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Master's Thesis of International Studies

**The Deterioration of U.S.-ROK-Japan
Trilateral Security Cooperation:
Diverging Threat Perceptions and Conflicting
National Strategic Identities**

한미일 안보협력의 악화:
서로 다른 위협 인식 과 충돌하는 국가전략정체성

August 2021

**Graduate School of International Studies
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국제학석사학위논문

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The Deterioration of U.S.-ROK-Japan Trilateral Security Cooperation: Diverging Threat Perceptions and Conflict National Strategic Identities

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a
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Abstract

Trilateral security cooperation amongst the United States, South Korea, and Japan has been a long-standing, vital feature of the East Asian security architecture since the Cold War, but its levels over time have been highly inconsistent. Within the contemporary period, trilateral security cooperation reached a highpoint in 2016. However, these increased levels of coordination did not last, and cooperation began a slow decline through 2019 and into 2020. Why did this deterioration occur, despite the fact that the international threat situation remained relatively constant as compared to when trilateral security cooperation was at a zenith?

This paper will explain the growing inefficiency of trilateral security cooperation with a neoclassical realist perspective using a combination of the balance of threat theory and the concept of national strategic identities. This will allow for a two-level analysis of why this integral feature of the East Asian security architecture appears to have been shunted to the side by the aligned parties. Ultimately, this paper aims to argue that the deterioration of trilateral security cooperation between the United States, Japan, and South Korea has taken place in part due to the partner's diverging threat perceptions of the region. In addition to these diverging threat perceptions, this paper will argue that the countries have adopted incompatible national strategic identities based on nationalism, resulting in significant damage to trilateral security cooperation.

Keywords: (U.S.-ROK-Japan, trilateral cooperation, trilateralism, threat perception, national strategic identity, international security)

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	i
List of Figures and Tables.....	iii
A Note on Conventions.....	iv
Chapter I. Introduction.....	1
1. Contextualizing the Alliances	2
2. The Puzzle	5
3. Main Argument	6
Chapter II. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework.....	7
1. Literature Review.....	7
2. Theoretical Framework	12
2-1. Balance of Threat Theory	13
2-2. National Strategic Identity.....	16
2-3. Synthesis	18
Chapter III. From Inoperability to Convergence.....	21
1. Gradually Shifting Perspectives.....	21
1-1. The Pathway toward Shared Threat Perceptions	21
1-2. Korea-Japan Relations as a Barrier	26
2. The Convergence	32
Chapter IV. From Maintenance to Divergence.....	38
1. The Entrance of the New Presidents	38
1-1. Donald Trump	38

1-2. Moon Jae-in	41
2. The Process of Partial Divergence	44
2-1. Maintaining Hope.....	44
2-2. The Growing Divergence	53
Chapter V. The Pathway toward Deterioration	60
1. Burden-sharing, China, and U.S.-ROK Relations	62
2. Worsening Korea-Japan Relations	67
Chapter VI. Conclusion	73
Bibliography.....	77
Korean Abstract.....	94

List of Figures

Figure 2.1 Overarching Theoretical Model.....	19
Figure 2.2 Nation-State Level Theoretical Model.....	20

List of Tables

Table 3.1 North Korean Missile Launches: 2012-2013.....	24
Table 3.2 North Korean Missile Launches: 2016.....	33
Table 4.1 North Korean Missile Launches: February-June, 2017.....	45
Table 5.1 North Korean Missile Launches: May-August 2019	70

A Note on Conventions

Chinese, Japanese, and South Korean names throughout this research are presented in traditional format, with the family name preceding the given name, in reverse of the Western format.

Chapter I. Introduction

It is undeniable that some of the greatest threats to the stability of the current international liberal order exist in East Asia. As such, the United States has relied upon its alliances in East Asia to maintain peace and order in the region and beyond for over 70 years. The exponential growth of China has led to their increased aggression in both the region and on the international stage, and this has caused the United States to depend on its alliance structure to check the growth and aggression of this non-liberal rising power. Furthermore, the threat of the growing nuclear power of North Korea and their increasing military capabilities has led to even further tensions in the international community and heightened concerns over the national security of the United States and its closest allies.

Only heightening the growing concerns about threats in the region, on January 5, 2016, a 5.1 nuclear explosion was detected along North Korea's northeast coast, near the Punggye-ri nuclear test site (USGS 2016). Shortly after the seismic activity was detected, North Korea officially announced that it had successfully launched its first hydrogen bomb (Sanger and Choe 2016). While there was a great deal of international skepticism about whether this claim that the test was successful was valid or not, the fact that North Korea's capabilities were increasing was undeniable. Admiral William E. Gortney further emphasized the truth of this in a statement to the United States Congress where he acknowledged that, although the KN-08¹ remained untested, it could "deliver a nuclear payload to much of the Continental United States" (Gortney 2016, 5).

¹ The KN-08—also referred to as Hwasong 13—is a North Korean ICBM that was first seen in a North Korean parade in 2012 (Missile Defense Project 2016).

After this shock, maintaining the East Asian security architecture was perceived as more important than ever, and undoubtedly, the military alliances that the United States has with Japan and South Korea that make up the trilateral security system are integral to this security architecture. This is demonstrated by the United States' Department of Defense referring to the U.S.-Japan alliance as the cornerstone of peace in the Indo-Pacific and the U.S.-ROK. alliance as the linchpin of peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia in official reports.² This acknowledges that—on the part of the United States, at the very least—high levels of trilateral cooperation between the three nation-states is essential for the prosperity of the entirety of the Indo-Pacific region.

1. Contextualizing the Alliances

Although the alliances between the United States and various countries in the Indo-Pacific are currently acknowledged as the primary mode of defense in East Asia, it was only shortly after the start of the Korean War, when in September of 1951, the United States began what is now referred to as the San Francisco System. This system emerged under the then United States Secretary of State John Foster Dulles.³ The San Francisco System is a series of bilateral security alliances⁴

² These remarks were made in the Department of Defense's Indo-Pacific Strategic Report that was released in June of 2019. The subtitle of the report was "Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region" which showed the desire for an increase in cooperation in the region in order to guard against what they referred to as a "revisionist China" and the "rogue state" North Korea (Department of Defense 2019).

³ John Foster Dulles also famously referred to this system as the "hub-and-spokes system," denoting the United States as the "hub" and the bilateral alliances with its allies in the region as the "spokes." It is referred to in this way as the "hub" connects with all of its partners, but the spokes have no direct connection to one another.

⁴ In this paper, the terms alliances and alignment will use the definitions as purported by Glenn Snyder. An alliance is defined as the "formal associations of states for the use (or

between the United States, the Philippines, Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, and South Vietnam. Despite the respective bilateral alliances being signed in a similar time period, these bilateral alliances were structured to be highly asymmetrical in nature, with Japan being given apparent precedence above other allies in both security obligations and the economic benefits provided through the alliances. (Calder 2004). This ultimately resulted in increased tension among the nation-states in the region as Japan—which, but few short years earlier, was considered an international pariah—seemed to be reaping the most rewards from this system (Calder 2004).

There are many theories as to why the United States set up this particular system of bilateral alliances rather than a multilateral alliance system similar to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Among these theories, the powerplay theory purported by Victor Cha has gained a great deal of traction. Cha argues that the United States created this system deliberately to exert control over their allies in the political, economic, and military domains. Furthermore, while the United States was certainly concerned about the domino theory,⁵ it was also concerned by the potential for “rogue allies”⁶ (Cha 2016, 3). Although the San Francisco system was

nonuse) of military force in specified circumstances, against states outside of their own membership (Snyder 2007, 4). An alignment is defined as the “expectations of states about whether they will be supported or opposed by other states in future interactions,” and further states that this is tacit and can be based solely on common interests (Snyder 2007, 6-7).

⁵The domino theory refers to the concern that if one regional nation fell to communism, it would then result in a domino effect in which the surrounding nations would also fall to communism. The United States’ was particularly concerned about this after the Maoist revolution in China.

⁶ The United States feared that the fervent anti-communistic sentiment among a subset of the East Asian leaders—particularly South Korea and Taiwan—would lead the countries to take violent action against China or North Korea. This would consequently bring the United States into further armed conflict (Cha 2016, 4). Furthermore, the United States was concerned about the great power potential of the formerly imperialistic Japan, and aimed to control the direction in which the country’s values and interests took going forward (Cha 2016, 5).

successful in maintaining democracy in the region and building up the postwar economies of the alliance partners during the Cold War, the United States' preferential treatment of Japan has led to the continued isolation of Japan regionally—particularly due to Japan's lack of effort toward reconciliation over wartime crimes against their neighbors (Cha 2009). This, in turn, has led to tensions in the region continuing on into the present day.

Regardless of the origins of the system, the legacy and structures of the San Francisco System have remained firmly in place, even beyond the end of the Cold War. Particularly in the cases of the United States' alliances with Japan and South Korea, the alliances have adapted with the times to maintain the East Asian security architecture while giving more control over to South Korea and Japan, respectively (Yang 2015). This can be seen through South Korea gaining more control over their own national defense and the ongoing negotiations over the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) (Kim, Jina 2020). Furthermore, the United States has consistently pushed for Japan to take on a larger role in both global and regional security as a more equal partner (Yang 2015).

Ultimately, the current primary intent of the alliance system is to keep peace in what has been referred to as the Indo-Pacific region. This is predominantly done by defending against a nuclear North Korea and acting as a check on the increasingly aggressive China. As South Korea and Japan face the most immediate danger from these two threats, the United States has created a system of trilateral cooperation, or trilateralism, in the security field with the two countries. However, there is still no formal alliance between the three nation-states, with most of the cooperation happening through the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security Between the United States and Japan (hereinafter referred to as the U.S.-Japan mutual defense

Treaty) and the Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States and the Republic of Korea (hereinafter referred to as the U.S.-ROK mutual defense Treaty), and the United States working as a go-between between the two neighboring countries.

2. The Puzzle

In the contemporary period, trilateral security cooperation was at a relative highpoint in 2016 and 2017. At this time, trilateral cooperation was increased significantly after the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) between Japan and South Korea was finally signed. After years of failed negotiations, this agreement was finally signed in part due to the threat of North Korea's successful nuclear tests earlier in the year. After GSOMIA was signed, trilateral security cooperation was at its smoothest stage of operation, and levels of coordination were at a high, with the three countries working together to streamline their intelligence sharing and the existing mechanisms for security cooperation. However, these increased levels of cooperation would not last despite the continued existence of the threats that initially necessitated it, and cooperation began a slow decline. Trilateral security cooperation took hits from all sides, with political leaders from each of the strategic partners taking actions that significantly harmed the levels of cooperation. This ultimately resulted in trilateral security cooperation slowly deteriorating until it reached a nadir in 2019 and 2020.

Therefore, this paper argues that during the contemporary period, trilateral security cooperation was at a relative high point from 2016 to 2017 with the signing of GSOMIA and increased coordination due to the apparent imminent threat of North Korea and their consistent, aggressive actions and nuclear testing. However, despite the fact that the security threats from North Korea and China still exist—or are

arguably increasing—and all of the mechanisms for cooperation remain in place, trilateral security cooperation decreased after 2017. Why has this deterioration of trilateral security cooperation taken place, despite the fact that the international threat situation had remained relatively constant as compared to when trilateral security cooperation was at a zenith?

3. Main Argument

This paper seeks to argue that the deterioration of trilateral security cooperation amongst the United States, Japan, and South Korea has taken place in part due to the diverging regional threat perceptions of the security partners. The diverging regional threat perceptions of the three nation-states made cooperation increasingly difficult, as the states do not feel the same sense of urgency in relation to any particular nation, and in some cases, view an entirely different nation as their main security priority. In addition to these diverging threat perceptions, this paper will argue that the countries have adopted national strategic identities that have resulted in significant damage to trilateral security cooperation. The threat perceptions of the respective states are filtered through their unique national strategic identities, and the resulting grand strategies or policy choices of the three nation-states affect the levels of trilateral security cooperation amongst the United States, South Korea, and Japan. Therefore, this paper will be looking at both international factors as well as domestic factors to fully explain the growing deterioration of trilateral security cooperation.

Chapter II. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

1. Literature Review

From a theoretical perspective, while there are many arguments for conflict among the trilateral partners, there are even more significant reasons for cooperation amongst the three nation-states. The realist perspective, with scholars such as Robert Jervis, Glenn Snyder, and Stephen Walt, argues that a security dilemma or shared threat perceptions will allow for cooperation amongst states, in spite of realism's inherent negative view toward cooperation. Following the realist logic, the continued threat of North Korea and China that continued from the Obama-Park-Abe period into the Trump-Moon-Abe period should have given great incentive for the continued high levels of trilateral security cooperation amongst the United States, South Korea, and Japan to continue.

The liberalist perspective, with its much more positive perspective toward cooperation, gives several reasons for continued cooperation amongst the three nation-states. First, Dale Copeland argues that the economic interdependence amongst the three nation-states—particularly the interdependence between South Korea and Japan—should lower levels of conflict and increase cooperation (Copeland 1996). Second, the democratic peace theory that is championed by scholars such as Immanuel Kant, Joseph Schumpeter, and Michael Doyle argues that shared democratic values and capitalism should lead to increased cooperation among nation-states. Therefore, following the liberalist logic, trilateral cooperation amongst the United States, Japan, and South Korea should be flourishing.

Finally, the constructivist perspective championed by scholars such as

Alexander Wendt also argues that the shared norms and identities of these wealthy, democratic, capitalist nation-states should lead to high levels of cooperation (Wendt 1992). Therefore, as the United States, Japan, and South Korea share values and norms, they should consistently cooperate. However, some constructivists, such as Thomas Berger, are quite ambivalent on the likelihood of cooperation amongst East Asian countries due to conflicting nationalisms and historical tensions (Berger 2003).

As the main theories of international relations generally show, if the United States, South Korea, and Japan reached levels of cooperation as high as were seen in 2016, then those levels of cooperation should continue if there has not been a dramatic change in the international environment—particularly the international security environment. Therefore, to further explore this conundrum, it will require looking directly into the literature on the region and the United States' involvement in said region. However, despite the fact that the trilateral security architecture has widely been accepted as integral to both national and international security, there has been a decided lack of scholarship on trilateral security cooperation in-and-of-itself. Most of the literature focuses on the bilateral aspects of the security triangle, as there is no formal alliance or agreement amongst the three countries. Therefore, the foremost theories as to the deteriorating levels of trilateralism tend to fall into three main categories: the fraught relationship between South Korea and Japan, the United States' lack of commitment to its allies under the Trump administration, or some sort of amalgamation between the two.

Arguably, the preeminent explanation for the cause of the deterioration of trilateral security cooperation amongst the United States, South Korea, and Japan is the tension and conflict between South Korea and Japan. This tension has been present for centuries and is largely caused by their fraught history of military battles

and occupation. The literature on Korea-Japan relations is prolific, with scholars around the world delving deeply into the causes of the Korea-Japan conflict, with even more scholars researching how to potentially alleviate the tensions. Naturally, as the trilateral security architecture in East Asia is largely based in the bilateral defense treaties between the United States and South Korea and Japan, there is a respectable amount of scholarship on how Korea-Japan relations affect trilateral security cooperation. Along with many other scholars, Jennifer Lind argues that the United States has championed trilateralism, but South Korea and Japan's preoccupation with their territorial issues and tensions over comfort women and forced labor has kept the two nation-states from cooperating with the United States on trilateral issues (Lind 2020). Kathryn Botto noted that alongside the aforementioned historical issues, Japan's changing military posture and South Korea's position toward China are all main causes of the bilateral tensions (Botto 2020). Botto further emphasizes how these tensions between South Korea and Japan are the main cause of low levels of trilateral cooperation. The research by these scholars shows that the effect of the worsening Korea-Japan relations—that seemed to reach an all-time high during the Moon and Abe period—is undoubtedly a main factor of the failing trilateral security cooperation. While this theory has a great deal of merit, it is insufficient to explain the deterioration in-and-of-itself, as it disregards the role of the United States in the issue.

Among the scholars who find Korea-Japan relations to be a main cause, many feature the role of the United States as an intervening variable in the conflict—whether it be through the role of a mediator between the two nation-states, an instigator of tensions between the two nations, or an entity somewhere in-between. Regardless of where the scholars stand on this particular matter, they agree that the

United States has a marked role in Korea-Japan relations. Park Cheol Hee writes that the worsening Korea-Japan relations are indeed the main barrier to trilateral cooperation, but he also addresses the role of the United States as an intervening variable in this deterioration. Park claims that the ambiguous role of the United States as a mediator between South Korea and Japan, as well as its asymmetric engagement with the two allies, leads to a further decay in Korea-Japan relations, and consequently, worsening trilateral cooperation (C. Park 2019a). Victor Cha argues for the quasi-alliance model in which he purports that the modern cooperation or conflict between Korea and Japan is not primarily caused by history and territorial issues but is based on the fear of the abandonment or entrapment through their respective alliances with the United States. In this way, if the two countries feel a symmetric and mutual fear of abandonment by the United States, cooperation between the two will increase (Cha 1999). Therefore, Cha argues that if the United States pursued a concept of “gradual finality” that signals the eventual removal of the United States from the region, it would eventually force cooperation between its two allies. Seongji Woo, though he also believes that changes in the United States’ policy heavily influence alliance behaviors, directly counters Cha’s argument and claims that higher levels of the United States’ engagement with its two allies will promote cooperation (Woo 2003). It is undeniable that the actions by the United States toward South Korea and Japan and the alliances they share affect Korea-Japan relations, and in turn, affect trilateral security cooperation. However, many of these views undermine the role that the United States’ policy plays towards trilateral security cooperation.

It is generally seen as a constant that the United States not only values its partners and allies but that it especially values its alliances with South Korea and

Japan, who play an integral role in both the United States' and international security. This has certainly been the case for the majority of the existence of trilateral security cooperation and the East Asian security architecture, but even the United States' policy and feelings of the importance of trilateralism vacillate. Particularly in the period that this paper will cover, one element that cannot be left out is that of the election of the quasi-isolationist President Trump in the United States. Many scholars were deeply concerned by Trump's devaluation of the United States' alliances worldwide. Naturally, many East Asia scholars were especially concerned due to the region's reliance on the United States' security umbrella—particularly due to Trump's obsession with increasing allies' burden-sharing. Bruce Klingner, Jung H. Park, and Sue Mi Terry especially highlighted the damage Trump was doing to the alliances with South Korea and Japan with his unreasonable demands for increased burden-sharing (Klingner et al 2019). Sheila Smith also directly referenced Trump's unpredictable policy toward North Korea as a key difficulty in formulating a trilateral strategy to enhance cooperation (Smith 2020). It is undeniable that Trump had an irreversibly negative effect on, not only the United States' alliance and partnerships but also the United States' international standing. However, the deterioration in trilateral security cooperation cannot solely be placed at Trump's feet, in the same way that it cannot be solely attributed to worsening Korea-Japan relations.

As can be seen, many have tried to find a direct party (or parties, as in the case of Korea-Japan relations) to be at fault for the deterioration of trilateral security cooperation, but this paper aims to argue that all three parties—the United States, South Korea, and Japan—all have a large part to play in the period of low trilateral cooperation during the Trump-Moon-Abe period. As Gilbert Rozman argued, the change in national identities within the three nation-states at the time directly caused

damage to trilateralism (Rozman 2020). The United States under Trump turned to isolationism, South Korea under Moon attempted to appease both North Korea and China to the detriment of its alliance with the United States, and Japan under Abe placed its national interests above the need for trilateral coordination. However, identity alone is not sufficient to explain the deterioration in trilateral security cooperation, as South Korea and Japan still rely heavily on the East Asian security architecture for their national security. As Patrick Cronin noted, although identity plays a heavy part in the issues at hand, the cause of the deterioration of trilateral security cooperation goes beyond just identity. Cronin noted that the differing threat perceptions in the region and the changing international structural environment as another main cause of the deterioration (Cronin 2019). Therefore, it can be seen that all three nation-states have taken actions to the detriment of trilateralism in various ways.

2. Theoretical Framework

This research follows general realist assumptions. This research assumes that states are rational, unitary actors with the main goal of state survival. Furthermore, this paper assumes that the international system is in a state of anarchy that leads states to rely on a system of self-help. Moreover, this research also looks to the neoclassical realist theory. As opposed to exclusively relying on the systemic-level factors, this research acknowledges the importance of domestic factors as fundamental in states' actions both domestically and on the international stage. Therefore, this research will first be using Stephen Walt's balance of threat theory to analyze the systemic-level factors that the United States, South Korea, and Japan are

facing. Subsequently, this research will be using Park Cheol Hee's concept of national strategic identities to analyze the domestic-level factors as an intervening variable.

2-1. Balance of Threat Theory

In his book, *The Origin of Alliances*, Stephen Walt challenges the common neorealist balance of power theory. This theory was championed by various highly-renowned scholars such as George Liska, Hans J. Morgenthau, John Mearsheimer, and Kenneth Waltz and has continued to be the preeminent explanation for neorealist scholars on how states handle the international system of anarchy. George Liska argued that "alliances are against, and only derivatively for, someone or something," emphasizing that states create alliances and balance to maintain the international balance of power against a rising or aggressive power (Liska 1962, 12). Kenneth Waltz argues that one of the ways in which states maintain the international balance of power, and their consequent survival, is through balancing.⁷ Waltz further argues that states will act with moderation and are seeking to maintain their position in the system and survival through defensive measures. Therefore, he argues that weaker states will consequently balance against stronger states or, less likely, will bandwagon with them (Waltz 1979).

Stephen Walt directly contends with Waltz and the balance of power theory and instead suggests the balance of threat theory. On the origin of alliances, Walt argues that states are much more likely to form international alliances based on an

⁷ Waltz argues that states achieve this balance through internal or external efforts. He defines internal efforts as "moves to increase economic capability, to increase military strength, to develop clever strategies," and external efforts as "moves to strengthen and enlarge one's own alliance or to weaken and shrink an opposing one" (Waltz 1979, 118).

external threat than they are on power alone (Walt 1988). Furthermore, Walt argues that states are much more likely to balance than they are to bandwagon. In other words, states are much more likely to ally with other powers against a source of threat than they are to ally with the actual source of threat (Walt 1988, 17). On how states recognize sources of threat, Walt finds several categories. He notes aggregate power,⁸ geographic proximity, offensive power,⁹ and aggressive intentions¹⁰ as the main factors that states use to form their view of what qualifies another state as a source of threat.

Walt makes several hypotheses on the concept of balancing. He argues that states are more likely to balance if a threat is more powerful, that balancing leads to more committed and long-lasting alliances than bandwagoning, and that an increase in a state's offensive power will lead other states to balance—particularly if that state appears to show aggressive intentions (Walt 1988). Furthermore, Walt argues that states have a modest tendency to form alliances with states that share “ideological solidarity”¹¹ with one another. Ideology particularly affects how regional powers chose their alliances with superpowers, as they will choose the superpower with an ideology that is more compatible with or appealing to the particular regional power (Walt 1988, 214). However, Walt makes a caveat that ideology is only an important

⁸ Walt defines aggregate power as a state's total resources. This includes a state's population, military capabilities, and technological abilities (Walt 1988, 22).

⁹ Walt defines offensive power as “the ability to threaten the sovereignty or territorial integrity of another state at an acceptable cost” (Walt 1988, 24).

¹⁰ Walt notes that even states with lower material capabilities can be seen as a threat if they are viewed as an aggressive power. Furthermore, the perceptions other nations have of a particular state's intentions can lead to the state being viewed as a threat (Walt 1988, 25). Walt specifically references Libya and Germany under Bismarck as examples of this phenomenon.

¹¹ Walt defines ideological solidarity as “a tendency for states with similar internal traits to prefer alignment with one another to alignment with states whose domestic characteristics are different” (Walt 1988, 181).

factor when states are not currently experiencing high levels of external threat and that scholars have a general tendency to overexaggerate the effect of ideology (Walt 1988, 216).

This balance of threat framework applies itself particularly well to the case of the alliances that appeared in the East Asian region with the United States during the 1950s. The more popular balance of power theory does not apply itself as well to East Asia, as this theory was based on a 19th-century Europe that was trying to avoid regional hegemony. At the point at which the East Asian security architecture was being built, the United States was already the world hegemon and was defending against the communist threat posed by the Soviet Union. Therefore, Walt's framework was formed under an already bipolar world. Under Waltz' balance of power theory, the East Asian powers should have been forming alliances to balance against the power of the United States, but empirically the opposite was seen. In reality, the East Asian nations formed alliances with the United States against the threat of the communist powers in the region. This was done despite the fact that the United States was the most powerful state in both military and economic capacities at the time. This shows empirical proof that supports Walt's argument that the strongest power is not necessarily the largest threat.

It can be seen that the balance of threat theory has withstood the test of the fall of the Soviet Union and has continued into current times with the United States-China competition and the threat of a nuclear North Korea. However, empirically, the United States, South Korea, and Japan are not acting entirely as one would expect under the international threat environment. One would expect the three nation-states to be working more closely together due to the threats surrounding them, but they consistently move farther apart and trilateral security cooperation is decreasing. The

United States began retreating into isolationism, South Korea began moving closer to China and North Korea and away from trilateralism, and Japan began focusing on its own domestic issues with South Korea rather than building a solid security architecture. This shows that the balance of threat theory is insufficient to solely explain why the three states are acting against their apparent national survival. The balance of threat theory, similarly to other neorealist theories, disregards the actual statesmen and how states build their strategy, as well as how states determine another state's intent.

2-2. National Strategy Identity

Although the aforementioned neorealist theory does well to explain certain aspects of why the United States, South Korea, and Japan have entered into a cooperative security architecture and have maintained at least some level of cooperation, a purely rationalistic approach does not serve to explain the puzzle fully. Neorealist logic cannot explain the varied actions that the three countries have taken that do not ostensibly coincide with current security concerns. The rationalist theories disregard the concepts of identity and history in relations between countries, and thus cannot fully explain the complex relationship amongst the United States, South Korea, and Japan—the relationship of the victor and the defeated, the relationship of the protector and the defended, the relationship of the colonizer and the colonized. While it is true that states ultimately strive for state survival and to maximize their interests—if not to maximize their power—the strategies through which states meet these goals are not made purely through logic and conceptions of threat and power, but are ultimately filtered through their national identity.

Generally, the definition of national identity used in international relations is based on predetermined concepts of shared blood, language, culture, etc. Famously, Benedict Anderson argued the concept of nations as “imagined communities,” the concept that a nation is socially constructed by its members who denote themselves as part of that “group” (Anderson 1983). Ernest Gellner, on the other hand, argued that nations are a modern concept and based upon the idea of nationalism. Therefore, national identity is based on the idea of a common past, culture, and language, and the ability of the members to recognize each other as belonging to the same nation (Gellner 2006). Ultimately, theories on national identity agree that common traits that members of the nation agree upon as what makes up their uniqueness are what creates a particular national identity. However, this concept is much too fluid and takes human agency out of the picture. These theories do not acknowledge that national identities are to some extent deliberately constructed, particularly by those in the political elite, and therefore are highly malleable.

Acknowledging these shortcomings in the literature, Park Cheol Hee created the concept of national strategic identities. Through this concept, one analyzes the underlying motivations and goals of the respective countries’ leaders to better understand the decisions they have made in regard to levels of cooperation. Park defines the concept of a national strategic identity as the identity of a particular country that is based on the direction or policy convergence of national strategies as defined by the leading political forces and support groups (C. Park 2019b, 338). This identity is created by a combination of the country’s geographical location, historical experiences, status in the international community, and relations with neighboring countries (C. Park 2019b, 338). Naturally, there are conflicting ideas within a nation, especially in a nation with a two-party or multi-party system, and this will lead to

contending national strategic identities. Despite this, there is a mainstream national strategic identity that becomes adopted or created by the leading forces in the government (C. Park 2019b, 339). However, this national strategic identity is not fixed and can change over time as needed to adapt to changing political forces both domestically and internationally (C. Park 2019b, 340-341).

Therefore, Park's concept of a national strategic identity can be seen to be different from the general concept of national identity as it is a much more deliberately constructed concept. As this identity is deliberately constructed by a specific country's leading political forces, it is constantly changing in response to both external and internal factors such as external threat perceptions and pressure from opposing domestic political groups. Therefore, the respective national strategic identities in place at a particular time can directly affect a nation's actions internationally in a way that may not appear to be directly in their national interest. This can be seen in the case of the deterioration of trilateral security cooperation, as the change in administrations—and the change of the mainstream national strategic identity within a single administration—led to drastic changes in policy. Naturally, these changes will affect the trilateral relationship amongst the United States, Japan, and South Korea in unpredictable ways—particularly if those identities have contradictory focuses or lack a cohesive approach.

2-3. Synthesis

This paper will use a synthesis of Stephen Walt's balance of threat theory and Park Cheol Hee's concept of national strategic identities to explain the changing state of trilateral security cooperation. Initially, the external threat perceptions of the

United States, South Korea, and Japan—as explained by Walt’s balance of threat theory—will be used as the independent variable of the puzzle. The external threat perceptions are measured by how much of a threat the three nation-states feel from the East Asia region—notably the threats from China and North Korea. In addition, Park Cheol Hee’s concept of national strategic identities will be used as an intervening variable through which the independent variable of external threat perceptions will be filtered. This will be measured by the policy choices the three nation-states make in relation to each other, the threats that precipitated the alliance structure—namely China and North Korea—as well as the statements the policymakers and state leaders make in regard to the threatening nation-states. This will also be used to determine the priority of the threats as viewed by the nation-states, which also affects the levels of trilateral security cooperation. Naturally, the level of trilateral security cooperation amongst the United States, South Korea, and Japan will be used as the dependent variable of this research.

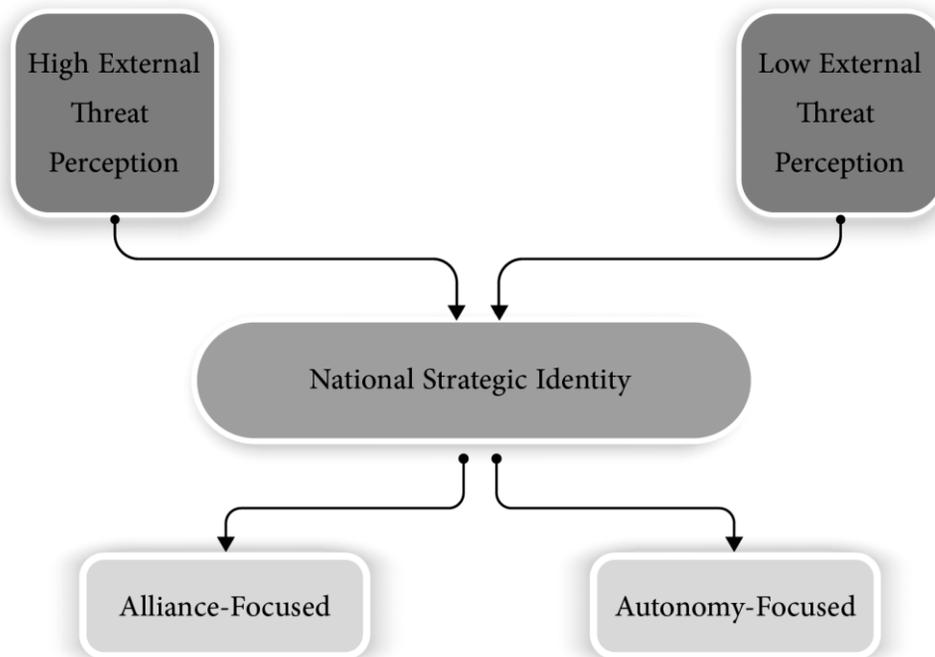
Figure 2.1 Overarching Theoretical Model



Therefore, for the United States, South Korea, and Japan, there will be differing policy outcomes, as they each have their own external threat perception that they will then filter through their national strategic identity. As will be shown, the

states can, on one hand, ultimately favor high levels of trilateral security cooperation, which this paper will refer to as “alliance-focused.” On the other hand, they can favor lower levels of trilateral security cooperation in order to distance themselves from the alliance structure and follow their own particular goals that may be separate from the other members of the trilateral security structure. This will be referred to as “autonomy-focused.” Ultimately, when the unique make-up of threat perception and national strategic identity of each nation-state gears toward a more alliance-focused outcome, trilateral security cooperation will be favored and perform at higher levels. The reverse is also true, as when the nation-states gear toward a more autonomy-focused outcome, trilateral security cooperation will not be seen as favorable, and performance will suffer.

Figure 2.2 Nation-State Level Theoretical Model



Chapter III. From Inoperability to Convergence

Although 2016 is widely accepted as one of the best periods of trilateral cooperation among the United States, South Korea, and Japan, it did not come easily. During Barack Obama's first term, his main focus was on the security threat caused by the Middle East,¹² rather than East Asia. Furthermore, for many years preceding the collaboration in 2016, Korea-Japan relations seemed to only worsen as time went on. Due to these factors, it was an uphill battle to achieve trilateral security cooperation. Even after the United States shifted its focus to the region, the tensions caused by the feuding Japan and South Korea proved to be a significant roadblock. Despite this, and in large part due to the increasingly aggressive actions by North Korea and a great deal of negotiation, the golden period of trilateral security cooperation was finally achieved.

1. Gradually Shifting Perspectives

1-1. The Pathway toward Shared Threat Perceptions

Since the 9/11 terrorist attack, the United States' main focus was on the Middle East and the War on Terror—to the extent that the Obama administration even criticized the previous administration's lack of focus on Asia (Lieberthal 2011). However, after Obama's first term as president both the external threat perception

¹² During Obama's inaugural speech, he directly referenced the troops in Afghanistan and the "Muslim World," but there was no direct mention of other countries. This insinuated that he would focus most of his attention on the War on Terror that he had inherited from the previous president, George W. Bush. Beyond that, the Arab Spring broke out in 2010, forcing the United States to focus its attention on the Middle East and North Africa while also taking part in NATO-led actions.

and national strategic identity changed greatly. During his first term, Obama ended what he referred to as Operation Iraqi Freedom¹³ and even authorized the assassination of Osama bin Laden. These moves clearly showed his intentions to move the primary focus of the United States away from the Middle East. In Obama's second term, it was apparent that he began to focus his attention on East Asia in the well-known Pivot to Asia strategy. At this point, Obama noted his administration's strategic goals were to make "efforts to advance security, prosperity and human dignity," while also noting his devotion to human rights and liberal ideals (Obama 2011).

The shifting of the United States' focus to East Asia was first announced by Hillary Clinton, who served as Obama's Secretary of State from 2009 to 2013. Clinton announced in her 2011 essay, "America's Pacific Century," that the United States would be maintaining its commitments in the Pacific region and that "harnessing Asia's growth and dynamism is central to American economic and strategic interests and a key priority for President Obama" (Clinton 2011, 57). She displayed the United States' commitment to these goals through her role as Secretary of State in her first official international tour, when she broke with tradition and visited Asia first, instead of the customary visit to Europe. Clinton further emphasized the United States' rationale by stating, "Strategically, maintaining peace and security across the Asia-Pacific is increasingly crucial to global progress, whether through defending freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, countering the proliferation efforts of North Korea, or ensuring transparency in the military

¹³ In an address to the Oval Office, Obama stated, "So tonight, I am announcing that the American combat mission in Iraq has ended. Operation Iraqi Freedom is over, and the Iraqi people now have lead responsibility for the security of their country" (Obama 2010).

activities of the region's key players” (Clinton 2011, 57).

Another point in Clinton’s essay was that the United States was looking to work with and not against China.¹⁴ Clinton stated that the United States desired a deeper relationship with China and to emphasize this, she visited China a total of six times in an official capacity throughout her term.¹⁵ The United States, under the liberal institutionalist-minded President Obama, clearly saw cooperation and engagement as the best way to maintain peace and stability, and developing a working relationship with China was clearly a key factor in this strategy. In this way, the United States—although still wary of China’s aggressive moves and predatory trading practices—had a low threat perception of China at this particular time and felt little need to take forceful action against China.

Although China-U.S. relations were seeming to be progressing, North Korea was a clear point of concern as the state’s aggressive actions increased in the region. After a series of missile launches in 2009, North Korea took more aggressive actions against South Korea, such as the alleged sinking of the Cheonan and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island. However, after these belligerent actions, North Korea did not appear to make any further missile launches until 2012. At that point, North Korea conducted its first missile launch in January of 2012 and proceeded to make five more launches throughout 2012 and 2013, with a suspected nuclear test in February of 2013.¹⁶

¹⁴ Clinton insisted in many speeches and addresses that the United States was not attempting to contain China, but was instead trying to build a deeper relationship with the state.

¹⁵ See <https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/travels/secretary/clinton-hillary-rodham>.

¹⁶ Pyongyang, through the North Korean KCNA news service, confirmed that the regime had conducted its third nuclear test on February 12th, 2013. The announcement was made after the U.S. Geological Survey detected 4.9-magnitude seismic activity at 11:58 a.m. in North Korea (Harlan 2013).

Table 3.1 North Korean Missile Launches: 2012-2013

Date	Missile Name	Number Launched
Jan. 11, 2012	KN-02	2
Apr. 13, 2012	Taepodong-2/Unha-3	1
Dec. 12, 2012	Taepodong-2/Unha-3	1
Mar. 15, 2013	KN-02 (presumed)	2
May 18, 2013	KN-02	3
May 19/20, 2013	KN-02	3

Source: <https://missilethreat.csis.org/north-korea-missile-launches-1984-present/>

These aggressive actions greatly concerned the United States, as it appeared that North Korea was ignoring international demands to cease its nuclear program. This caused the United States’ threat perception of the region to increase significantly. In November of 2013, National Security Advisor Susan Rice declared that protecting against the North Korean threat was one of the United States’ greatest security goals and declared that the United States would be working with its allies to put pressure on North Korea.¹⁷ After this, the Obama administration worked even harder to increase its ties in the region diplomatically, economically, and militarily—not only to balance against China but to protect against an antagonistic North Korea

¹⁷ During a speech on November 21, 2013, Susan Rice stated, “one of our most pressing security goals is to roll back the threat posed by North Korea’s nuclear and other WMD programs.” She further stated that “We will continue to join with international partners, especially China, to increase pressure on North Korea to denuclearize. We will do what is necessary to defend ourselves and our allies against any threat from North Korea, and we will maintain and expand, as necessary, both national and multilateral sanctions against North Korea.”

(Liberthal 2011). Naturally, strengthening the United States' relationship with regional partners—particularly South Korea and Japan—were included in this strategy proposed by the Obama administration.

On the part of the United States' partners, it appeared that both South Korea and Japan warmly embraced the Obama administration's moves to increase its presence in the region and strengthen its alliances and ties with regional partners. In a February 2013 speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Prime Minister Abe Shinzo emphasized the importance of the U.S.-Japan alliance, and the promotion of a rules-based order.¹⁸ He even conclusively stated that “no one should ever doubt the robustness of the Japan-U.S. Alliance” (Abe 2013). Abe then described his perception of the regional threat levels by directly condemning North Korea's nuclear actions and declared that the U.S.-Japan alliance, as well as cooperation with South Korea specifically, was the best method of deterrence.¹⁹ He also declared China's actions surrounding the Senkaku Islands²⁰ as a direct challenge against Japan's sovereignty and referred to the U.S.-Japan mutual defense treaty as the primary way to defend against this threat. Overall, at this moment in time, Japan showed a relatively high threat perception of the region, and as such, preferred an alliance-focused strategy.

On the part of South Korea, President Park Geun-hye made her first official

¹⁸ Abe further emphasized his agreement with Obama's values by stating that, “A rules-promoter, a commons' guardian, and an effective ally and partner to the U.S. and other democracies, are all roles that Japan MUST fulfill” (Abe 2013).

¹⁹ Abe stated specifically that, “their nuclear ambition should not be tolerated,” and “this is not only a regional matter, but a global one. Japan, on my watch, should work tirelessly with the U.S., South Korea, others and the United Nations to stop them from pursuing those ambitions” (Abe 2013).

²⁰ The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands are a series of uninhabited islands between China and Japan that are the center of a bitter territorial dispute. The dispute has been described as “the two countries' ships...playing an almost cold war-style game of cat-and-mouse” (Fackler 2012).

international visit to the United States, where she met with Obama and then-Secretary of State John Kerry. In a joint statement made by the two presidents following their meeting, Obama directly spoke on the increasingly provocative actions of North Korea and the threat that they posed. To this threat, Obama stated that the United States would defend its allies and spoke on the need to coordinate with both South Korea and Japan. Following Obama's statements, Park declared her continued commitment to the U.S.-ROK alliance.²¹ She further declared that she would not tolerate North Korean provocations and spoke on her desire to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula. Notably, Park made no mention of Japan at any point during this joint statement, despite Obama referencing trilateral cooperation with Japan twice in his short statements.²² This is due in large part to Park's identity as an "anti-Japanese" hard-liner, an identity displayed through her many harsh statements toward the country since her inauguration. In sum, despite Park's relatively high threat perception toward North Korea and commitment to the alliance with the United States, her national strategic identity would not allow her to show a positive outlook toward cooperation with Japan.

Therefore, it can be seen that at this point in time, the three countries had relatively high threat perceptions of North Korea and acknowledged that cooperation was necessary. With the increase of North Korean missile launches and all three countries having acknowledged the increasingly aggressive rhetoric and actions on the part of the regime, it seems natural that trilateral cooperation would increase at

²¹ Park specifically stated that "the President and I shared the view that the Korea-U.S. alliance has been faithfully carrying out its role as a bulwark of peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia, and that the alliance should continue to serve as a linchpin for peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and in Asia."

²² See "Remarks by President Obama and President Park of South Korea in a Joint Press Conference" for the full statements by both presidents.

this point. However, that was far from the case. As Korea-Japan relations were at an all-time low after the elections of Abe Shinzo and Park Geun-hye in 2012 and 2013, respectively, this would prove a great obstacle to trilateral cooperation. In this way, despite the shared high regional threat perceptions that would logically lead to cooperation, the respective national strategic identities of Japan and South Korea were acting as a barrier to true trilateral cooperation.

1-2. Korea-Japan Relations as a Barrier

Despite the continued tensions between Korea and Japan since the colonization of the Korean peninsula, there is a general trend in Korea-Japan relations in which a new South Korean president starts out their term with optimism regarding the future of relations with Japan. However, as time goes on, the relationship between Korea and Japan inevitably sours (C. Park 2008). As an outlier to this trend, Korea-Japan relations under President Park Geun-hye began immediately on rocky grounds. Historically, most Korean presidents in contemporary times have started out their terms with a bilateral summit meeting with the Japanese prime minister. However, despite Park Geun-hye being elected in February of 2013, she did not hold a bilateral summit with Prime Minister Abe until November 2, 2015. By which time, Park had already held six bilateral meetings with Chinese President Xi Jinping (C. Park 2015).

This unprecedented lull in bilateral summits seemed to be directly caused by the incompatible national strategic identities held by Japan and South Korea's leaders. President Park built her platform to be focused on nationalism with a hardline stance against Japan and North Korea. Therefore, after her inauguration, she

started out her term with aggressive rhetoric toward Japan regarding historical issues such as the comfort women, territorial issues, among other issues. She directly declared Japan as the aggressor that led to a victimized Korea. Park only further reiterated her uncompromising stance on the issue of history in her Independence Movement Day address on March 1, 2014. In this speech, Park called on Japan to “make the right and courageous decisions” and “heal the wounds of the comfort women victims” (G. Park 2014a). In her address on the 69th Anniversary of Independence, Park called for Japan to show a “correct view of history” about the comfort women (G. Park 2014b). This attitude toward Japan is in direct contrast to Park’s apparent desire to build a closer relationship with China. Contrastingly, it appeared as if Park was aiming to continue the strategic cooperative partnership with China that was created by the Lee Myung-bak administration through high-level diplomacy and building more economic ties (Hwang 2016). South Korea not only gained economically from strengthening ties with China, but Park was also seeking cooperation from China on the denuclearization of North Korea (Hwang 2016). This displays a move away from diplomacy with Japan and towards China, further emphasizing Park’s national strategic identity built upon the concept of Korea with a wounded nationalism.

Similar to Park, since his election in December of 2012, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo maintained his stance as a right-wing conservative. He showed a hardline approach to both North Korea and China, alongside a particularly harsh stance against historical issues with South Korea. He had been known to make harsh statements toward South Korea in regards to historical issues such as the comfort women, territorial issues, and colonization leading to his reputation as a historical revisionist in South Korea. This was also displayed by his continued visits to

Yasukuni Shrine in 2013,²³ which caused great ire in the South Korean public. Beyond this, his attempts to alter the interpretation of Article 9 of Japan's peace constitution²⁴ have done nothing to assuage the concern of many in South Korea. Despite this, as shown in his 2013 speech, Abe showed a general willingness to work with South Korea in the capacity of trilateral cooperation with the United States—particularly due to Japan's reliance on the United States for its defense.²⁵ However, because of his particular national strategic identity, Abe could not make the first move toward reconciliation with Korea without losing face domestically, and this led him to take an equally aggressive stance against Park's Korea.

The actions of the two leaders are clear examples of the trend of Northeast Asian countries to use of the concept of nationalism as a way to bolster their domestic support (Rozman and S. Lee 2006). This is a form of “intermestic” politics²⁶ in which Japan and South Korea use anti-Korean or anti-Japanese sentiment within their national strategic identities to solidify their domestic position and policy (Rozman and S. Lee 2006). Ultimately, the national strategic identities of Park and Abe as nationalistic hard-liners combined to make one of the worst periods of Korea-

²³ The Yasukuni Shrine is a Shinto shrine in Tokyo, Japan. The main reason that the shrine has been seen as especially controversial is the fact that 14 class A war criminals from World War II are enshrined in Yasukuni Shrine. Many Japanese leaders have frequently visited the shrine in their official capacity and these visits have brought up concerns over separation of religion and state, historical revisionism, tone deafness, or outright glorification of the acts committed by Japan during World War II.

²⁴ Article 9 of the Japanese constitution reads, “Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes. In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized.”

²⁵ See Abe, Shinzo. “Japan Is Back.” *CSIS Statesmen's Forum*.

²⁶ Rozman and Lee define intermestic politics as when leaders link domestic politics and international agendas to the level that domestic politics takes a precedence over strategic thinking. To these leaders, what mattered more “was not success in handling the external environment but persuasion of a domestic audience, with electoral consequences” (Rozman and S. Lee 2006, 783).

Japan diplomatic relations in modern times, with little in the way of true diplomacy between the two countries for years. Furthermore, as the two countries had relatively divergent threat perceptions at the time—with Japan viewing China as its main security threat and South Korea viewing North Korea as its main security threat—the two leaders did not feel enough urgency about their national security to collaborate with each other.

However, with Obama’s Pivot to Asia, he needed the participation of the two most important allies to the United States and began to work toward a return of basic diplomacy. Therefore, due to the insistence of Obama, Park and Abe ultimately participated in a trilateral summit with the United States on the sidelines of the 2014 Nuclear Security Summit at the Hague. This facilitated the first face-to-face meeting between Abe and Park during their terms and allowed for great progress in thawing the frigid relationship between the two leaders. During this meeting, the leaders spoke on the need to cooperate on the North Korean threat, and it was in this meeting that Park first spoke on the need for trilateral cooperation to handle the North Korean threat.²⁷ This led to the signing of the Trilateral Information Sharing Arrangement Concerning the Nuclear and Missile Threats Posed by North Korea in December of 2014. This created a framework for the three countries to share classified information about North Korea. However, this was less than ideal, as it was done with the United States Department of Defense as a go-between. When sharing information through this agreement, the South Korean Ministry of National Defense and the Japanese

²⁷ Park specifically stated that “the North Korean nuclear issue poses a major threat to peace and stability in the region, and it is vital that the international community, including Korea, the U.S. and Japan, fashion a united response” (Abe, Obama, Park 2014). She concluded by stating, “I sincerely hope that this meeting will offer a chance for us to reaffirm our trilateral coordination and strengthen cooperation on the nuclear front” (Abe, Obama, Park 2014).

Ministry of Defense would send their respective information to the Department of Defense, who would then relate the information to the respective partner.²⁸

Finally, on November 2, 2015, President Park and Prime Minister Abe conducted the first high-level bilateral summit between Japan and South Korea during their terms. This summit lasted almost two hours, and the two leaders discussed various issues, but primarily they shared the desire to improve Korea-Japan relations.²⁹ After this summit, Abe and Park ultimately agreed upon the Korea-Japan Agreement on Comfort Women Victims in December of the same year. This was intended to end the conflict over the comfort women issue, which was an issue that President Park had placed at the forefront of her anti-Japanese rhetoric since the start of her term. After such a time as Japan fulfilled the conditions stated by the agreement, President Park and Prime Minister Abe agreed that this agreement would be a “final and irreversible resolution of the issue.”³⁰ The United States declared their approval of the agreement, with Secretary of State John Kerry stating that he applauded the opportunity for two of the United States’ most important allies to improve their relationship (Kerry 2015). This agreement ultimately allowed for a return to basic diplomacy after years of political impasse and the easing of both the anti-Japan and anti-Korea sentiments that had plagued the two leaders’ national strategic identities since the start of their respective terms.

²⁸ See the *Trilateral Information Sharing Arrangement Concerning the Nuclear and Missile Threats Posed by North Korea*.

²⁹ See Cheong Wa Dae, “The President Holds Summit with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe,” and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Japan-ROK Summit Meeting” for details.

³⁰ See the “Report on the Review of the Korea-Japan Agreement on ‘Comfort Women’ Victims View: Ministry News Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea,” and the “Announcement by Foreign Ministers of Japan and the Republic of Korea at the Joint Press Occasion” for details.

2. The Convergence

Shortly after the improvement in Korea-Japan relations, North Korea's provocations and capabilities only increased. North Korea announced that they had successfully detonated their first hydrogen bomb on January 5, 2016—only a few short months after the first Korea-Japan bilateral summit. The North Korean announcement followed the detection of 5.1-magnitude seismic activity along North Korea's northeast coast, near the Punggye-ri nuclear test site (USGS 2016). A North Korean news anchor declared on the Central Television network that "this is the self-defensive measure we have to take to defend our right to live in the face of the nuclear threats and blackmail by the United States and to guarantee the security of the Korean Peninsula" (Choe and Sanger 2016). As there was a great deal of skepticism as to the truth of North Korea's statement on their nuclear capabilities, Obama refrained from direct comment. Despite this, the United States Congress did pass H.R.757 - North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act of 2016 in February. This bill allowed the government to pass sanctions on anyone who imported or exported goods to or from North Korea. Abe and Park also refrained from an official comment, but there was a record of a phone call between Park and Abe where they condemned the test and spoke on the need for bilateral and trilateral cooperation.³¹ Following this, North Korea proceeded to make twelve additional missile launches from February to September.³²

³¹ The specific quote from the report was, "they both acknowledged the need for close cooperation between Korea and Japan as well as among Korea, the United States and Japan." See: "[BRIEFING] The President Speaks by Phone with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe" for details.

³² Information compiled from the CSIS Missile Defense Project, "North Korean Missile Launches & Nuclear Tests: 1984-Present" <https://missilethreat.csis.org/north-korea-missile-launches-1984-present/>.

Table 3.2 North Korean Missile Launches: 2016

Date	Missile Name	Number Launched
Feb. 7, 2016	Taepodong-2/Unha-3	1
Mar. 9, 2016	SRBM (Scud Variant)	2
Apr. 15, 2016	Musudan	1
Apr. 23, 2016	KN-11 (SLBM)	1
Apr. 28, 2016	Musudan	2
May 31, 2016	Musudan	1
Jun. 22, 2016	Musudan	2
Jul. 9, 2016	KN-11 (SLBM)	1
Jul. 18, 2016	SRBM (Scud Variant)	3
Aug. 3, 2016	No Dong	1
Aug. 24, 2016	KN-11 (SLBM)	1
Sep. 5, 2016	No Dong	3

Source: <https://missilethreat.csis.org/north-korea-missile-launches-1984-present/>

In the midst of North Korea’s continued launches, in March of 2016, the United States, South Korea, and Japan held a trilateral summit meeting in Washington, D.C. In this summit, each of the three leaders declared the importance of and their commitment to trilateral coordination to combat the threat of North Korea. The three leaders discussed not only the security issues in the region, but also global issues including climate change, counterterrorism, health, and human rights.³³

³³ See the “Remarks by President Obama, President Park of the Republic of Korea, and Prime Minister Abe of Japan” for the full statements.

This shows an obvious intent to increase trilateral cooperation beyond the security region and into a true partnership among nations. A few months after this summit, the United States, South Korea, and Japan conducted a joint missile drill called the Pacific Dragon in June of 2016. During these exercises, the three countries performed exercises focused on tracking ballistic missiles and “improving tactical and technical coordination among its participants, including the detection, tracking and reporting of ballistic targets” (U.S. Third Fleet Public Affairs, 2016).³⁴

While the exercises were considered a success by the involved parties, North Korea reacted with anger. According to the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), a spokesperson for the Disarmament and Peace Institute of North Korea’s foreign ministry stated that “now that the U.S. and other hostile forces are posing a constant threat to the security of the DPRK and the region by frequently staging joint military exercises, the army and people of the DPRK will bolster in a sustainable manner the capabilities for preemptive nuclear attack to pose a constant threat to the enemies” (Parameswaran 2016). Shortly after this statement, South Korea and the United States signed an agreement to allow the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD), which would protect the United States’ allies from North Korea’s ballistic missile and WMD attacks (DoD News 2016).³⁵ Likely in response to the growing trilateral security cooperation, 5.3-magnitude seismic

³⁴ The U.S. Third Fleet Public Affairs further stated that “This trilateral exercise strengthens relationships with participating allies and partners while further developing maritime regional BMD capability and capacity. The ability to work together at sea, especially on aspects such as BMD, humanitarian relief as well as search and rescue operations, benefits the shared security interests of all three nations. This type of maritime cooperation enhances security, stability and peace throughout the Indo-Asia-Pacific” (U.S. Third Fleet Public Affairs, 2016).

³⁵ The deployment of THAAD was strongly opposed by China, who urged South Korea to cease deployment of the defense system (C. Lee 2018).

activity was detected near the Punggye-ri Nuclear Test Site on September 9, 2016 (USGS 2016). The KCNA acknowledged that this was a successful nuclear test and, more concerningly, declared that the regime would now be able to mount nuclear warheads on ballistic missiles (Hecker 2016).³⁶

In response to this, the United States, South Korea, and Japan all announced their condemnation of the North Korean actions. President Obama declared the test a threat to international security and stated that he had confirmed with South Korea and Japan their decision to work together to create a show of force against North Korea's actions.³⁷ President Park stated that the test was “fanatical recklessness” and that South Korea would work together with the international community (G. Park 2016). She also declared that South Korea would “increase pressure on North Korea by using all possible measures in order to make the North abandon its nuclear program” (G. Park 2016). Prime Minister Abe also condemned the test and instructed his security analysts to share any available, pertinent information with the United States, South Korea, China, and Russia (Choe and Perlez 2016). Ultimately, this increase in capabilities and aggression on the part of North Korea caused a spike in not only regional threat perceptions but also the international threat perception as a whole.

This spike in threat perceptions led to the signing of a bilateral information sharing agreement between the previously antagonistic South Korea and Japan in November of 2016—the General Security of Military Information Agreement, or

³⁶ The statement directly said, “The standardization of the nuclear warhead will enable the D.P.R.K. to produce at will and as many as it wants a variety of smaller, lighter and diversified nuclear warheads of higher strike power with a firm hold on the technology for producing and using various fissile materials. This has definitely put on a higher level the D.P.R.K.'s technology of mounting nuclear warheads on ballistic rockets (Hecker 2016).

³⁷ See the “Statement by the President on North Korea's Nuclear Test” for full details.

GSOMIA. GSOMIA allowed South Korea and Japan to share information about North Korea and its nuclear and missile programs directly with one another, rather than using the United States as a go-between.³⁸ The agreement was intended to allow for a more seamless process of intelligence sharing that would make timely responses to nuclear or submarine threats from North Korea possible. There was little direct comment on the signing by respective parties, but the South Korean defense ministry's Moon Sang-gyun noted that it would help protect South Korea from the nuclear threat of North Korea (Fifield 2016).³⁹ On the Japanese side, Foreign Minister Kishida Fumio stated that cooperation with South Korea was extremely important with the increasing threat from North Korea.⁴⁰ On the United States' side, both the Secretary of Defense and the United States National Security Council Spokesperson released statements welcoming the agreement.⁴¹ Ultimately, the increase in provocations on the part of North Korea and the concern it caused for the allied parties allowed for a shifting of national priorities. It allowed for a lessening of the anti-Japanese sentiment in the mainstream thread of national strategic identity on the part of President Park. This, in turn, allowed for her counterpart in Japan to focus more on cooperation as well.

At this time, trilateral security cooperation was at a high. Due to the

³⁸ See the "Agreement between the Government of Japan and the Government of the Republic of Korea on the Protection of Classified Military Information" for details.

³⁹ At the time of the signing, President Park was going through a scandal, and many disapproved of her pushing through GSOMIA before her impeachment, with approximately 60% of the South Korean public disapproving of GSOMIA (S. Park 2016). This is likely due to the high levels of anti-Japanese sentiment that she encouraged earlier in her term and the negative response to the comfort women agreement.

⁴⁰ See "Press Conference by Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida" for details.

⁴¹ The U.S.' National Security Council Spokesperson, Ned Price, specifically stated, "this agreement will allow the ROK and Japan, two of our closest allies in the region, to significantly strengthen bilateral, and with us, trilateral cooperation on deterring and defending against the North Korean threat" (Price 2016).

convergence of threat perceptions due to the apparently ever-increasing nuclear threat from North Korea and the relative amelioration of Korea-Japan relations that relaxed the hardline national strategic identities of Abe and Park into more alliance-focused identities, trilateral cooperation was able to flourish. However, there were still no official agreements between the three parties to keep the levels of cooperation at a consistently high level. Unfortunately, the high levels of trilateral security cooperation were coming at a time of great change for two of the states. On one hand, Obama's second term was coming to an end, and the United States was seeing a battle between the hawkish Democrat Hillary Clinton and the quasi-isolationist Republican Donald Trump. On the other hand, South Korea was in the process of impeaching Park Geun-hye over her corruption scandal. The impeachment was happening concurrently with the Korean public rallying against what they perceived as Park kowtowing to Japan to the detriment of the comfort women and South Korea's pride as a nation. With the amalgamation of these factors, the future of trilateral security cooperation was up in the air as the world waited to see who would take control of both the United States and South Korea in 2017.

Chapter IV. From Maintenance to Divergence

1. The Entrance of the New Presidents

1-1. Donald Trump

As 2016 came to a close, the world was waiting with bated breath to see who would win the United States' presidential election. Donald Trump had been making clear for the entirety of his campaign that he did not value the United States' alliances or partnerships—directly referring to the mutual defense treaties and alliances with South Korea and Japan. In fact, there is evidence of Donald Trump devaluing the alliance with South Korea as early as 2012.⁴² Years later and during his presidential campaign, he even spoke on his willingness to completely withdraw American troops from Japan and South Korea if they did not significantly increase their defense cost contributions (Haberman and Sanger 2016). Trump was not alone in his condescension toward the region, as his future Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, also showed a lack of tact toward East Asia. Tillerson declared his desire for a more aggressive posture towards China and threatened to block the state from its artificial islands in the South China Sea (Forsythe 2017).⁴³ These statements caused a great deal of concern in the world—particularly in South Korea and Japan who largely rely on the United States for their security—especially as these statements came at a

⁴² In an interview with Forbes magazine, Trump stated that “[South Korea] make a fortune on us. I'm saying, why aren't they -- when you turn on that ignition for that little aircraft carrier, that probably costs \$1 billion, okay? So, we're sending these ships over to North Korea. I mean, why aren't they paying for this?” (Forbes 2012).

⁴³ Tillerson specifically stated, “We’re going to have to send China a clear signal that, first, the island-building stops,” Mr. Tillerson told the senators. “And second, your access to those islands also is not going to be allowed” (Forsythe 2017).

time where North Korea was acting particularly aggressively and increasing its capabilities rapidly.

To the shock of many domestically and internationally, Donald Trump was elected as the 45th president of the United States. The 2016 inauguration of Donald Trump heralded many changes, both in policy and the United States' public image. President Trump based his platform on an identity based on nationalism, exceptionalism, and an America First policy verging on xenophobia, and according to a 2018 Pew Research Center survey, the world's confidence in the United States dropped significantly once Trump took office. The United States' allies and partners no longer had confidence that the United States would honor its commitments, and this lack of confidence was only exacerbated by Trump's pressure on Japan and South Korea to increase burden-sharing. With this platform, it appeared as if Trump would refrain from attempting to maintain high levels of trilateral security cooperation—regardless of the importance of the alliance agreements and trilateral cooperation to the United States' security.

Following his campaign slogan, "Make America Great Again," Trump declared in his inaugural speech that, "from this day forward, it's going to be only America first. America first" (Trump 2017a). In Trump's subsequent statement to a joint session of Congress, he again emphasized his intention to make the United States' allies contribute to defense spending (Trump 2017b).⁴⁴ Proving his commitment to "America First," Trump withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, reversed the United States-Korea Free Trade Agreement, and directly threatened

⁴⁴ Specifically, Trump said, "But our partners must meet their financial obligations. And now, based on our very strong and frank discussions, they are beginning to do just that. In fact, I can tell you the money is pouring in. Very nice" (Trump 2017b).

North Korea, all within his first few months in office. To make matters worse, when then-Vice President Mike Pence visited South Korea, he cited the recent strikes on Syria and Afghanistan to warn North Korea not to test the strength of the United States (Fifield 2017).⁴⁵

These statements and actions—among many others—showed that the Trump administration’s national strategic identity was solidly autonomy-focused. Speeches, addresses, and interviews were littered with isolationist, xenophobic, and chauvinistic remarks. This made it abundantly clear that the Trump administration, regardless of its alliance commitments, would be focusing on its own relative gains almost exclusively. With Trump’s various provocative statements about the North Korean threat—and even a handful of remarks about the harmful effect China has had on the United States—one can see that the Trump administration had a relatively high threat perception of the East Asian region. Despite this, Trump and his Cabinet created a national strategic identity that treated alliances as if they were business transactions and held the belief that the United States should handle security threats on its own.

Nonetheless, there was a sliver of hope that trilateral security cooperation would be maintained after the United States, South Korea, and Japan conducted their first trilateral anti-submarine warfare drill on April 4, 2017. This drill had been discussed in the previous year’s Defense Trilateral Talks, and the actualization of the drill gave hope that Trump would uphold the United States’ security agreements

⁴⁵ Pence specifically stated, "Just in the past two weeks, the world witnessed the strength and resolve of our new president in actions taken in Syria and Afghanistan." He continued by stating, "North Korea would do well not to test his resolve or the strength of the armed forces of the United States in this region" (Fifield 2017).

(Gady 2017).⁴⁶ Therefore, it remained to be seen how Trump would enact his actual strategy and how that strategy would interact with a new South Korean president.

1-2. Moon Jae-in

Following the scandal of the conservative Park Geun-hye's impeachment and amidst the conservative Trump's apparent dismissal of the alliance, the progressive Moon Jae-in from the Democratic Party of Korea was elected as the 12th president of the Republic of Korea on May 10, 2017. From Moon's time as a presidential candidate, he focused his platform and strategy on engagement and peace with North Korea and focused his ultimate goal on unification. Furthermore, as a candidate, he showed his intention to build a better relationship with China by stating that the issue of THAAD's deployment needed to be revisited (C. Lee 2018). Moon's popularity as a presidential candidate caused some concern in the United States, not only due to his stance on THAAD, but also because he was known to be a close friend and the chief of staff of former president Roh Moo-hyun who had a reputation as a staunch anti-American (S. Lee 2017).

After his election, Moon shifted the hardline conservative national strategic identity towards an identity also based on nationalism, but a nationalism that spans the entire peninsula rather than just the South. As president, Moon acted quickly to cement his dedication to reunification and peace on the Korean peninsula. In his inaugural address, one of his opening statements read, "my thoughts are now full of

⁴⁶ According to the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, the exercise consisted of "submarine search, fix, and tracking; high-value unit protection and anti-submarine defense maneuvers...The additional training will allow participants to enhance tactical maritime capabilities, strengthen cooperation, and improve shared situational awareness" (Commander, U.S. Seventh Fleet Public Affairs 2017).

blueprints for the new world of unification and coexistence” (Moon 2017). He further stated that he would be doing his utmost to resolve the current security crisis caused by North Korea’s nuclear capabilities by cooperating with the United States, China, Japan, and North Korea.⁴⁷ He also worked to assuage some of the fears in the United States by stating that he will strengthen the U.S.-ROK alliance. However, he also displayed an apparent intention to hedge between the United States and China. Moon declared that “I will have serious discussions with the United States and China for the resolution of issues related to THAAD,” showing his concern towards China’s disapproval (Moon 2017).

Moon further showed his intentions to take a strong engagement approach with North Korea through many of his Cabinet appointments. He appointed many members who had significant diplomatic experience in working with North Korea. This was particularly seen through President Moon’s appointment of Dr. Moon Chung-in as a special advisor to the president. A well-known expert on North Korea, Dr. Moon was one of the architects of the Sunshine Policy and aided both Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun in the inter-Korean summits during their respective terms (Cho 2017). Despite his experience, the appointment of Dr. Moon caused some concern in the United States. During a press conference with South Korean correspondents in Washington, D.C., Dr. Moon spoke of his willingness to reduce joint military activities with the United States if Pyongyang would halt its nuclear progress (Yi 2017).⁴⁸ As this statement came only shortly before the planned U.S.-

⁴⁷ He specifically stated, “I will endeavor to address the security crisis promptly. For the sake of peace on the Korean Peninsula, I will crisscross the globe. If needed, I will immediately fly to Washington. I will also visit Beijing and Tokyo and even Pyongyang under the right circumstances” (Moon 2017).

⁴⁸ Moon was quoted as saying that, “the president has made two proposals. The first is that we and the U.S. can discuss reducing the South Korea-US joint military exercises if North Korea suspends its nuclear weapons and missile activities. The president was thinking that

ROK bilateral summit, many were concerned over the reaction to Dr. Moon's apparent devaluation of the U.S.-ROK mutual defense treaty.

In sum, there were many mixed signals from both President Moon and members of his administration in the early days of his presidency. What was clear, however, was that Moon was building his presidential identity and South Korea's mainstream national strategic identity on a peninsula-wide nationalism and the goal of unification. To accomplish this feat, Moon was aware that he would need the cooperation of both China and the United States, and as such, he set himself up for the complicated process of hedging between the two superpowers. In addition, Moon began to show some discontent toward Japan by repeatedly calling the 2015 comfort women agreement into question—this being the very agreement that had allowed for a return to basic diplomacy between the countries in the first place. Moreover, Moon appeared to have a low threat perception of the region as a whole. This is shown by his willingness to work with China and his goal of a peaceful reunification by engagement. The combination of his regional threat perceptions and national strategic identity showed a South Korea leaning toward an autonomy-focused strategy. Due to both South Korea and the United States' leaders appearing to favor autonomy-focused strategies, the future of trilateral security cooperation was up in the air. The future depended on how the new configuration of the United States, South Korea, and Japan's leaders' threat perceptions and national strategic identities would play out.

we could even decrease the American strategic assets that are deployed to the Korean Peninsula [during the exercises]" (Yi 2017).

2. The Process of Partial Divergence

2-1. Maintaining Hope

Shortly after the South Korean election of Moon Jae-in, the United States and South Korea were scheduled to have a bilateral meeting in Washington, D.C., on June 30, 2017. The world's eyes were on Washington as everyone sought to gauge how the two apparently diametrically opposed leaders would handle the meeting. South Korea was particularly invested in the outcome of this meeting due to their concerns over Trump's censorious rhetoric surrounding the U.S.-ROK mutual defense treaty. Despite these concerns, a June 2017 Asan Institute report on public opinion found that the South Korean public still found the United States to be their most favored country and that they supported THAAD, although they believed that the deployment of the system should be in the hands of the Korean National Assembly (Kim et al 2017).⁴⁹ Furthermore, the South Korean public was optimistic about the future of U.S.-ROK relations under Moon and Trump, but they believed that the two leaders should work on building trust (Kim et al 2017). This exemplified that, although President Moon was pushing for peaceful engagement with North Korea, the general public still held concerns about the North and valued the U.S.-ROK alliance. These concerns were justified, as they came in the midst of continued missile launches by North Korea, with a total of 10 launches from February to June of 2017 (CSIS Missile Defense Project).

⁴⁹ See: "A New Beginning for ROK-U.S. Relations: South Koreans' View of the United States and Its Implications." The Asan Institute for Policy Studies.

Table 4.1 North Korean Missile Launches: February-June, 2017

Date	Missile Name	Number Launched
Feb. 12, 2017	KN-15 (Pukkuksong-2)	1
Mar. 6, 2017	Scud-ER (MRBM)	4
Mar. 22, 2017	Unkown	1
Apr. 5, 2017	Hwasong-12 (IRBM)	1
Apr. 16, 2017	Hwasong-12 (IRBM)	1
Apr. 29, 2017	Hwasong-12 (IRBM)	1
May 14, 2017	Hwasong-12 (IRBM)	1
May 21, 2017	KN-15 (SRBM)	1
May 28, 2017	KN-18 (SRBM)	1
Jun. 7, 2017	Kumsong-3 (ASCM)	4

Source: <https://missilethreat.csis.org/north-korea-missile-launches-1984-present/>

Under this environment, the two leaders released a joint statement following their meeting that declared a united front against North Korea, a desire to strengthen the U.S.-ROK alliance, a commitment to enhancing United States-ROK-Japan trilateral cooperation, amongst other issues (The White House Press Secretary 2017).⁵⁰ This joint statement showed a positive approach to strengthening not only the U.S.-ROK alliance but also the trilateral security cooperation that had seemed to take a backseat to the leaders' other concerns. Despite this presumed progress toward continued cooperation, shortly after this meeting, it was confirmed that North Korea

⁵⁰ See The "06/30/17 - Joint Statement between the United States and the Republic of Korea" for the full statement.

had successfully fired an ICBM capable of reaching the continental United States on July 4, 2017 (Choe 2017).⁵¹

This launch occurred just days before a scheduled trilateral meeting between the United States, South Korea, and Japan in Hamburg, Germany on July 7, 2017. While many were initially unsure as to the potential outcome of the summit, it appeared that North Korea's ICBM launch amplified concerns about the rogue state's growing capabilities and increased the regional threat perception of the three leaders. Therefore, the three countries released a joint statement following the meeting where the leaders condemned the ICBM launch and the danger it posed to all three countries, as well as the rest of the region. They further emphasized the importance of trilateral cooperation to achieve the complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement (CVID) of North Korea's nuclear program. President Trump also reaffirmed the United States' commitment to protecting its allies from North Korea's nuclear threat.⁵²

On the same day, President Moon engaged in a bilateral summit with Prime Minister Abe just two months after taking office. In this meeting, the two leaders also declared their commitment to both bilateral cooperation and trilateral cooperation with the United States, South Korea, and Japan. However, at this time, cracks began to show in the relationship between Moon and Abe, as Moon began to bring up the public dissatisfaction South Koreans held regarding the 2015 comfort women agreement made under his predecessor.⁵³ Furthermore, Moon appeared to

⁵¹ The ICBM in question was found to be the Hwasong-14 (KN-20). It has an estimated range of over 10,000 kilometers (CSIS Missile Defense Project).

⁵² See The "07/07/17 - Joint Statement from the United States of America, Republic of Korea, and Japan" for the full statement.

⁵³ According to the Cheong Wa Dae report, Moon responded to mentions of the agreement by Abe "noting that the majority of the Korean people were not accepting the agreement emotionally. The President said that it was necessary to admit such a reality in Korea,

be signaling his intentions of breaking away from the United States and Japan in regard to North Korea policy by stating that South Korea should take the lead in negotiations with the rogue state (Cheong Wa Dae 2017).

Shortly after this statement, North Korea launched another ICBM on July 28th, 2017 that appeared to have an even further range than the ICBM they had launched earlier that month. In response to this, the U.S. Air Force, alongside the Japanese and South Korean air forces took part in a mission to improve their skills and give a show of force (Pacific Air Forces Public Affairs 2017).⁵⁴ On the part of South Korea, President Moon began the process to open negotiations with the United States for South Korea to improve its own missiles and even asked for full deployment of THAAD on the peninsula (Phippen 2017). However, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs immediately condemned South Korea's actions. Geng Shuang, spokesperson of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, reportedly declared that "Deploying THAAD won't solve South Korea's security concerns, won't solve the related issues on the Korean Peninsula and will only further complicate issues" (Choe and Sanger 2017). It was at this time, that Trump began to antagonize China over its policies and actions regarding North Korea, despite his claims of a warm personal relationship with Xi Jinping. He tweeted accusing China of doing nothing to stop North Korea's nuclear progress while also claiming that China was cheating the United States during trade practices (Choe and Sanger 2017).⁵⁵ The Trump

suggesting joint efforts to address the issue in a wise manner" (Cheong Wa Dae 2017).

⁵⁴ According to the Pacific Air Forces Public Affairs, "the aircrews practiced intercept and formation training, enabling them to improve their combined capabilities and tactical skills, while also strengthening the long-standing military-to-military relationships in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region" (Pacific Air Forces Public Affairs 2017).⁵⁴

⁵⁵ Trump posted on Twitter, "I am very disappointed in China. Our foolish past leaders have allowed them to make hundreds of billions of dollars a year in trade, yet they do NOTHING for us with North Korea, just talk. We will no longer allow this to continue." He later posted, "China could easily solve this problem" (Choe and Sanger 2017).

administration's Secretary of State Rex Tillerson also placed blame for this growth in capabilities at China's feet and declared the United States' commitment to its allies and partners (Choe and Sanger 2017).⁵⁶ The statements were made with the intent to pressure China to take action against North Korea, but China still refrained from making any decisive actions against the regime.

Despite international condemnation, the North Korean provocations only continued as they launched another two missiles in August. These provocations went on with mostly verbal retaliation from the United States, the United Nations, Japan, and to a lesser extent Korea, for the next few months. Trump even went so far as to declare that if North Korea continued making threats against the U.S. that "they will be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen" (Baker and Choe 2017). On September 3, 2017, after 6.3-magnitude seismic activity was detected near the Punggye-ri Nuclear Test Facility, North Korea announced that they had successfully tested a hydrogen bomb and that the bomb would be a hydrogen warhead for the Hwaseong-13 ICBM (Diepen and Heinonen 2017). In response to this test, Trump went so far as to say, "we will have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea" in his speech at the 72nd Session of the United Nations General Assembly (Trump 2017).

Amidst the increasingly provocative actions from North Korea and the endless rhetoric war between the United States and North Korea, South Korea was facing pressure from China over the THAAD deployment. After South Korea had agreed to THAAD deployment, China vocally disapproved. In response, South

⁵⁶ Tillerson specifically stated, "As the principal economic enablers of North Korea's nuclear weapon and ballistic missile development program, China and Russia bear unique and special responsibility for this growing threat to regional and global stability" (Choe and Sanger 2017).

Korea tried to appease China by discussing the need for further negotiations, but by March of 2017, China had quietly escalated to putting economic pressure on South Korea. China organized this mainly through unofficial sanctions on tourism and Korean conglomerates—even going so far as to banning Korean entertainment in the country (Lim and Ferguson 2019). This pressure proved to be immense on South Korea as China is the country’s biggest trading partner, and South Korea bent under the pressure.

This economic attack by China posed enough of an economic threat to South Korea that they announced the “three no’s” as a form of reconciliation with China. These “three no’s” stated that there would be no further THAAD deployment, South Korea would not take part in further missile defense systems with the United States, and South Korea would not join in a trilateral security alliance with the United States and Japan (Stangarone 2019). Although there was very little likelihood that South Korea would ever join in an official security alliance with Japan, these three no’s showed South Korea’s willingness to pull away from the United States—and consequently, Japan—in order to maintain a positive relationship with China. This would prove to lead South Korea to pull themselves further away from trilateral security cooperation, as South Korea even later rejected the United States’ proposal of trilateral military exercises with Japan in early November (Minegishi 2017). South Korea also allegedly opposed Japan the joining joint military exercises South Korea had scheduled with the United States and Australia (Minegishi 2017).

Despite this apparent rebuff, Trump visited South Korea from November 7th through 8th, making it the first official state visit of a United States’ president in 25 years. During the visit, the two leaders discussed increasing the South Korean defense burden, increasing trilateral security cooperation with Japan to protect

against North Korea, the need to work together on a North Korea policy, among other issues (U.S. Mission 2017). Nonetheless, a few days later in Jakarta, economic advisor to Moon Jae-in, Kim Hyun-chul, rejected the entire concept of the Indo-Pacific, stating that it was an attempt by Japan to bring South Korea into a diplomatic link (Ser and Kang 2017).⁵⁷ Even so, South Korea's promise to increase trilateral security cooperation was at least partially fulfilled. In December of 2017, the United States, South Korea, and Japan conducted ballistic missile defense exercises directly following the November launch of North Korea's largest ICBM launch to date (Panda 2017).⁵⁸

In spite of this launch, and amidst a year of ever-increasing provocation from both North Korea and the United States under the bellicose Trump and Kim, there was an unforeseen turn of events. During Kim Jong-un's annual New Year's Address in 2018, Kim started out with his usual aggressive rhetoric but then switched to a much more reconciliatory tone. Kim made statements such as, "the prevailing situation demands that now the North and the South improve the relations between themselves and take decisive measures for achieving a breakthrough for independent reunification" (J. Kim 2018). Kim made a well-calculated move by appealing to Moon's desire for peaceful unification. He stressed that he was entirely willing to meet with the South and that unification and détente were matters that should be handled by Koreans and Koreans alone. Kim even brought up a desire for North Korean participation in the 2018 Olympic games as a show of inter-Korean solidarity.

⁵⁷ When Kim was specifically asked about the Indo-Pacific, he stated, "Japan is trying to build the Indo-Pacific line to build a diplomatic link of Japan, Australia, India and the United States, but we don't have to join it" (Ser and Kang 2017).

⁵⁸ On November 28, 2017, North Korea launched the Hwasong-15, which appeared to be capable of reaching the entire continental United States (CSIS Missile Defense Project).

He closed by stating that “our Party and the government of our Republic will develop good-neighborly and friendly relations with all the countries that respect our national sovereignty and are friendly to us, and make positive efforts to build a just and peaceful new world,” (J. Kim 2018). It appeared at this point that Trump’s apparent willingness to take military action against North Korea, regardless of the North’s nuclear threat, led Kim to make an overture to the more dovish Moon in an attempt to gain the regime some reprieve.

After this proposal by Kim, there was a high-level inter-Korean meeting in Panmunjeom on January 9, 2018. At this meeting, it was agreed that the North would send a delegation to the Olympics and open up talks with the South (Hu 2018). However, this agreement was not viewed positively by many countries. Notably, Japan’s Foreign Minister, Kono Taro, warned against falling for North Korea’s “charm offensive” (Takeuchi 2018). Despite the apprehensive stances of many in the international community, North and South Korea ultimately ended up marching together in the opening ceremony under a Korean Peninsula flag rather than their respective flags. The United States used this opportunity to show their disapproval, and Vice President Pence chose to meet with North Korean defectors and the father of Otto Warmbier instead of attending the opening ceremony (U.S. Mission Korea 2018). After this show of displeasure from the United States, Dr. Moon Chung-in relayed an offer from Kim Jong-un. Kim declared that he would be willing to discuss denuclearization with Trump personally, and Trump quickly accepted—notably without seeking counsel from his administration (Landler 2018). This showed a great departure from Trump’s long-standing antagonism toward the North and shocked many. It appeared that Trump was putting aside his hawkish, hardline stance on foreign policy for what many assumed was the desire to cement his legacy as

president with a grand bargain with North Korea.

However, before the Trump-Kim summit was to take place, the inter-Korean summit was scheduled to happen in late April. The 2018 Inter-Korean Summit was held at the Peace House at Panmunjeom in South Korea on April 27th, 2018. The summit marked history as the first time a North Korean leader has stepped on South Korean soil since 1951 (Madden 2018). At the end of the summit, the two leaders signed the “Panmunjeom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity and Unification of the Korean Peninsula,” a declaration that promised peace on the Korean peninsula (2018 Inter-Korean Summit). The declaration declared that there would be no further war on the peninsula, there would be an advancement in inter-Korean relations, and further, that President Moon would visit Pyongyang in the fall (2018 Inter-Korean Summit). With this declaration being signed, it appeared to many as if this would be a true opportunity for denuclearization, if not reunification. The focus of the world moved from pressuring North Korea to watching the progress of the coming U.S.-North Korea summit. The first U.S.-North Korea summit occurred on June 12, 2018 in Singapore. Much to the surprise of many scholars and politicians, the two leaders appeared to have a fruitful discussion and signed a joint statement where they committed to establishing diplomatic relations, working toward peace and denuclearization, and recovering fallen soldiers’ remains.⁵⁹ At this point, it appeared to many that the threat of North Korea was neutralized and that the coming months would bring further diplomacy and tangible progress toward North Korean denuclearization. As such, trilateral security cooperation was at the risk of being seen

⁵⁹ See: “Joint Statement of President Donald J. Trump of the United States of America and Chairman Kim Jong Un of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea at the Singapore Summit” for the full statement.

as veritably defunct by South Korea and the United States, if not Japan.

2-2. Growing Divergence

While the progress being made toward diplomacy with North Korea appeared to be a positive step toward denuclearization, it also significantly lowered the threat perceptions that the leaders in South Korea and the United States held toward North Korea. This was concerning as the decrease in threat perceptions came without any tangible timeline for North Korea to denuclearize or decrease its capabilities, let alone a way to verify if North Korea actually followed through on its promises. Nonetheless, this apparent decrease in threat perceptions seemed to lower the value of the U.S.-ROK alliance for those in both the Trump and Moon administrations, which in turn devalued trilateral security cooperation.

After the first inter-Korean summit, Dr. Moon Chung-in, special advisor to President Moon, conducted an interview with *The Atlantic* that portrayed his views on the U.S.-ROK alliance in May of 2018. During this interview, Dr. Moon was quoted as stating, “that alliances in general are a very unnatural state of international relations...for me, the best thing is to really get rid of alliance” (Friedman 2018). He continued to state that he would prefer a “multilateral security cooperation regime” and that he did not see South Korea relying on the U.S.-ROK alliance in the long-term (Friedman 2018).⁶⁰ Moon stated that the continued presence of American troops might be possible after a peace treaty between North and South Korea if North

⁶⁰ Specifically, Dr. Moon said, “in the short to medium term, it might be inevitable for us to rely on the alliance. But in the longer term, I personally hope that we can make a transformation from an alliance system into some form of a multilateral security cooperation regime. Why should we treat each other as quasi or potential enemies?” (Friedman 2018).

Korea agreed (Friedman 2018). However, when asked what would happen if North Korea objected to the troop's presence, Dr. Moon stated, "then there will be a big problem" and the "peace treaty might not come into existence" (Friedman 2018). As Dr. Moon is not only an advisor to the president, but also has a large part in managing negotiations with North Korea, these statements showed that Dr. Moon might see the presence of American troops as a bargaining chip rather than an integral part of regional security and a sign of the U.S.-ROK alliance.

Following the U.S.-North Korea summit, Trump also displayed his view of the alliance with South Korea, as well as his view of the East Asia security architecture. Trump announced that he would suspend joint military exercises with South Korea—evidently without contacting South Korea. Specifically, Trump stated that "we will be stopping the war games, which will save us a tremendous amount of money, unless and until we see the future negotiation is not going along like it should. But we'll be saving a tremendous amount of money. Plus, I think it's very provocative" (Burns and Klug 2018). This was rather concerning to many watching, as the terminology used by Trump seemed heavily dismissive of the exercises. Trump had long complained about the price of the United States' military commitments in the Indo-Pacific, but he had yet to act quite so unilaterally, especially with no true guarantees on the part of North Korea given in return. Despite many voicing their concerns, Trump continued to make similar statements in regard to the military exercises, all while continuously pressuring South Korea into spending more on defense costs.

On the part of Japan, the country was seemingly being left out of the negotiations entirely—whether that be the negotiations with North Korea or over the U.S. military presence in the region. Japan is in a particularly sensitive location in

relation to North Korea and had had multiple missiles flying over its airspace in the past year. Consequentially, North Korea poses a direct and vital national security concern to the country. Furthermore, Japan has long been concerned with the return of the Japanese citizens that were abducted by North Korea in the 1970s. Therefore, it is only natural that Japan would be highly invested in the outcome of the negotiations. Prime Minister Abe asked Trump and Moon respectively to directly convey to Kim that Japan wished to seek an agreement surrounding the issue of the abductees (MOFA Japan 2018; Abe and Trump 2018). Before the U.S.-North Korea summit, Abe sought out a meeting with Trump in order to deliver his requests. On June 7, 2018, Abe and Trump had a bilateral summit in which they both confirmed their commitment to the alliance, Abe repeated his request for Trump to inquire about the adoptees, and also pressed Trump to push for CVID of the North Korean nuclear program in the negotiations (Abe and Trump 2018).

While it appeared as though U.S.-Japan relations were being maintained with high levels of diplomacy and cooperation, it did not appear that this was the case on the part of Korea-Japan relations. Despite the fact that Korea-Japan relations had started out positively with Moon's election, relations only continued to worsen throughout Moon's term. The two leaders had regular summits throughout the first year of Moon's term, but Korea-Japan relations consistently worsened to the point that the two countries ceased high-level diplomatic meetings after the last bilateral meeting on September 25, 2018. This drastic deterioration in Korea-Japan relations was directly in relation to historical issues. Due to South Korea's growing positive relationship with China and growing diplomacy with North Korea, the leaders had an extremely low threat perception of the region. This allowed for South Korea to become more autonomy-focused and put more of an emphasis on the nationalist

aspect of the Moon-led national strategic identity.

President Moon's desire to seek reparations from Japan over the victims of Japanese colonization was seen from early on in his term—such as Moon repeatedly called the 2015 comfort women agreement into question—and this continued to put a strain on Korea-Japan relations as Japan considered the issue to be irreversibly resolved. This caused the tension in Korea-Japan relations to consistently increase, and the tensions appeared to come to a head in October of 2018. At this point, The Supreme Court of Korea ruled that Korean victims of forced labor at the hands of colonial Japan had the right to claim reparations from Nippon Steel for their suffering at the hands of their captors.⁶¹ Not even a month later, the Moon administration ultimately unilaterally closed the Reconciliation and Healing Foundation that had been created to compensate the comfort women after the 2015 agreement (H. Kang 2018). These two actions caused great outrage in Japan, and the Japanese Foreign Minister Kono Taro even accused South Korea of “violating international vows” by ending the comfort women agreement (H. Kang 2018). In regard to the decision by Supreme Court of Korea, Foreign Minister Kono claimed that this decision violated the “Agreement on the Settlement of Problems Concerning Property and Claims and on Economic Co-operation”⁶² that came after the 1965 Korea-Japan Basic Treaty

⁶¹ For details on the decision, see the Supreme Court of Korea. 2018. En banc Judgment 2013Da61381 Rendered October 30, 2018 [Damages (Others)].

⁶² The 1965 Korea-Japan Basic Treaty normalized diplomatic relations between Korea and Japan after the end of the Japanese colonialization of South Korea. In addition to the Basic Treaty, the two countries signed several other agreements in an attempt to settle issues that remained from the colonization period. The “Agreement on the Settlement of Problems Concerning Property and Claims and on Economic Co-operation” was among these agreements, and in the agreement it was stated that “the Contracting Parties confirm that [the] problem concerning property, rights and interests of the two Contracting Parties and their nationals (including juridical persons) and concerning claims between the Contracting Parties and their nationals, including those provided for in Article IV, paragraph (a) of the Treaty of Peace with Japan signed at the city of San Francisco on September 8, 1951, is settled completely and finally.” Furthermore, the agreement stated, “Subject to the

and threatened to take the issue to international courts for adjudication (Kono 2018).⁶³

As can be seen, all was not going well for the maintenance of trilateral security cooperation or even bilateral cooperation amongst some of the members of the three nations at this time. President Moon was focusing his attention on cooperation with North Korea and China, to the detriment of relations with Japan and the United States. President Trump was focusing his attention on North Korea and burden-sharing, which was damaging the trust built between the United States and South Korea. Prime Minister Abe was concerned about North Korea's charm offensive and South Korea's actions surrounding comfort women and forced labor to the detriment of diplomacy. In addition, with the apparent cessation of North Korean missile launches, Trump and Moon were not particularly concerned about maintaining trilateral or bilateral security promises but were much more concerned about the upcoming second U.S.-North Korea summit that would take place in Hanoi, Vietnam on February 27-28, 2019. Unfortunately, it appeared—as many had warned—that North Korea's overtures for denuclearization were a farce.

After many statements by Trump that there was no longer a nuclear risk from North Korea and that he would be ending the “war games” with South Korea,

provisions of paragraph 2 above, no contention shall be made with respect to the measures on property, rights and interests of either Contracting Party and its nationals which are within the jurisdiction of the other Contracting Party on the date of the signing of the present Agreement, or with respect to any claims of either Contracting Party and its nationals against the other Contracting Party and its nationals arising from the causes which occurred on or before the said date.”

⁶³ Kono specifically stated that “above all, the decisions completely overthrow the legal foundation of the friendly and cooperative relationship that Japan and the Republic of Korea have developed since the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1965” (Kono 2018). Kono also stated, “Furthermore, if appropriate measures are not taken immediately, Japan will continue to examine all possible options, including international adjudication and counter measures, and take resolute actions accordingly from the standpoint of, inter alia, protecting the legitimate business activities by Japanese companies” (Kono 2018).

satellite images from November 2018 showed that North Korea was surreptitiously continuing progress on its nuclear program in hidden bases (Broad and Sanger 2018). U.S. analysts warned that the Sakkanmol base, the closest base to the DMZ, appeared to be continuing its work on North Korea's nuclear program, but U.S. State Department officials and a spokesperson for President Moon wrote off the warning (Broad and Sanger 2018). Furthermore, in January of 2019, the Director of National Intelligence, Dan Coats, directly contradicted Trump's statements that North Korea was no longer a nuclear risk at the 2018 Annual Threat Assessment. Shortly before the second U.S.-North Korea summit was to take place, Coats stated that North Korea would not willingly give up its nuclear weapons (Coats 2019).⁶⁴ Despite this, the Hanoi Summit took place without further action from February 27th to February 28th 2019. However, the summit did not go as well as planned, and the two leaders cut the summit short on the second day without signing a joint statement. Reportedly the failure was due to a lack of agreement on the definition and process of denuclearization (Terry 2019).

Despite this lack of an agreement and the increasingly ambiguous outlook on North Korean denuclearization, the Korean Minister of National Defense Jeong Kyeong-doo and the acting Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan confirmed the termination of the Key Resolve and Foal Eagle exercises (U.S. DoD 2019). It appeared as if South Korea and the United States were still of the belief that there was a true chance of North Korea denuclearization and were attempting to refrain

⁶⁴ Specifically, he stated, "we currently assess that North Korea will seek to retain its WMD capabilities and is unlikely to completely give up its nuclear weapons and production capabilities, because its leaders ultimately view nuclear weapons as critical to regime survival. Our assessment is bolstered by our observations of some activity that is inconsistent with full denuclearization" (Coats 2019).

from provoking North Korea with a show of bilateral military exercises or drills, regardless of the proof of continued nuclear testing on the part of the rogue state. The United States and South Korean leaders maintained their low threat perception of North Korea and, as such, felt no need to maintain trilateral security cooperation. While the two countries repeatedly declare their continued commitment to the U.S.-ROK alliance, there was little in the way of tangible confirmation on this point. Furthermore, as Japan and Korea were at a diplomatic stalemate, the future of trilateral security cooperation was looking more uncertain by the day.

Chapter V. The Pathway toward Deterioration

Ostensibly, by the beginning of 2019, it did not appear that there would be any continued efforts at enhancing trilateral security cooperation—particularly from either the United States or South Korea. At this point, the indifferent attempts at maintaining trilateral security cooperation had ended, and the true deterioration had begun, as the United States, South Korea, and Japan had ceased to even pay lip service to the concept of trilateral security cooperation. It was at this point that the countries' leaders—particularly those of South Korea and the United States—were concerned primarily with their own personal goals and domestic standing over the strength of their alliances.

On the part of South Korean leaders, there was very little in the way of a significant regional threat perception of North Korea, as they were convinced as to the veracity of North Korea's claims of denuclearization and unification. Internationally, South Korean leaders had focused most of their attention hedging between the United States and China, apparently attempting to avoid being overly associated with one country, but to create partnerships with both. Furthermore, President Moon was single-mindedly focusing on the Korean nationalism in his national strategic identity. His administration was attempting to actively engage with the North, maintain the strategic cooperative partnership with China, and show an uncompromising stance against historical issues with Japan. This resulted in South Korea appearing to distance itself from the United States and trilateral security cooperation.

On the part of the United States, leaders were apparently divided on their

threat perceptions of North Korea. Some leaders truly believed that North Korea was willing to denuclearize, while others saw evidence of the continued nuclear program and were simply waiting for the farce to be concluded. Meanwhile, President Trump seemed to set his focus on China as the largest threat to the United States. He had begun to fan the flames of a trade war with China, increasing the United States' threat perception of China, as compared to North Korea. This was in great part due to his chauvinistic and xenophobic national strategic identity that called to "Make America Great Again." Trump viewed China as the reason for the United States' decrease in economic power and international standing. This change in threat perceptions was the impetus for Trump's increased pressure on the United States' allies to increase their defense burden-sharing, as well as his lack of focus on trilateral security cooperation. Trump chose to attempt to contain China's rise through economic means rather than the East Asian security architecture.

On the part of Japan's leaders, they held a high threat perception of both North Korea and China. Japan appeared to have never trusted North Korea's willingness to denuclearize, calling out North Korea for using a "charm offensive." Furthermore, due to the North Korean missile launches and China's aggressive actions in the sea between China and Japan, Japan still relied on the U.S.-Japan mutual defense treaty to defend against these two national security threats. Prime Minister Abe also focused his national strategic identity on Japanese pride—if not on a conservative form of nationalism. This pride can be clearly seen in his actions surrounding the growing Korea-Japan tensions, as he refused to retreat or extend an olive branch to South Korea.

All three of the countries had come to a point in which their threat perceptions had changed and changed in such a way that all three of the countries

had drastically different perceptions of who the largest threat to their nation was and what in particular was causing that threat. In combination with these changes in regional threat perceptions, the drastic changes in the international environment caused by Trump's policies and rhetoric, as well as the unexpected diplomatic overtures by North Korea, had caused a large change in the three countries' mainstream national strategic identities. It was under these circumstances that trilateral security cooperation began to deteriorate severely.

1. Burden-sharing, China, and U.S.-ROK Relations

As 2019 progressed with little headway in the way of creating a “grand bargain” with North Korea, President Trump appeared to revert more and more to his isolationist and xenophobic rhetoric. Seeking another method to ensure his legacy, Trump appeared to focus his attention on trade and how he could improve the American domestic economy—irrespective of foreign policy or long-standing alliances. In addition to the trade war that he had started with China—and as the two countries continued to cause damage to the international economy by applying mutually detrimental retaliatory tariffs—Trump began to refocus on pushing increased burden-sharing on the United States' allies, particularly South Korea and Japan.

Trump has long accused the United States' allies of free-riding and “getting rich” off of relying on the United States' defense commitments. In regard to South Korea, Trump repeatedly demanded that South Korea increase its defense-spending by billions of dollars, with very little justification as to the origin of his estimates. At a rally, he further emphasized his demands by stating that the United States lost “four

and a half billion dollars to defend a country that's rich as hell and probably doesn't like us too much" (Friedman 2019).⁶⁵ This shows Trump's utter disregard for the alliance structure that the United States has long relied upon, as well as his contempt for some of the United States' most important allies. In regard to Japan, Trump called the U.S.-Japan mutual defense treaty "one-sided," as Japan is not obligated to come to the United States' defense militarily (Jacobs 2019). Reportedly, Trump had even spoken privately about ending the long-standing alliance with Japan (Jacobs 2019).

Unsurprisingly, these statements and actions by Trump caused friction within the United States' alliance and greatly concerned the United States' allies about the reliability of the United States' defense commitments. However, others in the United States government worked to reassure the United States' allies, despite the views of Trump. In the Department of Defense's 2019 Indo-Pacific Strategy Report, they referred to the U.S.-Japan alliance as the cornerstone of peace and the U.S.-R.O.K. alliance as the linchpin of peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia, noting these alliances as integral to the United States (U.S. DoD 2019). Furthermore, the United States Congress passed House Resolution 127 and Senate Resolution 67 in 2019. These resolutions stressed the United States' commitment to its allies and the importance of trilateral cooperation. However, Trump's antagonistic behavior had already significantly hurt the United States' credibility, and many states remained unsure of the United States' reliability.

While Japan remained tied to the United States for the sake of its national security due to its peace constitution, the increased pressure from Trump pushed

⁶⁵ At a Florida rally, Trump reportedly "boasted of how he'd personally called the leader of an unnamed country and compelled him to double the country's \$500 million contribution to offset the \$5 billion cost of stationing U.S. troops there," making it quite clear that he was talking about South Korea (Friedman 2019).

South Korea further toward China and away from the United States. Consequently, this led South Korea to become resistant toward the concept of trilateral security cooperation and other initiatives that China viewed as detrimental to its goals. In particular, South Korea firmly resisted being under the Free and Open Indo-Pacific label. This, as well as similar such actions, has led some to question whether Moon was attempting to decouple South Korea from the United States (Jo 2020). Furthermore, as the trade war increased between the United States and China, South Korea seemed even more eager to avoid being forced to choose sides.

The South Korean ambassador to the United States, Lee Soo-hyuck, made his view on the situation clear. The ambassador told Korean reporters that he is proud that South Korea can choose between the United States and China, although he does not feel that South Korea should be forced to choose (H. Lee 2020).⁶⁶ Only months after this first statement, Ambassador Lee caused further controversy during the National Assembly's Foreign Affairs and Unification Committee audit. Ambassador Lee declared that "just because Korea chose the U.S. 70 years ago does not mean it has to choose the U.S. for the next 70 years, too" (S. Kang 2020). These statements, particularly as they came from the Korean ambassador to the United States, led many to believe that this was a clear indication that South Korea was actively pulling away from its association as a staunch supporter of the United States. In addition, when South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha was asked if South Korea would be willing to join the United States' Quad initiative, she stated that South Korea had not been formally invited, and needed to consider whether it served their security

⁶⁶ Specifically, Ambassador Lee stated that "I feel pride that we are now a country that can choose (between the U.S. and China), not be forced to choose." He then stated, "I don't believe we need to trap ourselves in the self-prophetic mindset that we will end up in a situation where we have to choose between the two" (H. Lee 2020).

interests (S. Kim 2020). Foreign Minister Kang further insinuated that South Korea was not willing to join an initiative that was meant to contain or balance against China (S. Kim 2020).⁶⁷

These statements were not received kindly by the United States, particularly the statements by Ambassador Lee, who was acting as the ambassador to the United States. In response to Ambassador Lee's first statement on South Korea's ability to choose between the United States and China, David Stilwell, the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, retorted that South Korea had already chosen the United States when it chose democracy over authoritarianism decades earlier (H. Lee 2020).⁶⁸ In response to Ambassador Lee's second statement, the State Department released a statement that declared the importance of the 70-year alliance between the United States and South Korea for the two countries, and the region as a whole (S. Kang 2020).⁶⁹ Furthermore, the United States ambassador to South Korea, Harry Harris, stated at the ROK-U.S. Alliance Peace Conference that the U.S.-ROK alliance is ironclad (Oh 2020).⁷⁰ These statements on the part of the

⁶⁷ Foreign Minister Kang was quoted as saying, "We don't think anything that automatically shuts out, and is exclusive of, the interests of others is a good idea," but followed with the statement, "if that's a structured alliance, we will certainly think very hard whether it serves our security interests" (S. Kim 2020).

⁶⁸ Stilwell was specifically quoted as saying, "Korea made a choice back in the '80s. That's the choice; they chose democracy. This is not a choice of China. You can work with both the U.S. and China, but you also have to consider your own national character, and most countries have moved to a system of democratic governance for the right reasons -- because it's more stable... So, yes, I don't like the discussion about whether you have to choose between the U.S. and China. I think you have to choose your own national system. And if you choose democracy, then you've made the right choice" (H. Lee 2020).

⁶⁹ The statement read, "we are extremely proud of our 70-year-old alliance and all it has done for the sake of peace and prosperity for the U.S. and ROK, and the region as a whole. Based on our shared values, our two countries are constantly working together as allies and friends to ensure that our alliance is able to meet new and emerging challenges in the region, including those that would seek to undermine the rules-based international order" (S. Kang 2020).

⁷⁰ Harris was quoted as saying, "The United States and the Republic of Korea are far more than mere friends, or even allies. We are family. Our alliance is ironclad and always will be" (Oh 2020).

United States show that the United States, if not Trump, still highly valued the U.S.-ROK alliance.

These interactions portrayed an image of a South Korea that is beginning to pull away from the United States—leaving many unsure as to whether the South Korean leaders' intentions are to hedge between the two superpowers or to create a “double allegiance” with China and the United States (Jo 2020). The South Korean leaders and progressives view this distancing as a natural response to the improving relationship with North Korea, as the impetus of the U.S.-ROK alliance was to protect against the North. With the improving relationship with North Korea, South Korean leaders formed a lowered threat perception of North Korea. Instead, the country began to fear economic retaliation from China as the largest threat to South Korean prosperity. Moreover, as Moon is still holding on to the possibility of reunification with North Korea, Moon needs China's assistance in either pressuring or charming the rogue state.

Ultimately, due to Trump's bellicose rhetoric toward China and constant belittlement of the U.S.-ROK alliance, South Korea had lost trust in the United States' credibility—with the North Korean negotiations, as well as with South Korea's national security. Although there are unmistakable competing strands of national strategic identity in the United States—the Trump faction devaluing the alliances and pushing for more money from the region, and the opposing faction trying to maintain the alliances integral to the United States' security—Trump is the loudest voice and the head of the state. Therefore, South Korean leaders could not afford to simply disregard his statements as groundless rantings and chose to pull away from the United States and choose a more autonomy-focused strategy. Naturally, this has caused a significant deterioration in trilateral security cooperation. However,

Trump's actions and South Korea's apparent moves away from the United States are not the only reason for the deterioration. As the tensions over burden-sharing were taking place between the United States and South Korea, relations between Japan and South Korea were also worsening at a rapid rate.

2. Worsening Korea-Japan Relations

After the Supreme Court of Korea ruling in October of 2018 and Moon's unilateral closing of the Reconciliation and Healing Foundation in November of 2018, Korea-Japan relations only continued to deteriorate. The two leaders that had included national pride as an integral part of their national strategic identities had come to a point in which they could not back down from what they viewed as an attack over their interpretations of the two countries' shared history. If either leader backed down from their position on history and the current conflicts, they could lose the endorsement of their parties and much of their public support. In this environment, the angry rhetoric between Japan and South Korea's leaders descended into a series of retaliatory actions. The two countries fell into an unending cycle of an ostensible tit-for-tat style of political and economic fisticuffs that harmed not only the two countries' own economies, but the global technology supply chain (Harrison 2019).

Japan began by imposing export restrictions on industrial materials necessary for South Korea's technology industry. South Korea then took it one step further by initiating a boycott of Japanese goods with slogans such as "No Abe" and "Boycott Japan." The anger in South Korea even went so far as South Korean citizens voluntarily boycotting all travel to Japan (Soheili 2019). South Korea was

filled with protestors, and Japanese restaurants, Japanese products, and Japanese-owned brands were losing business. Posters were seen across Seoul urging people to join the boycott, signifying the public's willingness to join their country in protesting Japan and its actions. As the angry reactions in both countries increased, the tit-for-tat actions worsened relations even further, and Japan downgraded South Korea as a trading partner, removing the country from its export whitelist (J. Lee 2020). This would make it significantly harder for the two countries to trade and set off further anger in South Korea. In response to Japan removing South Korea from its export whitelist, Moon called an emergency Cabinet meeting. In his opening remarks, Moon made forceful comments such as, South Korea "will never again lose to Japan" and "the old order in which one country can dominate another by using force is merely a relic of the past" (Moon 2019). Moon concluded his statement by declaring, "If we take the current challenges as an opportunity instead and turn them into a chance to make a new economic leap, we can fully triumph over Japan. Our economy can surpass Japan's" (Moon 2019).⁷¹ South Korea subsequently removed Japan from its own whitelist (J. Lee 2020).

Presumably as additional retaliation for this tit-for-tat economic warfare, President Moon made a shocking announcement that would go beyond economic maneuvering and would greatly affect the East Asia security architecture. To the shock of both Japan and the United States, Moon announced his decision to withdraw from GSOMIA on August 22, 2019. Kim You-geun, the deputy director of South Korea's presidential national security office, stated that South Korea decided to terminate the intelligence sharing agreement because it no longer "served [South

⁷¹ See Moon, Jae-in. "Opening Remarks by President Moon Jae-in at Emergency Cabinet Meeting" for full details.

Korea's] national interests" (H. Kim 2019).⁷² In response to South Korea's decision, the Japanese foreign minister, Kono Taro, stated that the decision "reflects [South Korea's] total misapprehension of the current regional security environment, which is extremely regrettable" (Kono 2019).⁷³ Kono's statement was in relation to the increased nuclear and missile testing on the part of North Korea after the failed Hanoi Summit and the subsequent cessation of denuclearization negotiations. North Korea proceeded to return to its missile launches in May of 2019, and subsequently performed six more missile tests before South Korea announced its decision regarding GSOMIA (CSIS Missile Defense Project). As the North Korean missile threat that had originally facilitated the agreement persisted, Japan was dumbfounded by South Korea's decision.

⁷² Kim was quoted as saying, "Under this situation, the government has determined that maintaining the agreement, which was signed for the purpose of exchanging sensitive military intelligence on security, does not serve our national interests" (H. Kim 2019).

⁷³ Kono continued his statement by declaring, "In its announcement, the Government of the ROK linked its decision to terminate the GSOMIA with Japan's recent update of its licensing policies and procedures for export control in the context of security; yet these two issues are of totally different nature. Therefore, the ROK's claim is absolutely unacceptable and Japan firmly protests against the Government of the ROK. Although the current Japan-ROK relations continue to face a truly severe situation because of the ROK's extremely negative and unreasonable actions including the most recent decision, the Government of Japan continues to strongly urge the ROK side to take sensible actions, based on Japan's principled position on various issues" (Kono 2019).

Table 5.1 North Korean Missile Launches: May-August 2019

Date	Missile Name	Number Launched
May 4, 2019	KN-23 (SRBM)	1
May 9, 2019	KN-23 (SRBM)	2
Jul. 25, 2019	KN-23 (SRBM)	2
Aug. 6, 2019	KN-23 (SRBM)	2
Aug. 10, 2019	KN-24 (SRBM)	2
Aug. 16, 2019	KN-24 (SRBM)	2
Aug. 24, 2019	KN-25 (SRBM)	2

Source: <https://missilethreat.csis.org/north-korea-missile-launches-1984-present/>

Although the United States under the Trump administration had heretofore refrained from involving itself in the conflict between Japan and South Korea, after the announcement regarding GSOMIA, the Pentagon voiced their “strong concern and disappointment” over Moon’s decision (H. Kim 2019). Lieutenant Colonel Dave Eastburn, a Pentagon spokesperson, stated that the security ties between Japan and South Korea should supersede the conflict over history and that the United States would “continue to pursue bilateral and trilateral defense and security cooperation where possible” (H. Kim 2019).⁷⁴ As to why Moon would take these actions, some accused the president of using the withdrawal as a ploy for garnering political support from other anti-Japan progressives in South Korea in light of his falling approval rating (Yeo 2019). Whether this is truly another case of “intermestic”

⁷⁴ Lieutenant Colonel Eastburn specifically stated, “We strongly believe that the integrity of our mutual defense and security ties must persist despite frictions in other areas of the South Korea-Japan relationship. We’ll continue to pursue bilateral and trilateral defense and security cooperation where possible.”

politics, with Moon using anti-Japanese sentiment to attempt to maneuver domestic politics or if it was simply a further attempt to endear South Korea to China and North Korea, it unnerved both Japan and the United States and shook their view of the current state of trilateral security cooperation.

The United States began putting intense pressure on both the Japanese and South Korean governments to come to an agreement that would allow them to continue actively participating in trilateral security cooperation (Johnson 2019). United States officials such as Defense Secretary Mark Esper and General Mark Milley, Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, forcefully and repeatedly called on South Korea to remain in the pact and stressed the importance of GSOMIA to both trilateral security and bilateral relations (Johnson 2019). Ultimately, after months of pressure from the United States, the South Korean government reversed its decision to withdraw from GSOMIA with only hours left on the deadline. This announcement brought relief to the United States and Japan, as well as many in South Korea. However, South Korea only acquiesced to rejoin the intelligence sharing agreement under the condition that it could leave again at any time (Y. Park 2020). This led some to believe that it was likely that the agreement will be used in the future to pressure Japan into negotiating with South Korea on any number of issues (Y. Park 2020). However, despite the fact that GSOMIA was saved, it did not serve to make any headway in improving Korea-Japan relations, nor did it restore trilateral security cooperation.

With President Moon focusing a large part of his national strategic identity on improving relations with North Korea and facing a large amount of pressure from China, it led the president to form a fear of entrapment within the security triangle with Japan and the United States. He did not share the same high threat perceptions

of North Korea and China that Japan and the United States did. In fact, he had a strangely low threat perception of the two states at the time, despite their proven aggression in the region. President Moon viewed the pressure strategies of both Japan and the United States as being directly harmful toward his engagement and dialogue with the North as well as his strategic cooperative partnership with China. Therefore, Moon moved to pull away from the alliance and trilateral security cooperation so as to better his standing with North Korea and China. This ultimately led to a worsening of relations with Japan that only continued to deteriorate as he built increasingly harsh stances against Japan in regards to historical controversies into his national strategic identity to boost his domestic approval ratings. All of this led to one of the worst periods of Korea-Japan relations in recent times. Compounding this with the pressures being put on the U.S.-ROK alliance from Trump over burden-sharing as well as the differing threat perceptions and national strategic identities of the two leaders, there was a significant amount of damage done to trilateral cooperation.

Chapter VI. Conclusion

Ultimately, this paper posits that the deterioration of trilateral security cooperation amongst the United States, Japan, and South Korea has taken place in part due to the diverging threat perceptions in the region. Particularly during the Trump-Moon-Abe period, the three nation-states' views on the level of threat posed by both North Korea and China began to diverge significantly. President Trump viewed China as a direct and imminent threat to the United States progressively more throughout his term. However, he changed his stance on the level of threat that North Korea multiple times. Trump initially viewed the country as an immense threat and showered North Korea with bellicose rhetoric and derision. After Trump saw the potential to seal his legacy as president with a “grand bargain,” he focused intensively on the possibility of coming to an agreement with the rogue state and began speaking warmly of the country and its leader. However, after the breakdown in negotiations, Trump then returned to suspicion and anger. Naturally, this caused his threat perception of the rogue state to change unpredictably, and as such, led to unpredictable policy behavior.

On the other hand, President Moon maintained his dovish engagement policy toward North Korea throughout his term. From his time as a presidential candidate, Moon spoke of his brothers to the North and the need for diplomacy and aid to North Korea. This optimism toward North Korea left Moon with a remarkably low threat perception of South Korea's nuclear neighbor. Furthermore, Moon appeared to be attempting to hedge between the United States and China. This left Moon wanting to keep from antagonizing China in issues such as security. This left Moon with a low threat perception of the region as a whole—although he did have

concerns about Chinese economic retaliation. These low regional threat perceptions meant that Moon did not view the North as a true military threat, and the concern he held toward China caused the president to focus on maintaining a cordial relationship throughout his term to maintain good economic relations.

As the most consistent of the three leaders, Prime Minister Abe had solidly high threat perceptions of the region. However, unlike the United States and South Korea, Abe appeared to view China as a primary threat. This was in large part due to China's maritime aggressions in the East China Sea and the territorial disputes that continued between the two countries. In this way, Abe appeared to view North Korea as a secondary but still massive threat. With North Korea's missiles crossing directly over Japan's airspace, Japan could not ignore the threat of a nuclear North Korea. Furthermore, Abe's reliance on security cooperation—whether it be bilateral or trilateral—is also due in part to the Japanese peace constitution and Article 9 creating tangible restraints on the Japanese Self Defense Forces. These factors left Abe with the highest and most consistent regional threat perception out of the three partners, and as such, he appeared to be the most invested in maintaining trilateral security cooperation.

In addition to these diverging threat perceptions, this paper posits that the three nation-states adopted conflicting national strategic identities that resulted in significant damage to trilateral security cooperation. A country's national strategy can change throughout its leader's term as the international or domestic environment changes. In the cases of the United States and South Korea in particular, changes in the national strategic identity of the leaders appeared to change multiple times. The United States, under a conservative President Trump, based its national strategic identity on one based on chauvinism, exceptionalism, and an America First policy

that bordered on xenophobia. This national strategic identity led Trump to initially believe that it was in the United States' best interests to handle threats on their own and procure as many relative gains as possible. In particular, Trump's threat perception and national strategic identity worked to create a highly autonomy-focused strategy with low levels of appreciation for alliances, let alone trilateral security cooperation. This view only changed when Trump saw the opportunity for the prestige of having denuclearized North Korea and at this point, Trump was willing to work closely with South Korea as a means to an end. However, when he saw the negotiations falling apart, Trump returned to his autonomy-focused strategy.

South Korea under President Moon initially had a national strategic identity mostly based on Korean nationalism and reunification. However, as time went on, Moon's actions and Japan's reactions surrounding historical conflicts eventually led to a strong anti-Japan policy and sentiment being implemented into Moon's national strategic identity. In combination with his low regional threat perception, Moon leaned toward an autonomy-focused strategy. However, due to South Korea's capabilities and regional environment, Moon could not pull away from the alliance structure nearly as much as Trump did. Therefore, Moon incrementally pulled back from the U.S.-ROK alliance and trilateral security cooperation in favor of hedging between the United States and China.

Japan under Prime Minister Abe created a national strategic identity based on assertive nationalism, returning Japan to a "normal country," a hard stance against North Korea, and a non-compromising attitude on historical conflicts between Japan and South Korea. This national strategic identity, paired with Japan's high regional threat perceptions, led to Abe working diligently to maintain Japan's good standing with the United States. Abe viewed the U.S.-Japan alliance as integral to Japan's

national security, and as such trilateral security cooperation became a key part of Japan's national security strategy. Due to this, Abe alone appeared to have a mostly alliance-focused strategy amongst the security partners. This left Abe in a unique situation when it came to South Korea. Japan, as an alliance-focused country, preferred high levels of trilateral cooperation. However, with Abe's conservative and chauvinistic national strategic identity, he could not simply compromise or relent on his stance toward South Korea's actions regarding forced labor or comfort women. Therefore, although Abe favored high levels of trilateral security cooperation, he refused to back down in the face of what he viewed as South Korea's attacks against Japan. Ultimately, this combination led to Abe's actions also contributing to the deterioration of trilateral security cooperation. In sum, the diverging international threat perceptions and conflicting domestic national strategic identities of the United States, South Korea, and Japan appear to be the cause of considerable damage to this vital aspect of the East Asian security architecture.

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Korean Abstract

한국, 미국, 일본의 3자 안보 협력은 냉전 시기부터 오늘날까지 동아시아의 핵심적인 안보 구조를 장기간 유지하는 데에 필수적 요소로 평가되고 있지만, 실제로는 시간에 따라 그 협력의 수준이 일관되지 않았다고 여겨진다. 현대에 접어든 이후, 특히 2016년에는 한미일 안보 협력이 최고조에 달했다. 그러나 이 시기 이후 협력 수준은 증가하지 않았으며, 오히려 2019년부터 2020년을 아우르는 시기의 경우 협력의 정도가 완만한 하락세를 보이기 시작했다. 한미일 안보 협력이 절정에 도달했던 전자의 상황과 하락세를 띤 후자의 경우를 견주어 보았을 때, 국제사회의 위협 상황이 비교적 일정함에도 불구하고 왜 이런 협력 상황의 악화가 일어난 것인지를 의문에 도달할 수 있다.

본 논문은 스티븐 윌트의 ‘위협 균형 이론(balance of threat theory)’과 박철희의 ‘국가 전략 정체성(national strategy identity)’ 개념을 바탕으로 하여, ‘신고전적 현실주의(neoclassical realism)’적 관점에서 한미일 안보 협력의 비효율이 증가한 현상을 설명할 것이다. 본 논문에 제시된 틀은, 동아시아 안보 구조에 내재하고 있는 특정 요인이 행위자로 하여금 어떠한 정렬된 입장에 놓이도록 하는지를 설명하는 데에 있어서 총 두 단계

수준의 분석을 가능케 할 것이다. 궁극적으로, 본 논문이 주장하는 바는 한미일 안보 협력의 악화 현상이 역내 위협 인식의 다변화에 어느 정도 기인했는 것이다. 다만, 서로 다른 위협 인식 요인 뿐만 아니라 민족주의에 입각한, 안보 협력과 양립할 수 없는 국가 전략 정체성을 채택한 결과 한미일 안보 협력에 치명적인 손상을 입힌 것임을 설명할 것이다.