Prospects for Japan-Republic of Korea relation: a possibility analysis based on the external threats

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Abstract. The relationship between Japan and Korea has complex historical, political, and cultural dynamics, often characterized by tensions and disputes. Influenced by the intervention of the superpowers, these two countries are economically interdependent and politically opposed. Despite the efforts of the Korean leader to improve the trend, the bilateral relationship faces challenges due to unresolved factors such as historical issues, territorial disputes, and war reparations. This paper takes the external threats affecting the cooperation between Japan and Korea as the research object and evaluates the current situation and obstacles to the bilateral relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea by analyzing the impact of actions taken by countries other than Japan and Korea on their domestic governance, economic conditions, foreign policy decisions, military arrangements, and bilateral relations development. Also, this paper prospects favorable conditions for tightening further bilateral communication, and looks forward to the possibilities of future cooperation between the two countries.

1 Introduction

Japan and the Republic of Korea's historical and geopolitical complexities culminated in a critical juncture with the Treaty on Basic Relations in 1965. The investigation into the potential of Japan-Republic of Korea relations constitutes a prominent scholarly domain that has attracted substantial attention from analysts and researchers. This bilateral relationship was influenced by the dynamics of superpowers, Satoh pointed out the superpower operation in control of the Japan-South Korea relationship [1]. The bilateral cooperation between Japan and the ROK has been characterized by intricate historical, political, and cultural dynamics, frequently punctuated by instances of tension and disagreement. Moon’s research discussed historical and identity-related factors that have influenced Japan-South Korea relations [2]. Kim and Ha suggested that civil society, cultural diplomacy, and grassroots exchanges shape Japan-ROK relations [3].

After concluding the facts above, this research found that external threats affecting cooperation are left as blank views of study, and took it as the research object.

External threats are activities and operations outside a country against its governance, economy, security, unity, and shared values. Its activities and operations span the political, economic, cultural, military, and other fields. This research narrows its regional range between the two countries: the Republic of Korea and Japan. An external threat is defined as an operation originating from a country except for these two Asian countries, which could affect their domestic governance, economic conditions, diplomatic decisions, military arrangements, and the development of bilateral relations.

The research analyzes the importance of regional alliances in mitigating external threats, programs promoting economic integration, and relevant security issues. This study intended to assess both opportunities and obstacles, to contribute to a comprehension of the future relationship shaping by clarifying the trajectory of this bilateral relationship amid the effects of superpowers.

2 Original concerns of external threats

2.1 Interference of non-Asian countries

Non-Asian countries like the United States tried to expand their strategic deployment in the Asia-Pacific by interfering with Japan-Republic of Korea relations. The US dictates the direction of the Japan-ROK relationship as a potential axis to affect the United States hegemony of maintaining liberal order, especially when the US-Sino relationship stays intense [1].

The United States tried to recommend its confidential mechanisms in Japan-ROK relations. The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) was released as a continuation of the US’s Indo-Pacific Strategy and a united alliance framework for Japan and Korea [4]. The United States suggested Japan and the ROK join the NATO framework as two Asia-Pacific partner countries to defer the increasing threats from the China-Russia alliance. These changes propose to defeat security concerns from Japan and Korea, especially when other Asian military forces can influence their safety. NATO's eastward expansion would inevitably cause a strong backlash from other Asian countries.

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As a non-Asian superpower, the US’s intervention would vibrate the whole region, and increase its risk. The internal Japan-Korea antagonism made the past rapprochement of the US-brokered short-lived and unreliable. External mechanisms haven’t been proven suitable in Northeast Asia. Japan and the ROK’s survival risk increased by this recommendation. Whether there is sufficient assurance that the US’s East Asian partners can against security threats and escape from danger as quickly as possible, would lead to an unpredictable result. If Japan and the ROK seek greater autonomy, interference from the United States will exacerbate their existential crisis.

2.2 Restructure actions to Northeast Asia order

As one Northeast Asian country, China tried to reconstruct a trilateral Beijing-Seoul-Tokyo partnership and required a restrained and qualified perspective. The “Joint Declaration for Peace and Cooperation in Northeast Asia” was released in 2015, it supposes deeper cooperation in peace, prosperity, and sustainable development. However, this movement catalyzes the security concerns of the Republic of Korea and Japan. Both Japan and the Republic of Korea have conflicts with China, including territorial disputes, diverging historical issues, and military concerns. Experience of being a vassal in the ancient system of tributary states has made Japan and Korea distrust China, though ancient China had no actual control over the vassals.

China’s eager activities have been seen as an expanding intraregional hegemon to Northeast Asian countries [5]. When China established itself as the reconstructor of a new order in Northeast Asia, it touched the intentions of Japan and the Republic of Korea. Japan tries to restore its prestige by strengthening its influence with the United States, and the ROK sees itself as a dynamic free country and a participatory builder of the Asian order. Combined with the political antagonism created by the Chinese threat theory and the continuing fear of communism, these factors made China a major external threat to Northeast Asia from the Japan-Korea point of view.

2.3 Incredible conditions in Korean Peninsula

The Korean peninsula’s condition is seen as a threat that determines the security and extent of Japan-ROK relations. As a security threat, DPRK’s nuclear weapons and long-range missiles brought armaments increase and incite to counter nuclear threats. DPRK used the test launch of long-range missiles condemn to the regional situation, especially when the United States conducted military exercises with Japan and the Republic of Korea. The Korean peninsula problem stems from two bifurcations of the same political institution created by the Cold War [6]. The Japan-Korea relations would be promoted by the tension of the peninsula. Stable relations on the peninsula had stalled the improvement between Japan and the ROK. Based on a shared fear of nuclear weapons and military concern from the North could lead Japan and ROK to enhance their basis for military alliances and cooperation. Frequent pressure in 2023 made Seoul agree to strengthen cooperation with Washington and Tokyo after each missile launch and the military alliance of the US-Japan-Korea undoubtedly strengthened. From this presentative, the threats from DPRK increase the possibility of Japan-Korea bilateral cooperation.

2.4 Fostering economic dangers

Global economic trends posed a potential threat to the Japan-Korea relationship direction, and market disputes in the market changed its bilateral policy decision.

Amidst the Sino-U.S. trade conflict, Japan and the ROK have increasingly considered the United States as a primary market for product exports and a means to mitigate their economic losses. Consequently, both countries have altered their manufacturing strategies, transitioning to exporting raw materials and importing cost-effective intermediate goods from China, followed by exporting finished manufactured products to the United States. This trade change also shifted the foreign policy direction of both Japan and the ROK more toward the United States instead of China.

The rivalry between Japan and the ROK poses a threat to bilateral cooperation. Both countries’ industries are highly dependent on export-oriented economies, which increases their dependence on the global economy and is subject to currency exchange rate movements. The two countries compete in petrochemical, machinery, steel, and other industries. Currency depreciation would be a severe blow to their enemy’s exports. This exacerbated the two countries’ economic rivalry. Also, the supply chain between Japan and the ROK is linked to unresolved political and historical issues. Korea has used the particularity of the semiconductor industry to pressure Japan to complete compensation on war-time labor lawsuits. Japan removed the ROK from its "White List" for failing to provide a concrete response to the labor lawsuits. These changes have led to a bilateral political and diplomatic confrontation.

3 Negative impacts of external threats

3.1 Lack of mutually satisfactory government consensus

Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK) have not yet reached a consensus on historical issues and recent nuclear waste disposal issues. Failure to resolve these issues will antagonize the people in the Asia-Pacific region against Japan and ROK.

From the historical perspective, long-term and complex historical disputes in Asia have resulted in divergences and contradictions in the historical views of Korea and Japan. The endless debates on the issue of “Comfort Women” and labor compensation have become the main factors affecting the bilateral relationship. Japan maintains that government compensation has been settled in the labor compensation issue and would not recognize individual compensation. ROK still maintains that
individual claims need to be compensated. They failed to reach a common consensus on major historical issues that affect in-depth cooperative relations. It will be a long process to reconcile, eliminate barriers, and reach a satisfactory consensus on historical issues [7]. In this process, the historical perception of countries in the Asia-Pacific region will directly affect bilateral relations.

In addition, there are also differences between the two sides on the recent issue of nuclear waste disposal, with the ROK frequently holding protests over the discharge of wastewater from Japan's Fukushima nuclear power plant. In addition, Korean people have also purchased a large amount of seafood due to concerns about ocean pollution, which undoubtedly exacerbates the distrust between the two countries and makes it more difficult to establish political mutual trust.

Trust between the two countries has been damaged by the lack of consensus on both historical and current issues, and it may be unrealistic to expect too much from the relationship at the beginning [8].

3.2 Inconsistent policies resulted from domestic political change

Inconsistent policies of the two countries' governments have undermined the fragile foundation of cooperation. To comfort domestic contradictions, the two governments have adopted different political movements to deal with their challenging but intimate neighbor.

Tokyo’s perception was shaped by its social ideology shift. Influenced by the post-war Pacifism trend, the Treaty on Basic Relations in 1965 was released to establish diplomatic relations with Seoul. The contemporary rightward trend results in frequent territorial disputes between Dokdo (also known as Takeshima) in the textbooks, preventing cooperation development. Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida did not express his attitude to historical arguments during his 2023 Seoul visit.

Seoul's perception depends on the domestic populism trend, especially when the opposition expanded. In 2012, Korean President Lee Myung-bak visited Dokdo (known as Takeshima in Japan) to save his declining support rate and condemn Japan's position on the Comfort women issue. However, policies would be modified by the governance needs. For reasons of national reputation, Park Geun-hye’s government delayed the final decision about forced labor compensation.

In summary, policy decisions, as the analysis of the government's historical situation, are constrained by domestic ideology and governance needs. These policies exacerbate the possibility of disputes, especially when the government changes its consistent direction.

3.3 Ideological disputes on unsolved historical issues

The irreconcilable historical issues have determined the connections between the people of Japan and Korea, and as a result, there is an unbreakable gap in the relationship between the two countries.

The opinion polls of Korean people show that the rightward shift and repeated Yasukuni visits of Japanese leaders have reshaped Korea’s deep resentment and growing security suspicion of Japan [9]. The territorial dispute of Dokdo led to a downturn in public opinion. Meanwhile, Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol’s untimely announcement of ROK-Japan relations at the 77th-anniversary commemoration of the Day of Reunification, intentionally ignoring historical issues, had sparked strong criticism. Korean public opinion generally believes that excessive concessions to Japan will gradually trigger a structural contradiction of "government compromise and civil resistance" in Korean society [10].

The same goes for Japan, where erroneous public discourse is used to formulate foreign policy towards Korea, where "toughness" has become "taken for granted". The dissatisfaction with this relationship has also led to the weariness and dissatisfaction of the Japanese people towards South Korean policy and diplomacy [11].

To sum up, the difficult problems left over from history in Japan-South Korea relations make it difficult for the two countries to completely shake hands and make peace.

4 Impacts of external threats on bilateral cooperation

4.1 Imperatives for cooperation

The reinforcement of political collaboration between Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK) extends beyond their bilateral relationship and encompasses multilateral relations involving Washington-Tokyo-Seoul, and Beijing-Tokyo-Seoul. If any party participates in the situation in Northeast Asia, Japan, and South Korea will cooperate under the influence of major powers.

Both Japan and South Korea propose closer ties with the United States to counterbalance China's influence in the region. As the United States assumes a growing role in Asia, it consistently encourages Tokyo and Seoul to enhance strategic communication, deepen bilateral relations, expand shared interests, and mitigate the interference of external factors.

Japan-ROK cooperation will become an important part of East Asian integration. In the pursuit of regional integration, minimizing the influence of foreign powers becomes crucial. Despite complex geopolitical dynamics and power distribution in East Asia hindering the practical implementation of regional integration, it serves as a mechanism for balancing diverse interests. The maintenance of a stable regional order in Asia bears significance not only for the common interests of Japan and Korea but also as an integral part of the broader international system in East Asia [12]. Therefore, Japan and South Korea must move towards cooperation.

4.2 Existing bilateral cooperation and its implications
Political interactions between Japan and South Korea once concentrated at the highest levels of government, have experienced stagnation in recent times due to historical issues and disputes regarding nuclear waste discharges. Nevertheless, leaders from both countries have exhibited willingness and determination to alleviate tensions. In 2022, after a 12-year hiatus, "Shuttle Diplomacy" between the two countries successfully resumed. South Korean President Yoon Seok Yeol's visit to Japan marked the onset of a renewed phase and considerable enthusiasm in fostering improved ROK-Japan relations, despite facing domestic criticism. In response, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida reciprocated with a return visit to Seoul. Also, at the 2023 NATO meeting, the two leaders decided to coordinate holding bilateral high-level economic consultations within the year.

As part of these renewed efforts, the Republic of Korea formally recommenced military intelligence exchanges outlined in the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) with Japan. Japan, in turn, announced a temporary halt to the release of nuclear wastewater into the Pacific Ocean. These bilateral cooperative actions mark notable steps towards strengthening their engagement amid external threats.

5 Favourable conditions and ways for further cooperation

5.1 Favourable conditions

5.1.1 Desiring to leverage the United States to expand its influence in Asia

To further expand their influence in the Asia Pacific region and create cooperation opportunities for their Indo-Pacific strategy, the two countries are continuously restoring and strengthening trilateral cooperation between the United States, Japan, and Korea [13]. The normalization of Japan-Korea relations is a reconciliation led by the United States based on the San Francisco system, rather than a true "autonomous reconciliation". The United States has been an important stakeholder in Japan-Korea relations from the beginning. Under ideological co-optation, the United States will strengthen this trilateral cooperation in a deeper context [14].

5.1.2 A sharing fear to superpower countries

China's relationship with Russia and the United States means something to Japan and Korea about the direction the region is taking. Japan and the Republic of Korea cannot survive a confrontation with major powers alone, as they are the forces influencing international relations in East Asia. In a geographical space where Japan and Korea coexist with other great powers, the effect of their joining forces will be greater than their isolation. If there is a rift in the relationship between Japan and the ROK, it will be difficult to form a united front, and the contradictions between the two countries may also be exploited by China, DPRK, and Russia.

If such shared fears or concerns can be harnessed to forge cooperation, Japan and Korea will be closer than ever. Such a partnership should be equal and reciprocal, but it also means that Japan and Korea's cooperation must involve one side giving up its desire to see itself as the dominant player and instead seeking mutual benefits.

5.2 Measures for future cooperation

5.2.1 Sharing cultural elements of Confucianism

Both Japan and Korea belong to the Confucian culture, with Confucianism as the orthodox idea. This common cultural element is reflected in all areas of politics, economics, culture, and life in Japan and Korea. Similar cultural identities have led to the homology of cultural resources and traditions on both sides and similarities in values and ethics [15]. Strengthening cooperation in the cultural field may further promote people-to-people exchanges.

5.2.2 Actively carry out consultations on historical issues

It has been proven that long-term and intensive negotiations are feasible for resolving historical issues, but this means that both sides need to make some compromises in terms of principles, policies, and finances. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea held four meetings in 2022 to discuss solutions to the forced labor issue and widely solicit public opinion. Meanwhile, Japan and the ROK have also held repeated consultations. Perhaps issues that are easy to agree on can be used as a breakthrough to improve relations, based on the consensus that both parties hope to achieve. Whether the two countries can strengthen cooperation and fully restore relations depends to a large extent on responsible measures and active consultations between the two countries in the future.

6 Conclusion

External threats present a significant opportunity and challenge to Japan-Republic of Korea's cooperation and originate in geopolitics, military, economics, and ideology. Geopolitical interferences from superpower countries operate in the direction of Japan-ROK relations but tighten their connection. Northeast Asian countries are wary and prevent each other from becoming a regional hegemon. Any superpower would try to reapproach the two countries to a more cooperating relationship to break the dilemma. Whoever superpower participating in Northeast Asia in the short term, Japan and Korea would cooperate under the influence of superpowers. Military concern about DPRK's nuclear threat affects the direction of Japan-Korea relations, and it plays a solid foundation for the Washington-Tokyo-Seoul partnership to establish a deep multilateral partnership and resolve contradictions.
Economic competition linked with political requirements reduced Japan and Korea's risk-facing ability during the global economic depression. Ideologically, sharing Confucian cultural elements could promote in-depth cooperation. But differences in historical perceptions and public opinions, especially on the “Comfort Women” and labor issues are difficult to overcome compared to hardware difficulties such as technology, resources, and infrastructure.

Active consultations on historical issues are feasible, but compromises are needed. The Crux of Japan-Korea relations lies in public opinion. Long-term intensive negotiations based on compromise and consensus are necessary for historical issues resolved. People-to-people exchanges in cultural, commercial, and educational fields can be carried out to solve the remaining issues under the two country leaders’ Shuttle Diplomacy cooperation.

Japan and the Republic of Korea's cooperation is crucial for East Asian integration, balancing diverse interests and maintaining a stable regional order. Competition and oppression under external threats raise survival risks for Japan and Korea. The two countries have strengthened strategic communication and mitigated external interference. Japan and the ROK have more confidence in confronting external threats arising from regional security, economic, and political contexts in the establishment of the Asia-Pacific deployment.

This paper mainly focuses on the impact of external threats on Japan-Korea relations but neglects the formation process of threat cognitive construction. Future studies may be able to further explore this aspect.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

Reference