial Meeting in New York," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, September 18, 2016. https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/na/page1e_000100.html

⁴⁷ "South Korea, Japan Agree Intelligence-Sharing on North Korea Threat," *Reuters*, November 23, 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southkorea-japan-military-idUSKBN131068>

diplomatic meeting in Munich between South Korea's Yun Byung-se and China's Wang Yi also demonstrated a divergence in approach, with Yun arguing for "assertive pressure" and Wang preferring "peaceful stability and dialogue."⁴⁸ The diverging positions were a bitter reality check that China's strategy toward North Korea was not fully onboard with that of South Korea.⁴⁹ To Seoul, Beijing's refraining from applying full pressure on North Korea would likely have been perceived as mirroring the lackluster, guarded response to Pyongyang's provocations against South Korea in 2010 (i.e. The *Cheonan* battleship sinking and Yeonpyeong Island Shelling incident). Thus, distrust toward Beijing developed, influencing the shift of Seoul's security alignment to Tokyo and Washington, a reconfiguring of strategy to traditional trilateral cooperation. Park's decision to install the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense with the US was a definitive demonstration of South Korea's security alignment, contrasting from Park's previous refusal to deploy THAAD (i.e. 3 No's: (1) no urging from the US, (2) no discussion between South Korea and the US, (3) no decision made by South Korea)⁵⁰ to avoid offending Beijing and weakening bilateral cooperation.

⁴⁸ 조승호, "윤병세 "끝장 제재" vs 왕이 "신중 대처"” *동아일보*, 2016.02.13.

<https://www.donga.com/news/Politics/article/all/20160213/76423323/1>

⁴⁹ 김재철, "배반된 기대인가 과도한 기대인가," 126-128. Kim describes South Korea-China relations as "same bed, different dreams" since 2013, arguing that the joint statement implied different aims for the Korean Peninsula, with Park aiming for unification through absorption into South Korea and Xi preferring peaceful resolutions. Kim also mentions Victor Cha's commentary, which argued that China has tactically approached South Korea, but not strategically. It is implied that bilateral relations were on a shaky foundation with underlying strategic divergence and perspectives, even before South Korea and China's relation deteriorated by the THAAD issue.

⁵⁰ 서승원, "박근혜 정부 시기 한국의 대 중국 전략적 사고에 관한 고찰," 131

Yet the Park administration appeared not fully onboard with Japan on threat perceptions toward China. Even though China deployed retaliatory measures against South Korea in objection to THAAD, the Park administration refrained from interpreting such action as an infringement on its right to defense (which is linked to sovereignty). It instead opted to continue explaining that THAAD was aimed at no other country but North Korea and emphasizing the need to cooperate with China.⁵¹ In other words, the Park administration's threat perception remained locked onto North Korea, and the doors were left open to shift back to a beta-oriented security alignment should China respond positively and cooperate with South Korea again. This would leave potential cracks in cooperation between South Korea and Japan.

Similar trends are observed in the year 2017, after the impeachment of President Park following a political scandal and the inauguration of the progressive party candidate Moon Jae-in. North Korea's provocation continued, along with China's assertive military activity in the Indo-Pacific region. Since February 2017, North Korea had constantly taken provocative actions by launching ballistic missiles, even firing a Hwasong-12 ICBM on May 14th, four days after the new Moon administration's inauguration. A total of fifteen ballistic missiles were launched in the same year, along with the sixth nuclear testing in September, which South Korea evaluated that "North Korea's nuclear threats have become quite considerable."⁵² Japan

⁵¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Korea, *2017 Diplomatic White Paper*, 48

⁵² Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Korea, *2018 Diplomatic White Paper*, 10-11.

had also evaluated North Korea as an “unprecedented, grave and imminent threat” to Japan due to the nuclear testing and constant ballistic missile launches, two of which had flown over Japanese territory.⁵³ Thus, Seoul and Tokyo coordinated together in addressing North Korea. Foreign ministers of both countries held a telephone talk together on May 14th right after North Korea’s launching of its ICBM, exchanging information on the provocation and sharing a common stance that “dialogue for the sake of dialogue with North Korea is meaningless,” affirming that Seoul and Tokyo will maintain close cooperation in applying pressure on Pyongyang.⁵⁴ Afterwards, during the G20 Hamburg Summit in July 2017, a trilateral joint statement was drafted with points of the following: (1) South Korea, Japan, and the United States condemn North Korea’s weapons provocation as a threat and violation of UNSC resolutions; (2) the three countries will work to achieve the “complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization” of the Korean Peninsula; and (3) the three countries commit to applying maximum pressure on North Korea by pressing early adoption of new UNSC resolutions with further sanctions.⁵⁵ On the surface level, the coordinated approach against North Korea and the focused alignment of South Korea with Japan and the United States

⁵³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Diplomatic Bluebook 2018*, 5

⁵⁴ Kishida Fumio and Yun Byung-se, “Japan-ROK Foreign Ministers’ Telephone Talk,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, May 14, 2017, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/na/kr/page3e_000690.html

⁵⁵ “Joint Statement from the United States of America, Republic of Korea, and Japan,” conclusion date: July 7, 2017, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Korea*, https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5476/view.do?seq=318761&srchFr=&srchTo=&srchWord=&srchTp=&multi_itm_seq=0&itm_seq_1=0&itm_seq_2=0&company_cd=&company_nm=

appeared to have created an atmosphere of cooperation; however, there were underlying cracks that could revert bilateral relations back to conflict.

Japan and South Korea's threat perception toward China remain diverged even after the inauguration of the Moon administration. While Japan had increased its coordinated pressure efforts with South Korea in pressuring North Korea, its primary concern still lied in China. Japan steadily repeated the rhetoric of expressing concern over China's lacking military development transparency, its challenge against the status quo in the Indo-Pacific, and the violation of Japan's territorial integrity through the intrusion of "Chinese Government-owned vessels" near the waters of the Senkaku Islands.⁵⁶

Tokyo also maintained its alpha-oriented security alignment preference, continuing its close coordination with the United States and other liberal democracies. The "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" strategy, which Abe had officially finalized in 2016 during his speech in TICAD VI, gained further momentum as it became a major strategic vision shared with the United States. The newly inaugurated Trump administration had also defined the Indo-Pacific as a region of strategic interest and implicated that China embodied the "repressive visions of world order" challenging the regional status quo.⁵⁷ Shared perspectives and strategic alignment on the

⁵⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Diplomatic Bluebook 2018*, 5; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Diplomatic Bluebook 2019*, 15; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Diplomatic Bluebook 2020*, 12; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Diplomatic Bluebook 2021*, 18

⁵⁷ White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: White House, 2017), 45-46, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>

FOIP were confirmed when Abe and Trump held a summit meeting in November 2017. Both parties established a detailed consensus, affirming that Washington and Tokyo must cooperate to promote “fundamental values” (rule of law, freedom of navigation) and maritime law enforcement.⁵⁸ The extension of the FOIP strategy and the establishment of consensus over the FOIP strategy with the United States (which designated China as a challenger of the existing world order) thus demonstrated Japan’s strengthening of its cooperation and alignment with Washington.

The Moon administration, like its predecessor, maintained its threat perception centered around North Korea than on China, and worked to return to its beta-oriented security alignment by working to restore ties with China. The effort to restore ties with China was to address two strategic matters: (1) Preventing further retaliation from China over the THAAD controversy, and (2) Utilizing China to play a constructive role in stabilizing the Korean Peninsula by using its leverage over North Korea. China’s economic retaliation against THAAD had negatively affected South Korea’s economy (particularly the tourist sector), with an estimated loss of 8.5 trillion won and a 0.5% decrease in GDP.⁵⁹ Despite the damage and rising anti-Chinese public sentiment, the Presidential Office dismissed the idea of filing a lawsuit against China at the WTO to prevent further deterioration, reasoning that cooperation was necessary to address the

⁵⁸ “Japan-U.S. Working Lunch and Japan-U.S. Summit Meeting,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, November 6, 2017.

https://www.mofa.go.jp/na/na1/us/page4e_000699.html

⁵⁹ 김은정, “사드보복 손실 한국 8.5조 vs 중국 1.1조,” *한국경제*. 2017.05.03.
<https://www.hankyung.com/economy/article/2017050357321>

North Korea issue.⁶⁰ Consultations between Seoul and Beijing were held in October 2017 to restore ties and share common strategic interest in North Korean denuclearization,⁶¹ followed by a meeting between Moon and Xi at the APEC summit in Danang affirming the goals agreed during the previous consultations. Moon's beta-oriented security alignment preference was also demonstrated by its response to the FOIP framework. The Blue House raised objections when President Trump proposed in November 2017 that South Korea participate in the FOIP framework, stating that it saw little benefit in a framework that was meant to link Japan with the US, Australia, and India.⁶² Moreover, South Korea likely saw more risk and counterproductivity than strategic interest in antagonizing China by participating in the FOIP framework.⁶³ Thus, Seoul instead devised its own version of FOIP, known as the "New Southern Policy" (NSP), which placed more emphasis on economic cooperation with ASEAN countries while removing implications for security cooperation to contain China. The US would later acknowledge NSP through a jointly released factsheet and

⁶⁰ "Seoul dismisses idea of petitioning WTO over China's THAAD retaliation," *Yonhap News Agency*, September 14, 2017. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20170914007500315>

⁶¹ "한중 관계 개선 관련 양국간 협의 결과," *외교부*. 2017.10.31. https://www.mofa.go.kr/www/brd/m_4080/view.do?seq=367200&srchFr=&srchTo=&srchWord=&srchTp=&multi_itm_seq=0&itm_seq_1=0&itm_seq_2=0&company_cd=&company_nm=&page=40

⁶² Jaechun Kim, "South Korea's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Dilemma," *The Diplomat*, April 27, 2018. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/south-koreas-free-and-open-indo-pacific-dilemma/>

⁶³ Michael D, Swaine, "A Counterproductive Cold War with China: Washington's 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' Strategy will Make Asia Less Open and Less Free," *Foreign Affairs*, March 2, 2018. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-03-02/counterproductive-cold-war-china> Swaine argued that the FOIP would be perceived as provocative by China and could alarm Asian nations in the process, driving the region to further tension with "zero-sum competition". South Korea would have also shared the same sentiment, thus negatively viewing Japan's counterbalancing efforts against China as a conflict-driving source in the region.

coordinate Seoul's policy with Washington's Indo-Pacific Strategy in 2019,⁶⁴ indicating that South Korea strategically utilized its balanced relationship with the United States and China.

The lingering divergence of both threat perceptions toward China and the security alignment preference in the interim period slowly weakened incentive for cooperation, as South Korea and Japan held underlying perspectives that they will not serve their respective security interest. For South Korea, Japan's FOIP framework calling for cooperation among like-minded countries to counterbalance China could ruin South Korea's efforts to restore ties and provoke Beijing to retaliate further. South Korea's "3 No's" policy on THAAD, which included the prevention of developing US-South Korea-Japan trilateral security cooperation into a formal military alliance,⁶⁵ suggests that Seoul aimed to placate China by indicating that it will not deepen its partnership with Japan (a country that is actively counterbalancing against China), thus lowering prospects for deepened cooperation with Japan in the process. The Moon administration's strategic approach toward North Korea also aligned more with China's approach than that of Japan. As it will be discussed further in detail in the next section, Seoul and Beijing aligned in their strategy of engaging with North Korea through dialogue, while Tokyo preferred further pressure until full denuclearization. This would also influence

⁶⁴ Andrew Yeo, "South Korea and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, July 20, 2020. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/south-korea-and-free-and-open-indo-pacific-strategy>

⁶⁵ "강경화 "사드 추가배치 검토안해... 'MD불참' 기존입장 불변", *연합뉴스*. 2017.10.30. <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20171030072800014>

South Korea's view on Japan as a liability, perceiving it as a less-likely partner than China that would support the Moon administration's security initiatives for the Korean Peninsula. Reflecting upon South Korea's approach as a tilt toward China, Japan in return would perceive South Korea as an unreliable partner in the counterbalancing effort against Beijing, rendering Seoul a low strategic priority. In a speech in January 2018, Abe excluded South Korea in his listed mentioning of potential partners (United States, Europe, ASEAN members, Australia, and India),⁶⁶ demonstrating that Japan did not perceive South Korea as a cooperative partner. The cracks of the temporary unstable cooperation in the interim period would set the stage for a sharp divergence with the shifting international security environment starting in 2018.

⁶⁶ "Policy Speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the 196th Session of the Diet," *Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet*, January 22, 2018.
https://japan.kantei.go.jp/98_abe/statement/201801/_00002.html

Chapter IV: Moon & Abe-Suga Administrations

1. 2018-2021 Period

In 2018, a wind of change blew surrounding the Korean Peninsula as North Korea's Kim Jong-un announced his interest in engaging with South Korea. Although the change of North Korea's attitude appeared to signify peace on the Korean Peninsula, it was also the catalyst that would break the last link between South Korea and Japan's unstable cooperation, as Seoul and Tokyo would respond differently based on their threat perceptions and security alignment preferences.

Seoul's threat perception toward North Korea decreased as a result of Pyongyang's opening to engagement. Since its inauguration, the Moon administration had aimed to engage with the Kim regime should it reciprocate Seoul's friendly gestures instead of maintaining pressure until denuclearization. Moon's 2017 speech at the Körber Foundation, which became known as the "Berlin Initiative", outlined the new administration's approach to North Korea, involving five points: (1) Aiming for peace on the Korean Peninsula through co-existence, cooperation, and non-existence of nuclear weapons or threat of war; (2) denuclearization with guarantee of the North Korean regime's security by easing military tension through exchange and dialogue; (3) institutionalization of peace for permanence even after change in government through law enactments and peace treaties; (4) economic cooperation for South-North co-prosperity; and (5)

pursuit of nonpolitical exchange and cooperation projects separated from political/military situations.⁶⁷ The Moon administration was ready to not only lower its threat perception toward North Korea, but also perceive Pyongyang as a cooperative partner for the stabilization of the Korean Peninsula.

South Korea's strategic outlook came into full fruition with a series of reconciliations and peace initiatives that lowered threat perceptions and expanded engagement/cooperation with North Korea. Along with the restored inter-Korean communications channel and plans to hold high-level talks in Panmunjom, South Korea made an agreement with the United States to postpone the annual joint military exercise during the Pyeongchang Olympics to contribute to the peaceful mood of the Korean Peninsula.⁶⁸ Furthermore, Seoul and Pyongyang held three summit meetings to solidify peaceful relations and cooperation, adopting the "Panmunjom Declaration on Peace, Prosperity, and Reunification of the Korean Peninsula" in April, and signing the Pyeongyang Joint Declaration in September. Both declarations, along with the "Agreement on the Implementation of the Historic Panmunjom Declaration in the Military Domain" (signed as an annex to the Pyeongyang Declaration) emphasized inter-Korean cooperation, the promotion of peaceful denuclearization, and

⁶⁷ Bae Hyun-jung, "Full Text of Moon's Speech at the Korber Foundation," *The Korea Herald*, July 7, 2017. <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20170707000032>

⁶⁸ "한·미 정상, 평창올림픽 기간 연합군사훈련 양기로 합의," *대한민국 정책브리핑*. 2018.01.05. <https://www.korea.kr/news/policyNewsView.do?newsId=148846626>

the cessation of military-related hostility.⁶⁹ It further worked to serve as a mediator between North Korea and the United States to accelerate peace talks,⁷⁰ leading to the first summit between the two states in Singapore. The Moon administration had thus demonstrated not only its lowered threat perception toward North Korea, but also its beta-oriented security alignment preference by adding North Korea to its list of cooperative partners in stabilizing the Korean Peninsula.

On the other hand, Japan expressed reservation and skepticism toward North Korea's engagement. At a summit meeting in Pyeongchang with Moon during the 2018 Winter Olympics, Abe expressed concern about North Korea's "charm offensive", arguing that Kim Jong-un is still continuing missile development and that the policy of applying maximum pressure through UNSC resolutions and US-ROK-Japan trilateral coordination must be preserved.⁷¹ Moreover, Japan refrained from opening engagement with North Korea because of the latter's failure to carry out "dismantlement of all weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles of

⁶⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Korea, *2019 Diplomatic White Paper*, 33-34. The document provides a broad summary of the three agreements and declarations made in Panmunjom and Pyeongyang. More detailed explanation can be found from the said documents: "Panmunjom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity and Unification of the Korean Peninsula," conclusion date: April 27, 2018; "Pyongyang Joint Declaration of September 2018," conclusion date: September 19, 2018. "Agreement on the Implementation of the Historic Panmunjom Declaration in the Military Domain," conclusion date: September 19, 2018.

⁷⁰ "South Korea wants to be mediator to North Korea and US: Official," *CNBC*, May 17, 2018. <https://www.cnb.com/2018/05/17/south-korea-to-be-mediator-to-resolve-north-korea-us-summit-doubts.html>

⁷¹ Abe Shinzo and Moon Jae-in, "Japan-ROK Summit Meeting," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, February 9, 2018. https://www.mofa.go.jp/page4e_000829.html

all ranges in a complete verifiable and irreversible manner”,⁷² echoing its initial stance to continue applying pressure for CVID. In addition, Japan prioritized the resolution of the North Korean abduction issue by proactively bringing it to attention in summit meetings and international conferences, which also led to the pressuring of North Korea.⁷³ With these issues at hand, along with the fact that North Korea maintained an antagonistic stance against Japan, Tokyo could not share Seoul’s lowered threat perception nor could it engage with Pyongyang, thus maintaining its preference for the alpha-oriented security alignment.

As a result, South Korea and Japan were set on course to a sharp decline in bilateral relations void of incentive for cooperation. The divergent threat perceptions toward China were added by divergent threat perceptions toward North Korea as well. Security alignment preferences also remained diverged, as South Korea not only preferred to continue its strategic partnership with China, but also added North Korea as another potential partner, deepening its beta-oriented security alignment preference. For Japan, South Korea’s position could have been perceived as a drastic tilt to the authoritarian bloc, as it had opted to cooperate with China and North Korea for its security interest. South Korea was no longer viewed as

⁷² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Diplomatic Blue Book 2019*, 15

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 38. The North Korean abduction issue had been a major focus in Japan’s policy approach toward North Korea. Abe continued requesting Moon, Trump, and the international community to bring up the issue in talks with North Korea. Moon refrained from responding positively due to concerns that bringing up the issue could inhibit the peace process on the Korean Peninsula. In fact, North Korea later blamed Japan for the failed Hanoi Summit because of its request to President Trump to resolve the abduction issue with Kim Jong-un during the meeting.

a reliable partner for Japan, thus leading to Japan's negligence.⁷⁴ South Korea also found itself unable to cooperate with Japan to serve its security interest in stabilizing the Korean Peninsula through inter-Korean dialogue. Japan's steadfast approach of pressure on North Korea, along with its emphasis on its alpha-oriented security alignment to counterbalance against China, was perceived as only deepening tension and obstructing peace initiative on both the Korean Peninsula and the region.⁷⁵ With no more convergence over threat perceptions and security alignment preferences, the incentive for cooperation weakened, followed by further exacerbation with controversies over history issues and the economic trade row in 2019 that prolonged unprecedented tensions between the two countries throughout.

The Trump administration's disengaged posture in intervening and mediating between Washington's two allies had also contributed to the weakening incentive for cooperation. Unlike the previous Obama administration, which pushed Seoul and Tokyo to engage and make compromises over issues, the Trump administration was rather negligent and took little to no initiative to patch its allies together even as South Korea and Japan's relations deteriorated further from divergence over security issues to history related issues. The Trump administration

⁷⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Diplomatic Blue Book 2019*, 41: Unlike previous Blue Book passages describing Japan-ROK relations, the Blue Book of 2019 excluded the description of Korea's importance as a strategic partner, instead opening with an introduction describing the relation as in a "extremely severe situation"

⁷⁵ 박철휘, "한일 갈등의 심화와 한일안보협력의 미래," 한국국가전략 4, no. 2 (2019): 128

appeared to convey its “America First” policy and implied its relatively lowered priority toward maintaining its East Asian allies, demonstrated by its demand toward both South Korea and Japan to “pay up” for maintaining and hosting US forces in their respective territories.⁷⁶ It also signified Washington’s lack of concern over its credibility and security reliability toward its allies. With the Trump administration’s distanced position and disengagement, the incentive for bilateral cooperation was left to be further weakened with no chance for thawing frozen ties.

Entering the 2020s with the global pandemic breaking out, Washington and Beijing’s rivalry over security and power in the Indo-Pacific region continued to intensify. China continued its military endeavors in the South China Sea, asserting claims over maritime territory by enforcing the “nine-dash line” and even firing “aircraft carrier killer” ballistic missiles into the sea in a show of force to protest against US interference.⁷⁷ Tariffs on Chinese imports and other economic sanctions imposed during the Trump administration to prevent the usage of technology on Chinese military development were carried over and expanded by the newly inaugurated Biden administration.⁷⁸ Western

⁷⁶ Nick Wadhams and Jennifer Jacobs, “President Trump Reportedly Wants Allies to Pay Full Cost of Hosting U.S. Troops Abroad ‘Plus 50%’” *Time*, March 8, 2019.

<https://time.com/5548013/trump-allies-pay-cost-plus-50-troops/>; 송용창, “[출구 없는 한일관계] 트럼프, 한일관계 악화에도 중재 외면 왜?” *한국일보*, 2019.03.27.

<https://m.hankookilbo.com/News/Read/201903261700366172>

⁷⁷ Brad Lendon, “China test fires so-called ‘carrier killer’ missiles into South China Sea,” *CNN*, August 29, 2020. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/08/28/asia/china-missile-tests-exercises-intl-hnk-scli/index.html>

⁷⁸ “Biden Expands Trump’s list of Chinese Companies banned from US Investment,” *CNN*, June 4, 2021. <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/06/03/economy/biden-china-executive-order/index.html>

countries and democracies have also been reaching a consensus over China's behavior as a challenge to security and the rules-based international order, as demonstrated from a NATO communique released in 2021 that recognized China's threat for the first time and the G7 statement criticizing China's military drill in the Taiwan Strait as "increasing tensions and destabilizing the region."⁷⁹ Within this context, however, South Korea and Japan had little to no momentum to create an incentive for cooperation.

South Korea experienced certain incidents occurring around the Korean Peninsula that could have potentially influenced a change in threat perceptions and security alignment preferences. For example, after failing to reach an agreement in the Hanoi Summit and continuing the state of impasse, North Korea had reverted back to its aggressive threatening stance. Along with its resumption of consecutively launching ICBMs since 2019, North Korea also demolished the Inter-Korean Liaison Office in June 2020, signifying the end of amicable inter-Korean relations. Communication and interactions between Pyongyang and Washington came to a halt after summits yielded no potential for further progress. China had also engaged in activities that could potentially be interpreted as a threat, particularly the intrusion of the Chinese air force into KADIZ in March and December of

⁷⁹ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Brussels Summit Communique: Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels 14 June 2021*, June 14, 2021. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm#top; Office of the Spokesperson, "G7 Foreign Ministers' Statement on Preserving Peace and Stability Across the Taiwan Strait," *US Department of State*, August 3, 2022. <https://www.state.gov/g7-foreign-ministers-statement-on-preserving-peace-and-stability-across-the-taiwan-strait/>

2020.⁸⁰ South Korea resumed its joint military drill with the United States (Combined Command Post Training - CCPT) despite COVID in recognition of North Korean provocations, with a note that “security issues related to Beijing will be handled on the basis” of US alliance;⁸¹ however, the Moon administration did not go further to perceive neither China nor North Korea a threat, clinging onto hope that continued engagement will bore fruit for further cooperation and peace.⁸² Moon demonstrated such in his speech at the 75th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, in which he called for international support for the official “end-of-war declaration” and the establishment of a “permanent peace regime” despite deteriorated inter-Korean relations.⁸³ Moon had also refrained from criticizing China’s intrusion of KADIZ, even allegedly underreporting the number of intrusions to prevent tension between Seoul and Beijing.⁸⁴ South Korea’s response reflect the unwillingness of the Moon administration to perceive China (and North Korea) as a threat, and its desire to continue its beta-oriented cooperation with both Washington and Beijing to address its security interested centered around the Korean Peninsula.

⁸⁰ Chinese intrusion into KADIZ had occurred 15 times since 2017, two of which were carried out with Russian air force. For a detailed chart and analysis, see: 유재광, “복합적 위협인식과 유보된 수용: 한국의 대중 외교 안보 전략을 중심으로,” *국제정치논총* 61, no. 2 (2021): 30

⁸¹ “S. Korea, US to continue combined exercises in adjusted manner: defense minister,” *The Korea Herald*, March 20, 2020. <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200320000717>

⁸² Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Korea, *2021 Diplomatic White Paper*, 60.

⁸³ “Full text of President Moon Jae-in’s speech at 75th Session of United Nations General Assembly,” *Yonhap News Agency*, September 23, 2020. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20200922010300315>

⁸⁴ 김상진, 이철재, 박용한, “中군용기 KADIZ 침입, 100회나 줄여서 공개한 文 정부,” *중앙일보*, 2020.10.08. <https://www.joongang.co.kr/article/23889024#home>

Japan's threat perception and security alignment preference remained contrasting from that of South Korea even after the change of administrations from Abe Shinzo to Suga Yoshihide in September 2020. As with previous documents, the Diplomatic Bluebooks detailing the years of 2020 and 2021 did not fail to recycle expressions that raised concern about China's military build-up, its challenge to the status quo, and Japan's territorial integrity at the face of China's continued intrusion near the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands,⁸⁵ thus indicating that Japan's threat perception remained centered around China. In a policy speech in January 2021, Suga declared his intention to continue Abe's legacy with the FOIP framework, characterizing Japan's alliance with the United States as a "linchpin of Japan's foreign policy and security", followed by his emphasis on the necessity to cooperate with other democracies to uphold the rule-based order.⁸⁶ Japan also demonstrated its staunch preference to fully align with the United States and liberal democracies through its first summit with the newly inaugurated Joe Biden administration, affirming close cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region against China's challenges to the rule-based order and maintaining peace in the region.⁸⁷ Moreover, Japan did not shy away from the risk of antagonizing China in security terms by not only openly

⁸⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Diplomatic Blue Book 2021*, 18; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Diplomatic Blue Book 2022*, 15, 19

⁸⁶ "Policy Speech by the Prime Minister to the 204th Session of the Diet," *Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet*, January 18, 2021.

<https://japan.kantei.go.jp/99suga/statement/202101/00013.html>

⁸⁷ "U.S. – Japan Joint Leaders' Statement: "U.S.-Japan Global Partnership for a New Era," *The White House*, April 16, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/16/u-s-japan-joint-leaders-statement-u-s-japan-global-partnership-for-a-new-era/>

mentioning advocacy for peace in the Taiwan Strait, but also drafting joint military plans with the United States to address emergency scenarios relating to Taiwan.⁸⁸

Overall, South Korea and Japan could not form an incentive to restore ties and cooperate. South Korea's centralized focus over the Korean Peninsula and the North Korean threat was not compatible with Japan's centralized focus over China. The Moon administration continued to refrain from taking concrete principled measures toward China, instead relying on balanced relations (or strategic ambiguity) between Washington and Beijing, unlike the Suga administration's strict security alignment with the United States and other democracies against China. At the G7 meeting of 2021 in which South Korea was invited, Moon and Suga did not hold a separate summit. Even when a South Korean regional court decision in the same year apparently overturned the 2018 Supreme Court decision by dismissing a lawsuit filed by forced labor victims, both states did not use the opportunity to amend ties,⁸⁹ demonstrating relations devoid of both trust and incentive for cooperation. The incompatibility caused by divergent threat perceptions and the mismatch of security alignment preferences obstructed the establishment of strategic trust, and therefore leaving bilateral relations in the dark for the remainder of 2021.

⁸⁸ "US and Japan draw up joint military plan in case of Taiwan emergency – report," *The Guardian*, December 24, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/24/us-and-japan-draw-up-joint-military-plan-in-case-of-taiwan-emergency-report>

⁸⁹ "RESOLVED: The United States Can Fix the Japan-South Korea Problem," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, July 9, 2021. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/resolved-united-states-can-fix-japan-south-korea-problem>

Chapter V: Yoon & Kishida Administrations

1. 2022-2023 Period

A reset in South Korea-Japan bilateral relations gained momentum with the inaugurations of new administrations: Japan's Kishida Fumio in late 2021 and South Korea's Yoon Suk-yeol in mid 2022. Though such change was possible partially by the intermediating efforts of the Biden administration, it was largely due to South Korea's shifting view of threat perceptions and strategic alignment preferences, converging with that of Japan.

The Kishida administration preserved its threat perception centered around China, taking further steps by updating its National Security Strategy in December 2022 that listed China first as a security threat intensifying the challenge to change the status quo by force and declared Japan's position to "strongly oppose China's growing attempts" of forceful change of the status quo.⁹⁰ Kishida also announced plans to carry out a 43 trillion-yen Defense Buildup Program to reinforce Japan's defense capabilities, signifying its proactivity to balance against China and protecting the security of the region with its democratic allies.⁹¹

South Korea's Yoon administration also appeared to shift its posture regarding China. Most notable was that it differentiated its

⁹⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *National Security Strategy of Japan* (2022), 8-9, 14. <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/221216anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf>

⁹¹ Kishida Fumio, "Press Conference by Prime Minister Kishida," *Prime Minister's Office of Japan (Kantei)*, December 16, 2022. <https://japan.kantei.go.jp/101kishida/statement/202212/00006.html>

approach from that of its predecessors by taking a more principled position, aiming for a relation based on “mutual respect.”⁹² South Korea aimed to stand its ground on fundamental issues and take a more proactive approach in international affairs, something the previous administration would have been hesitant of due to possibilities of causing friction with China. For example, Yoon commented on China’s responsibility in causing tension over the Taiwan Strait because of its attempt to challenge the status quo, even summoning the Chinese ambassador to lodge a protest against Beijing’s retaliatory remarks regarding Yoon’s interview, calling it “disrespectful.”⁹³ South Korea’s foreign minister Park Jin had also commented on China’s approach toward the THAAD issue, stating that THAAD is a matter of South Korea’s sovereignty and national interest, implying that China infringed upon South Korea’s sovereignty.⁹⁴ Furthermore, South Korea rejected China’s claim that the former previously promised to implement the “3 No’s 1 Limitation” regarding THAAD, rebutting that such promises were never made and affirming that THAAD was a matter of Korean sovereignty and security.⁹⁵ While it is to be seen in the long run, should South Korea consolidate the position that THAAD is a

⁹² Cheol Hee Park, “Stronger and Broader: President Yoon’s New Foreign-Policy Initiatives,” *Global Asia*, June 2022. https://globalasia.org/v17no2/focus/stronger-and-broader-president-yoons-new-foreign-policy-initiatives_cheol-hee-park

⁹³ 박은경, “정부, 中 외교부 ‘말참견’ 발언에 “심각한 외교적 결례”…중국 대사 초치 항의” *경향신문*. 2023.04.20. <https://www.khan.co.kr/politics/president/article/202304201832001>

⁹⁴ 김효정, “박진 "대중외교, 아쉬운 부분 있었다…주권·정체성엔 단호해야"(종합)” *연합뉴스*, 2022.04.30. <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20220430022451504>

⁹⁵ 한상용, ““안보주권” vs “운용제한”…사드 '3불1한' 주장에 한중관계 시험대,” *연합뉴스TV*, 2022.08.11.

<https://www.yonhapnewstv.co.kr/news/MYH20220811018000038>

sovereignty matter, then Seoul will have an incentive to perceive China as a threat because of the infringement on its sovereignty rights.⁹⁶

The Yoon administration also demonstrated its shift from beta-oriented to alpha-oriented security alignment preferences, aiming to strengthen its alliance with the United States and proactively engage with other democratic states sharing common values. This was conveyed by Yoon's interest to expand South Korea's role in the Indo-Pacific region along with Japan and the United States, even unveiling its own "Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region." The strategy echoed the wordings of Japan's FOIP by calling for "peace, stability, and freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea," even mentioning the issue in the Taiwan Strait as an important factor for the security of the Indo-Pacific region.⁹⁷ Yoon had also expressed interest in working with the QUAD since his presidential candidacy, stating in April that he would "positively review" and consider if South Korea were to be invited to join.⁹⁸ Later in May the same year, South Korea joined the US-led "Indo-Pacific Economic Framework" alongside Japan, creating a basis for strategic cooperation with one another. The Washington Declaration and the events surrounding it have highlighted South Korea's alpha-oriented security alignment preference, as value of partnership with the United

⁹⁶ 김현욱, "신정부의 한미동맹 발전 방향," *외교안보연구소*, 2022.05.10. Kim argues that South Korea should align its threat perception toward China with that of the USA for a more effective coordination in security.

⁹⁷ "자유, 평화, 번영의 인도-태평양 전략," *외교부*, 2022.12.28. 28

⁹⁸ "Yoon says will 'positively review joining' Quad if invited," *Yonhap News Agency*, April 26, 2022. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20220426001000315>

States increased and that of China decreased. The Declaration in April 2023 affirmed strengthening bilateral security ties with the foundation of a Nuclear Consultative Group, aiming to deter North Korea. In the face of Chinese criticism toward the summit in Washington, Yoon stated that China reaped what it sowed by failing to join sanctions against North Korea,⁹⁹ reflecting Seoul's decreased trust and reliance on Beijing for deterring Pyongyang.

The Biden administration also returned to active engagement to push its allies closer together. Contrasting from Trump's passive role on alliance management and focus on payment for troops by the allies, the Biden administration recognized the need to fix the "broken circuit in our network" (meaning the deteriorated bilateral relations between South Korea and Japan) in order to address security challenges.¹⁰⁰ Since 2021, the Biden administration repeatedly stressed the importance of trilateral cooperation and collective efforts to address the "unprecedented challenges" during its meetings with both South Korean and Japanese leaders.¹⁰¹ The continued emphasis for trilateral cooperation from

⁹⁹ Jeong-in Yoo, "'What Do They Want Us to Do?' President Yoon Accuses China of Trying to Find Fault with the Washington Declaration," *The Kyunghyang Shinmun*, May 3, 2023.

https://english.khan.co.kr/khan_art_view.html?artid=202305031701157&code=710100&utm_source=livere&utm_medium=social_share

¹⁰⁰ Michelle Ye Hee Lee, "As Biden seeks to restore alliances, a souring Japan-South Korea relationship presents a challenge," *The Washington Post*, March 2, 2021.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/biden-japan-korea-allies-blinken/2021/03/01/a3604258-76e4-11eb-9537-496158cc5fd9_story.html

¹⁰¹ Dan Lamothe, "To counter China, U.S. pitches South Korea a sensitive effort involving Japan," *The Washington Post*, March 17, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2021/03/17/us-korea-japan-china/?utm_source=hs_email&utm_medium=email&_hsenc=p2ANqtz-

Washington would likely have influenced Seoul and Tokyo to follow suit, as both saw the necessity to align with their ally's security initiatives and strategy. With the administrations of Kishida and Yoon positively responding to Washington, the Biden administration's efforts have contributed to setting the stage for engagement and cooperation between the two countries.

With South Korea's principled position toward China and its move to strengthen ties with both the United States and other liberal democracies, a convergence in threat perceptions and security alignment preferences between Seoul and Tokyo became evident, creating incentive to cooperate. Japan demonstrated certain trust in South Korea for cooperation by inviting Seoul to the NATO Asia-Pacific partner's meeting (AP4) that included Australia and New Zealand, discussing cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region and linking communication with NATO.¹⁰² Both the Yoon and Kishida administrations continued to communicate their shared interest in upholding the rule-based order in the Indo-Pacific and their alignment in exerting pressure on North Korea for denuclearization, consolidating their strategic alignment through a Trilateral Joint Statement in September 2022.¹⁰³ South Korea also implied its support for Japan's increase of

[8fHRg6eLMmmdvztEXOxJcblnisE3aq6reAFZgEkZ2zPqO8Ayc59mQNUBTkD8WsqznDcP9m](https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/ocn/ki/page1e_000413.html)

¹⁰² 이준서, “대통령실 "日, 한·일·호·뉴 4개국 정상회의 제안…검토중” *연합뉴스*, 2022.06.20. <https://m.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20220620102600001?section=politics/all>; “NATO Asia-Pacific partners (AP4) Leaders’ Meeting,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, June 29, 2022. https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/ocn/ki/page1e_000413.html

¹⁰³ “Joint Statement on the U.S.-Japan-Republic of Korea Trilateral Foreign Ministerial Meeting,” conclusion date: September 22, 2022, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100396522.pdf>

military capabilities and the National Security Strategy update through Yoon's comment that Tokyo's actions cannot be stopped in the face of constant threat.¹⁰⁴ Yoon also demonstrated South Korea's trust and willingness to cooperate with Japan through a March 1st commemorative speech acknowledging Japan's evolution from the past to present, from a militarist invader to a partner sharing universal values and cooperating in matters of security, economy, and the global agenda.¹⁰⁵ This was followed by an announcement of South Korea's plans to provide compensation for the forced labor victims with its own budget while allowing Japanese companies to compensate voluntarily without obligations.¹⁰⁶ The move was welcomed by Japan, and lauded by the United States, which had desired to push for cooperation between South Korea and Japan.¹⁰⁷

The two countries held summits twice in 2023, the first in Tokyo during March and the second in Seoul during May. In the aftermath of the March summit, the trade row of 2019 between South Korea and Japan came to an end after both restored each other to their respective whitelist trade partners in April. Shuttle diplomacy was restored as a result of the May summit. Based on observations of current trends and diplomatic affairs,

¹⁰⁴ "Yoon says Japan's moves to bolster defense are hard to stop," *Yonhap News Agency*, January 11, 2023.. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20230111005651315>

¹⁰⁵ "윤석열 대통령 제104주년 3.1절 기념사," *외교부*, 2023.03.01. https://www.mofa.go.kr/www/brd/m_4076/view.do?seq=369829

¹⁰⁶ Tong-hyung Kim and Hyung-jin Kim, "South Korean plan aims to heal forced labor feud with Japan," *AP News*, March 6, 2023. <https://apnews.com/article/south-korea-japan-forced-laborers-colonial-rule-e8e828901148c2f2528ce557f445772b>

¹⁰⁷ Isabel Reynolds and Jeong-Ho Lee, "Japan, South Korea Reach 'Groundbreaking' Deal to Mend Ties," *Bloomberg*, March 6, 2023. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-03-06/japan-south-korea-to-resolve-longstanding-dispute-reports-say#xj4y7vzkg>

South Korea and Japan's bilateral relations have improved with increased incentive for cooperation. This was possible because both countries could establish strategic trust: threat perceptions on China converged, and both Seoul and Tokyo matched their preferences to align firmly with the United States and other liberal democracies in the wider region.

Chapter VI: Conclusion

My research aimed to pinpoint alternative, underlying sources that contributed to the deterioration of bilateral relations in the late 2010s. On the surface, the 2018 Supreme Court decision over forced labor compensation was definitely a significant factor that set the course to relations reaching an all-time low. Overall, the incident appeared to add verification to the notion that conflicts between South Korea and Japan derive primarily from history related controversies. While history can play a significant role affecting the prospects for bilateral cooperation, the primary focus on history risks creating a perception that historical controversies dominate the field of South Korea-Japan relations. Such misperception overlooks the reality of South Korea and Japan's more dynamic multilayered structure in bilateral relations. Despite lingering history issues that could potentially disrupt relations, South Korea and Japan had previous moments in which both could cooperate. In other words, there were other factors that were linking the two countries together, and the unprecedented deterioration of relations in the late 2010s could imply that the linking factor had significantly weakened, if not broken. Thus, my research turned focus toward the issues relating to national security matters.

As my research has analyzed, cooperation and conflict between South Korea and Japan are significantly shaped by external factors, namely security issues. This is especially the case in which both countries are stuck

in an unstable international security environment shook by intensified US-China competition since the 2010s. Although it is contestable to claim the advent of a new Cold War based on the current affairs, there is an evident divide in the realm of security and values as Washington and Beijing compete to strengthen their power holds in the Indo-Pacific region, pulling in neighboring countries to support their cause and security interests. As official allies of one of the competing powers, South Korea and Japan are also pulled into the vortex, having to confirm their positions in the rivalry based on their strategic security interests in order to ensure national survival in the anarchic international order. The big question for Seoul and Tokyo was: could both trust each other as potential partners that will guarantee security and survival?

Overall, the prospects for cooperation depended on whether South Korea and Japan shared threat perceptions and matched security alignments. When threat perceptions were identical and their alignments with partnering countries overlapped, Seoul and Tokyo had incentive to cooperate. When threat perceptions diverged and their alignment preferences unmatched, the incentive to cooperate weakened. In addition, the status of whether the US was engaged or disengaged in intervention between its two allies was also a factor that contributed to cooperation, albeit limited. The status of bilateral relations from 2013 to 2023 have demonstrated the patterns of my hypothesis. In the 2013-2015 period, South Korea and Japan had weak incentive to cooperate because both threat perceptions toward China diverged and security alignment preferences

diverged (Japan - alpha; South Korea - beta). The 2016-2017 period marked the interim period of temporary, unstable cooperation as South Korea partially shifted to aligning with the US and Japan against North Korea due to complications in relations with China, though threat perceptions still remained diverged. The Obama administration also worked behind the scenes to push both allies to cooperate, managing to make certain success at the end of 2015 and the start of 2016. Sharp deterioration of relations took place in the 2018-2021 period, as not only threat perceptions diverged, but also security alignment preferences diverged further with South Korea's partnership extension to North Korea, which Japan steadfastly aligned against while prioritizing US/liberal-democracy partnership. The Trump administration also remained aloof, placing more interest on demanding payment for stationing US troops instead of encouraging trilateral cooperation. The final 2022-2023 period was a shift to increased incentive for cooperation, as South Korea and Japan shared threat perceptions toward China and converged on security alignment preferences. In the backdrop, the US Biden administration returned to engagement and intervention, nudging Seoul and Tokyo to cooperate by stressing the importance of trilateral cooperation.

My analytical framework, which was largely inspired by previous existing realist frameworks, made partial improvement by offering an alternative explanation for South Korea and Japan relations based on the contemporary security context of a deepening US-China rivalry in the face of a rising China. Previous realist frameworks were designed with

applicability to their respective time periods, particularly the Cold War era and the post-Cold War era of the early 2000s before China's evident rise in the 2010s. Characterizing the rise of China and the emerging rivalry of the two world powers as another new context in the international security environment (if not fully a "New Cold War"), my framework made use of variables and concepts that can be applied to the current affairs. My research contrasted from the Cold War-based analyses by qualifying the influential power of the United States over South Korea-Japan bilateral relations, recognizing the change from the Cold War to the post-Cold War era in which the two states hold increased agency. The US role is still significant but only holding indirect power to affect and shape bilateral relations.¹⁰⁸ Threat perception was also a major factor, as South Korea and Japan are geographically proximate with the rising China, in addition to a nuclear-developing North Korea, meaning that both were in a precarious position to feel urgency for appropriate security measures. Security alignment preferences aimed to examine which partnership course the political elite took to address security threats, demonstrating that they are not limited to cooperating with their formal ally as it was during the Cold War, but that a wide set of options are available and that both countries have greater agency in devising their security strategies. In summary, my analytical framework can provide insight into the dynamics and mechanisms of South Korea-Japan cooperative/conflicting relations based

¹⁰⁸ Park, "Cooperation Coupled with Conflicts," 21

on security issues and the context of the contemporary international security environment.

Finally, although my research expressed reservation toward the approach of centered focus around history issues as the determinant factor for South Korea-Japan cooperation, I acknowledge that my research had also been primarily narrowed down to focus on security matters. Though it was meant to offer an alternative explanation for cooperation/conflict patterns in the contemporary context, the research and framework can be further expanded to reflect the complex nature of bilateral relations and cooperation between South Korea and Japan. Along with history issues, other features such as economic matters and cultural/people-to-people exchange can be factored into examine the dynamics and mechanisms for bilateral cooperation. In other words, realist and constructivist approach should both receive equal attention when analyzing the peculiar, complex relations between the two East Asian states. Based on the trends throughout the history of relations, cooperation between South Korea and Japan is likely to fluctuate in the future. Therefore, extensive studies of South Korea-Japan bilateral relations are important to establish better understanding, even possibly shedding light on less visible submerged factors and conditions that affect cooperation, thus providing an effective prescription to sustain healthier bilateral relations.

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국문요약

2010년대에 들어 한일관계는 불화가 이어졌다. 한일관계 속 불화에 대한 많은 연구들은 여러 분석을 내놓는데, 흔히 역사문제가 중점적으로 거론된다. 물론, 2018년 강제징용 대법원 판결 이후 한일관계는 급격히 냉랭해진 것은 사실이다. 하지만 역사문제를 중점적으로 다루는 방향은 복합적으로 연결된 한일관계를 단순화 시킬 수 있는 문제를 안고 있다. 무엇보다도, 한국과 일본이 가까운 협력 관계를 맺는 경우가 있어, 비록 역사 문제가 양국관계 큰 영향을 미칠 수 있어도, 완전히 좌우하지 않음을 보여준다.

본 논문은 한일관계에 영향을 미치는 또 다른 잠재적인 요소로 안보 문제를 분석한다. 특히 현재 중국의 부상과 깊어지는 미중 경쟁이 국제안보 정세에 큰 영향을 미치는 만큼, 미국과 중국 사이에 끼어있는 한국과 일본은 그 어느때 보다도 더 안보문제와 국가 생존에 우선적으로 신경 쓸 수 밖에 없다. 본 논문은 중국에 대한 한국과 일본의 위협 인식 불일치와 안보협력 상대에 대한 인식의 차이로 인해 한일 간 전략적 신뢰 구축에 실패 및 협력할 인센티브가 전무하여 불화로 이어졌음을 주장한다. 중국에 대한 위협 인식 차이는 물론, 일본은 미국과 민주주의 진영 국가들과의 협력을 선호했는가 하면, 한국은 반대로 미국 뿐만 아니라 중국과의 협력을 선호하는 차이가 있었다. 본 논문은 사례연구로 2010년대 이후 다른 패턴과 조건에 의한 한일관계 협력 및 불화를 보이는 4가지 시기를 분류하여 분석한다: (1) 2013-2015년, (2) 2016-2017년, (3) 2018-2021년, (4) 2022-2023년.

핵심어: 한미관계, 중국 부상, 위협인식, 안보협력 상대 인식, 인도-태평양 지역, 미국 동맹

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