PARTY POLITICS AND CHANGING DIPLOMATIC PRIORITIES:
JAPAN-SOUTH KOREAN RELATIONS INTO THE 21st CENTURY

By

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Abstract

Japan-South Korean relations have been consistently hindered by political and social reminders regarding their shared history that includes Japan’s violent occupation of Korea in the 20th century. However, relations had been improving into the 21st century until now, where positive relations and cooperation appear to be at a standstill regardless of the expectation that they would have grown closer given current events. This paper explains the motivations for the lack of a fully realized cooperative relationship between the two nations using the following explanations: dysfunctional political parties in South Korea benefits politically from pushing emotional anti-Japan rhetoric to a typically disaffected voting base; Japan is no longer viewed as being as critical an economic partner compared to China; and this anti-Japan rhetoric has no substantial pushback or reaction from the Japanese government and public.
Introduction

Within the last few decades, East Asia has gradually become a region of significant importance to the West. Of particular note, especially for the United States, are Japan and South Korea (ROK – Republic of Korea). The United States has since the 1940s in the wake of World War II maintained close relations and interests in the affairs of Japan and South Korea. Various U.S. administrations maintained prominent relations with both countries through a strong military presence and frequent diplomatic exchanges. Its participation in the formation of the new government of Japan is readily apparent along with continued support of South Korea against its communist neighbors, North Korea and China.

Increasingly, the reason for the United States’ military presence has become to sustain strategic positioning against said aggressor North Korea and the rising power of China. This move has been visibly supported by the governments of both South Korea and Japan respectively, and the people of both countries generally share a positive outlook on actions of the United States in its role in working to stabilize the political and economic positions of their countries in the region. However, where the United States’ relationship with South Korea and Japan has remained cordial, transparent, and mutually supportive, the relationship between South Korea and Japan has deteriorated.

On paper, Japan and South Korea should have a strong, diplomatic relationship as political allies. Japan and South Korea share a mutual ally in the United States, which maintains a powerful military presence in each country and has played a direct role in their respective postwar reconstructions. In the late 20th century they developed economic partnerships and share a similar taste in popular culture with the result that Japanese and
Korean pop music and TV programs are avidly consumed in their respective markets. Furthermore, both countries cite concerns over the rise of China along with the unpredictable nature of North Korea and how they will affect political and military stability in the region. In spite of those developments, instead of a stronger more cordial relationship between Japan and South Korea, their partnership has considerably deteriorated within the last decade. Furthermore, though Japan had previously been a key-trading partner of South Korea, its contribution has been eclipsed by China and the United States. With these as examples, it appears that their relations will continue to follow this downward trend under the political administrations of each country.

This thesis will examine why relations between South Korea and Japan have worsened over time. I rely on a qualitative analysis to uncover political and economic trends in the Republic of Korea that account for the rise in Japan bashing. For the purposes of investigating the development of the aforementioned trend in worsening relations between South Korea and Japan and answering the question of why it has developed as such in this period of time, this paper will mostly take the form of a qualitative analysis through an extensive reliance on secondary literature with the inclusion of descriptive figures. I begin this study with an introduction of the historical context that needs to be given consideration when discussing South Korea and Japan. In addition, I will examine key motivations for improved relations between the countries. Thus, in the first section I will present the historical background for relations between South Korea and Japan, from the late 19th century, as they were normalized in the 20th century, and moved into today. In addition, I will explore why we should have expected stronger and closer diplomatic cooperation between South Korea and Japan. Then,
progressing into the current day, I will highlight the notable shift in Korean and Japanese public opinion towards their each other. I conclude by attempting to answer the research question of why the previously mentioned dynamics – shared ally in the United States, China’s territorial aggressions, economic considerations - have failed to improve relations between S Korea and Japan. My tentative explanation is that of South Korea is increasingly shifting towards China.

**Historical Context of Japanese-South Korean Relations**

However recent and relevant the issues of China and economic cooperation might be, people from South Korea consider their shared history with Japan to be a sore point of contention and thus an understanding of this history is absolutely critical to a study of the state of current relations seeing the influence it continues to exert over contemporary politics. The history of relations between South Korea and Japan may effectively be divided into two phases: pre and post World War II, reflecting a definitive change in roles of conqueror and conquered from the pre-World War II period, to a relationship between two sovereign nations post-World War II.

Before the Japanese annexation of Korea, Korea was given the moniker of “Hermit Kingdom” by the West for its preference for decidedly isolationist policies (Henshall, 2012). When required to act internationally, Korea mostly interacted with China as part of the Chinese sphere of influence, yet as Japan’s ambitions of asserting itself as an imperial power in the East Asian region grew, it gradually started forcing Korea into its own sphere of influence beginning in the 19th century. Japan engaged in several conflicts in the region with other countries, including Russia and China, in order
to secure a strategic military position with the intention of eventually targeting Korea. Of these conflicts, the Russo-Japanese War proved (1904-1905) to be one of the most critical for Japan (Sakharov, 2007). This conflict represented the first time that a non-Western power not only defeated an established European power, yet did so with notable success against expectations. Other Western powers recognized the need to consider Japan seriously following the decisive victory over Russia, and potentially as the main power within Asia at the time. For Japan, this victory cemented feelings of nationalism and that Japan was ready to take on a more proactive role in East Asia; it also inspired them to send its military out through China, Korea, and other parts of Asia as an effort to pursue additional territory. Following several years of military occupation of Korea, Japan forced Korea into signing the Japan-Korea Annexation Treaty in 1910 thereby beginning the period of violent occupation that would become the focus of Japan-South Korean relations (Henshall, 2012).

Moving into the 20th century, a significant majority of Korean complaints and feelings of animosity from the people towards the Japanese have been attributed to atrocities committed during the 1919-1945 occupation (Kim, 2014). The Japanese occupation of Korea has been characterized as excessive, even in the words of contemporary Japanese politicians, and incredibly violent in their attempts to stifle rebellion and Korean culture and language. Japan sought to imitate Western forms of Imperialism during the 19th and 20th century, arguing that these actions were carried out with the ultimate purpose of working towards unifying the region and similar ethnic groups so present as a capable contender to the West (Henshall, 2012). Their form of Imperialism was unique from that of the West’s, in that the Japanese felt they were able
to relate to the conquered, and consequently hoped to spread their language and culture at the expense of local population. Seeking to supplant local languages and cultures in its colonies, the Japanese government enacted brutal policies of cultural suppression, including within Korea. While these assimilation policies that included Japanese replacing Korean as the official language taught in schools and the Koreans changing their Korean surnames to a Japanese name were deeply resented by the Koreans and marked a steadily souring relationship between the two peoples, events leading up to, and during World War II, would effectively served as the definitive “final straw” for the Koreans that would go on to irrevocably set the tone for future vitriolic exchanges between the two nations (Kim, 2014).

Beginning in the late 1930s, the Japanese government compelled Korean men to work in positions of labor and military service to assist with the war effort. Hundreds of thousands of Koreans served in these positions and died for Japan, still receiving negligible recognition from the government or at war memorial shrines; several Korean soldiers serving in the Japanese army were even tried and found guilty at the Tokyo Trials (Kim, J. 2014). During the war the Japanese Army established “comfort stations” as a means of providing sexual services for soldiers participating in the war, which were located en masse across Japanese occupied territory in the area. A considerable majority of the women made to work at the stations were Korean women, since the status of Korea as a Japanese colony allowed for the government to freely “recruit” women. However, these women were frequently lied to and/or abducted into the positions; they were typically young and still unmarried, into their late teens or early 20s (Kim, M. 2014).
Korean relations with Japan may have subsequently worsened were it not for the development of the Korean War. Following Japan’s surrender in the wake of World War II, Korea was removed from Japanese rule and put under a joint administration of the Soviet Union and the United States, with the Soviet Union in charge of the peninsula north of the 38th parallel and the United States of the land south of the 38th parallel (Cumings 1981). Separate governments were established that insisted to be equally legitimate and refused to reunite as one nation. With the military aid of the Soviet Union and China, in 1950, North Korea invaded South Korea and initiated the Korean War. The United States intervened with approval from the United Nations’ security council and via military bases established in Japan.

For South Korea, the Korean War had resulted in the near-complete devastation of the country, its resources, and any pre-existing infrastructure (Zang & Baimbridge, 2012). Since the majority of natural resources were located in the northern region that became North Korea (mostly valuable metals), South Korea consequently was forced to divert any funds and resources into rebuilding the country and moving towards “import-substitution industrialization” as a means of reducing dependency on foreign aid following the Korean War. This strategy worked until 1963, when, similar to Japan, South Korea switched to focus on developing fruitful economic relations with other countries via an export-oriented strategy due to significantly scarce natural resources and an equally small domestic market.

South Korea had previously distinguished itself during the late 1940s through the early 1950s for its rigid refusal to resume relations with Japan, but immediately following
the events of the Korean War it became evident that maintaining efficient economic relations with neighboring Japan would be preferable to none (Glosserman, 2015). However, it was not until Park Chung-hee came to power in 1963 that those relations changed (Van Jackson, 2011). President Syngman Rhee (1948 – 1960), the first president of South Korea entered into office in 1948, perpetuated significant anti-Japan furor among the public during his terms. In spite of that anti-Japan rhetoric pushed by Rhee during his term, Park managed to successfully bring about renewed official relations between South Korea and Japan by specifically framing the normalization as critical to South Korean interests and development. Foreign Minister Shiina’s apology was the first apology by a Japanese official in 1965 in an effort to bring about normalization of relations between South Korea and Japan. South Koreans viewed this apology as a crucial and necessary concession at the time. In the same year 1965, Japan and South Korea signed the normalization treaty known as the Treaty on Basic Relations (Oda, 1967). According to the treaty, South Korea forfeited the right to demand additional financial compensation for the Japanese occupation period aside from what would be given at the time of the signing. Furthermore, Japan singularly recognized South Korea as the sole legitimate government in the peninsula, thereby refusing to officially establish diplomatic or economic relations with the North. Demonstrations and protests were staged in both countries, chiefly in South Korea where they did so in significant numbers and passionately, where some voiced a preference in unifying with North Korea over re-establishing relations with Japan (Cha, 1999). This treaty, however, was the result of a long and difficult fourteen-year process that both sides constantly challenged on both sides due to preexisting animosities and demands.
An official defense treaty between the two countries still does not explicitly exist, however the closes approximation is the “Korea clause” from Japan that recognizes that security within Korea is important for Japan. In addition, Japan asserted an “Okinawan base agreement,” that would allow the United States unrestricted access to military bases in Okinawa for the purpose of defending South Korea. The degree to which Japan has abided by these two agreements has varied through the years, and therefore upset South Korea and inspired the view that Japan is wholly unreliable. Relations between Japan and South Korea have been marked by tension and ups and downs, and notably while there is a distinct level of animosity directed towards the Japanese at the popular (public) level, there are still friendships and close ties at the higher levels of policymaking between both countries.

**Development of the South Korean Economy**

Following the re-establishment of diplomatic relations with Japan, South Korea entered into an economically vertically integrated structure with Japan (Rhyu & Lee, 2006). Vertical integration in economics refers to when a company moves to control or own different points in production, i.e. the company owns the supplier and/or distributor; they are involved in the production on multiple levels with the potential benefit of reducing costs and increasing overall efficiency by removing the “middlemen.” In this development, Japan deferred diminishing and overcrowded industries to South Korea (via direct investment, transfers, subcontracts), imported those, and then assumed participation in high-technology sectors; South Korea served as components of Japan’s vertically integrated economic structure and did not have this type of structure until later
on. This economic hierarchical relationship persisted while South Korea focused on rebuilding and proved effective until a change in strategy that would further advance the South Korean economy became evident. Into the 1970s, the Park administration (at the time) chose to make a clean transition from traditional industries (i.e. textiles) to the technologies via the introduction of several new economic policies for its export-oriented industrialization believing that technologies were key to competing in the world market and to reduce its reliance upon Japan for those technologies. The Japanese government directly aided the development of POSCO, the leading steel producer within South Korea, with over a hundred million dollars for the construction costs. Then the Korean government subsequently incorporated successful Japanese strategies and became a significant threat to the steel industry in Japan, to the point where they began to oppose POSCO. Thus South Korea began effectively moving into industries that had previously been dominated by Japan – steel, shipbuilding, cars, electronics, and IT hardware – by the late 1970s and early 1980s. South Korea’s moving into the steel industry, an industry in which they would directly compete with Japan, is due to the transference of technology and capital goods from Japan in the 1960s and 1970s.

This transition that equated to moving out from under the previously established hierarchical economic relationship with Japan (essentially done in the mid 1980s) had several consequences. South Korea managed to situate itself as a formidable competitor to Japan, marking significant development from its weakened, depleted state after the Korean War. Then, South Korea began aggressively pursuing its agenda of export-oriented economics, specifically in areas that Japan also specialized in, thus instigating fierce competition as they both struggled to appeal to the U.S. – a major export market
for Japan and South Korea. It began in the 80s but by 2000, they were directly competing with one another in world exports, as Japan and South Korea’s top exports included both electronics and automobiles (Rhyu & Lee, 2006). Notably, the South Korean adoption and imitation of the Japanese political-economic system proved critical to South Korea’s long-term fortune, since it had relied heavily upon Japanese capital and technology (Cha, 1999).

South Korea’s phenomenal economic development and subsequent prosperity leading into the 1990s and concluding with the successful hosting of the 1998 Olympics and co-hosting (with Japan) of the 2002 FIFA World Cup, resulted in this transition being famously referred to as “the miracle on the Han River” (Park, Kim, & Harrington Jr., 2011). This level of economic progress was matched in Japan and China in the decades following World War II, with South Korea, Japan, and China all maintaining superior growth to other countries in the world, and thus making up about 20 percent of the world economy. However, while South Korea and even China have had high economic growth in recent years, Japan has comparatively had a low economic growth rate due to an economic bubble from the late 80s; this period is known as the “Lost Decade,” wherein GDP and wages decreased dramatically and the economy consequently was stagnant for an extended period of time (Wong, 2010). In Japan’s relative absence, its role as a key contributor to the South Korean economy was taken over by the U.S. and China (Rhyu & Lee, 2006).
The United States and Japan-Korean Relations

For South Korea and Japan, the United States has figured prominently in their development and this presence has been maintained into the current day. After World War II, the U.S. primarily managed the Allied occupation effort in Japan, and unlike in Korea, this was executed without any additional interference from the Soviet Union (Dower, 1999). The occupation forces also proved integral in the construction of the new Japanese Constitution. Since Japan had agreed to an unconditional surrender, the U.S. effectively steered the drafting to more closely reflect their interests and away from the previously militaristic orientation by including a stipulation in the Constitution that prevents Japan from maintaining a standing army. Their heavy occupancy in Japan would later demonstrate its usefulness in the Korean War, serving as a nearby military base for the U.S. to readily deploy its forces.

The United States has, since the division between North and South Korea, exhibited an interest in intervening within South Korea to promote an alliance that would benefit the U.S.’s position against the Soviet Union and China; this cooperation between Seoul and Tokyo was often referred to as “the Pacific anti-communist arc.” Prior to World War II, the U.S. had shown negligible interest in the region, but resurged upon the significant Russian and Chinese interference in the Korean War (Cha, 1999). During the 1960s, the United States came to view China as a significant threat following the establishment of the communist regime, signing a mutual defense treaty in 1961 with North Korea, and working to support other revolutionary movements in Southeast Asia as a means of “consolidating an Asian communist front.” Hence, the United States encouraged the two neighbors to normalize relations. The normalization of relations
would work towards establishing Japanese aid and trade that could benefit the then ailing South Korean economy. U.S. ambassadors to Japan frequently made trips to Seoul and Tokyo and met with the respective politicians in trying to move along the process, desiring an earlier settlement so as to help stabilize South Korean politics and provide a front against North Korea; the United States was overburdened by commitments in Indochina at the time and was concerned with potential retaliations by North Korea. Ultimately, the United States played a critical role in fostering Japanese-Korean relations in the second half of the 20th century since it determined that strong diplomatic ties between all three countries would serve its strategic interests in the Pacific region.

**Logic for Strengthened Relations**

As it currently stands, there are a myriad of reasons for South Korea and Japan to foster improved relations. Both South Korea and Japan share a formidable common security ally in the United States, together acting as a security triangle in the Northeast Asia region (Cha, 1999). The U.S. initiated bilateral defense treaties with Japan in 1951, and South Korea in 1953, which have served as the foundation for the “American-led defense network” in East Asia. Japan’s interests in keeping strong relations with the U.S. include maintaining a strong U.S. military presence in the region to combat China’s aggressive territorial advances (more recently this involves the dispute over the possession of the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku islands) and provide a front against the equally aggressive North Korea, especially since Japan does not otherwise have the ability to generate its own military response except in explicit situations of self-defense (Dower, 1999). In fact, Japan has recently complained about the absence of its ally in
East Asian affairs, feeling that they are not able to as readily rely upon the support of the United States for national security, as it had done so in the past, since the U.S. has refrained from interfering in those affairs (Powell, 2014). As a result, Japan has been engaged in political maneuvers to supersede Article 9 and potentially authorize the creation of a proper military. Those efforts to reinterpret or amend the Japanese Constitution have posed as an additional source of tension between Japan and its neighbors, though that will be discussed in further detail in subsequent sections. Presently, the United States acts as the leading source of foreign direct investment (FDI) in Japan, which had more than doubled from 1998-2011 (Cooper, 2014). While both countries rely upon each other’s exports, being closely connected through capital flows, it is evident that Japan relies upon the United States more than the United States needs Japan.

Once again, analogous to the establishment of the modern state of Japan, the U.S. was equally instrumental to South Korea’s development and has consequently been a key ally for the country. Likely due to the influence of the United States and the heavy presence of neighbors North Korea and China and its experiences as a colony under Imperial Japan, South Korean identity has been characterized by powerful sentiments of anticommunism and anti-colonialism (Glosserman, 2015). The United States has, since the bilateral treaty in 1953, supplied South Korea with funding for its own military and American troops to preserve a powerful unified front in the eventuality that North Korea provokes conflict, still a prominent concern for many South Koreans. An American partnership remained a key priority for various political administrations in South Korea, with even President Barak Obama recently calling South Korea “one of America’s closest allies and greatest friends” and vowing to make efforts to further improve relations.
(McKeeby, 2009). The South Korean economy, and in this again resembling Japan, depends upon the United States’ investments, where it eclipsed Japan as the largest investor in the South Korea (Rhyu & Lee, 2006). Moreover, in both Japan and South Korea, recent public opinion of the United States ranges from favorable to decidedly favorable (Poushter, 2013). Even the United States has been a very vocal supporter of improved relations between South Korea and Japan, seeking to prioritize stability in the region with the backing of both key allies (Cha, 1999).

However, like the Japanese, South Korea has shared concerns about the inconsistent presence and support of the United States (Cha, 1999). During the 70s and 80s South Korea felt that the United States and Japan had not exhibited an appropriate amount of concern over the potential threat North Korea posed to South Korea. South Korea may then fear becoming entrapped or abandoned in this “quasi-alliance” it has maintained with Japan, and considered looking into other alternatives.

**China as a Potential Threat**

Alternatively, aside from a mutual alliance with the United States, Japan and South Korea anticipate military action in the region from China, a growing rival for both countries, though primarily for Japan. Unlike Japan’s relationship with China, the dynamics between South Korea and China are markedly more complex. South Korea and China already share a close economic relationship since China transitioned into the primary trading partner for South Korea in the early 2000s. However, these economic ties have not necessarily translated to similarly effective military cooperation (Tiezzi, 2015).
Likely in response to the belief that the United States is not present *enough* within the region, South Korean defense spending has raised significantly in the 21st century as they move to maintain a powerful naval presence in the region (Wirth, 2015). Within that same time frame, South Korea rose to become the second largest importer of conventional weapons in Asia, with China at fourth, and the military budget only continues to increase. These moves may have been part of efforts to defend against North Korea, but South Korea has also had altercations with China in the recent past. China’s expansionist agenda specifically affected South Korea and those conflicts included additional territorial disputes over Jiandao (known as Gando in Korean), tensions over Chinese patrol ships in South Korea’s EEZ (exclusive economic zone), and illegal fishing in South Korea waters by Chinese fishermen (Hwang, 2007; Wirth 2015). Furthermore, though both nations have officially resolved those issues, a security gap remains between the two countries in the face of South Korea’s closeness to the U.S (Tiezzi, 2015). China and South Korea have had military exchanges, but actual cooperation is low. Since 2008 they have only had a single bilateral military exercise, which was in 2010, yet China has South Korea may be content to fully support and promote a healthy economic relationship, but concerns over China’s support of the North Korean regime consequently affects South Korean enthusiasm for fostering a similarly close military one.

The aforementioned events and policies have affected public opinion concerning Chinese activity in the region. According to polling from the Pew Research Center, publics within Japan and South Korea feel that territorial disputes between China and neighbors that escalated in recent years will inevitably end in military conflict – with at least seven-in-ten of those polled in the Japan and South Korea reporting as such (Pew
Research Center, 2014). Those disputes include disagreements over the possession of the previously mentioned Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and separate ones involving Vietnam and the Philippines in the South China Sea. Between Japan and China, those negative views are similarly felt – seven percent of Japanese view China favorably, while eight percent of Chinese “like” Japan. In a 2013 survey also by the Pew Research Center, it revealed that these disputes involving China are a source of major concern for Japan (82 percent) and South Korea (77 percent).

Regardless of the position demonstrated to be deeply felt and feared by an overwhelming number of Japanese and South Koreans that China is fostering a hostile environment in the region, this joint apprehension has not proved to be a compelling enough incentive for both countries to prioritize strengthened relations; instead, it appears that South Korea has been orienting towards strengthening relations with China. Outwardly, President Park promised during her term to prioritize closer relations with China, thus reflecting public sentiment that believed this to be an ideal direction for diplomatic relations. Public attitudes in South Korea towards China had been incredibly positive during the 1990s and early 2000s, when they normalized relations and opened up the additional opportunity for trade and a buffer between South Korea and North Korea (Glosserman 2015; Cha 1999). In conclusion, while South Korean politicians and the public aspire to improved relations with China due to their mutually beneficial economic partnership, South Korean policies regarding increased military spending and persisting lagging military ties with China demonstrate that South Korea continues to show restraint in pursuing a fully cooperative relationship with China.
Relationship with North Korea

Relating to security concerns in Asia, aside from the strong belief that China’s territorial disputes will result in military action, another major concern for South Korea includes the often-belligerent North Korea. The North Korea-South Korean relationship remains complicated and their views towards each other have evolved through the years, and especially as South Korea increasingly dominates economically. Initially, South Korea struggled following the Korean War due to a dire lack of natural resources, which were primarily located in land occupied by North Korea (“North Korea: Natural Resources,” 2008), and the two nations competed and fostered a mostly negative relationship at the time. Yet into the 70s and 80s, the economic disparity between the two became such that there could hardly be said to be any reasonable competition (Bae, 2010). At that time in the 70s, the then President Park Chung-hee promoted a form of peaceful competition in international relations and industrialization. This promotion by Park Chung-hee marked a change in how South Korea approached relations with North Korea, specifically since the near end of the Cold War, preferring stability and peaceful coexistence to the pro-military approach pushed by the United States. While leaders in South Korea in subsequent decades would acknowledge their success over North Korea, it was done in a manner that recognized the North as a partner.

President Roh Moo-hyun (in office from 2003 - 2008) cited this peaceful coexistence as critical for promoting eventual unification of North and South Korea. Significantly, this is a major difference in approaches to North Korea from South Korea and the United States, the latter of which believes that reunification has no merit unless the North changes dramatically from within or the regime collapses completely. The
current President Park even stated that she would support reunification and anticipates that it could occur soon (Glosserman, 2015). In light of this belief, despite the fact that some South Koreans resent China for its intention to continue maintaining the status quo in North Korea, many feel that cooperation with both nations is key for stability in the region and reunification with North Korea.

Regardless of these disagreements over North Korea with the U.S., South Korea understands the importance of continued support from the United States and the very real threat of North Korea; hence deploying Korean soldiers to Iraq when requested by President Bush as a means of appeasing U.S. leadership and to ensure continued military cooperation (Glosserman, 2015). South Korea also established the US-Korea Free Trade Agreement in 2007 to further demonstrate its commitment to an alliance with the United States. In addition, according to research conducted by the PEW Research center, positive attitudes between South Korea and the United States remain very high due to recent North Korean provocations toward South Korea and their belief that the U.S. remains a powerful ally against the often unpredictable regime (Glosserman, 2015). As for maintaining a military front against North Korea, South Korea had previously expressed apprehension in the past that neither the United States nor Japan expressed enough interest or worry in North Korea, that South Korea’s two allies were possibly leaving South Korea vulnerable to attacks from the North (Cha, 1999; Bae, 2010).

While reunification had been desirable in the 20th century, even those in South Korea acknowledge the inherent difficulties in doing so now. Where before North Korea and South Korea had effectively competed economically, by 2006 South Korea’s nominal GNI (gross national income) exceeded North Korea’s 34 times over as the “total volume
of trade was more than 211 times larger” than in North Korea (Bae, 2010). More recently, based on data in 2013, according to South Korea’s central bank, South Korea’s $1.6 trillion economy is at least 43 times larger than North Korea’s, whose GDP was tentatively marked at around $30 billion (Sedghi & Rogers, 2013).

The economic disparity between South Korea and North Korea accompanied with language changes and other social dimensions render the possibility of reunification a problematic proposal. South Koreans cite a concern that reunification would negatively impact their current standard of living and the economic achievements made by the country, one that politicians carefully take into consideration now. Thus, by the 1990s, South Korea has attempted to engineer a strategy of sustaining and minimally supporting the North to prevent its total collapse, though they continue to actively fear military action from the North.

**Rise of Increased anti-Japanese sentiment**

According to a Pew Research Center poll in 2013, global public perception of Japan has mostly been positive, with Indonesians, Australians, and Filipinos at about 78 percent for positive views (Kohut, 2013), and the 68 percent of respondents in the United States believing they can “trust Japan a great deal” (2015). By contrast, South Korean opinion of Japan is at 23 percent favorable, which is a significant decrease from previous years where it had been roughly 50 percent (Kohut, 2013). However, it should be noted that older Koreans (50 years of age and older) were recorded at 82 percent negative in their attitudes towards Japan while only 66 percent of Koreans under the age of 30 felt similarly. Considering that for many of those older Koreans the events of World War II
are remembered (there are also women from the period of forced sexual servitude who continue to speak out about their experiences) the high percentage still feeling negative is expected. Yet, that a significant number of young Koreans feel similarly despite being far removed from the actual events solicits an explanation. Since the end of World War II and Korea’s liberation from Japanese rule, reminders of Japanese colonialism clearly continue to elicit tense feelings from South Koreans. However, now in the 21st century, this shared past can no longer serve as the primary explanation for the focused South Korean animosity towards Japan, in lieu of a similar attitude toward North Korea.

The crux of the argument South Korea makes for its standoffish relations with Japan thus depends upon Japan’s reluctance to offer a public form of apology. As recent as December 2015, Japan appeared to have finally come to a concrete agreement with South Korea over a final apology for the comfort women, which also included an $8.3 million payment directly from the Japanese government to a victim’s fund and the tacit understanding from both parties that this apology would effectively resolve the issue (Sang-hun, 2015). President Park and her party were said to be satisfied with Prime Minister Abe’s apology, but opposing parties and interest groups claimed that this was not enough, again. Superficially, it would appear that South Koreans have consistently been unsatisfied with all forms of apology given by Japan, believing them to be insincere and an inadequate response to their policies and behavior during occupation of Korea. Yet, as cited previously in this thesis, different Japanese governments and politicians have repeatedly acknowledged in varying fashion their actions towards Korea as inhumane, from the first apology in the 60s, through the 90s, and into now. Furthermore, both Japan and South Korea have indicated strong concerns regarding Chinese military
activity in the region. South Korean politicians may publicly trump their rapidly
developing economic relations with China as a means of supporting their claim that they
seek close ties with them, but South Korean military spending policies, actions, and
previous territorial squabbles between the two would tell a different story. Japan and
South Korea thus share an interest in cooperating to provide a strong front against
aggressive Chinese territorial expansion. Consequently, something else must account for
the persistent South Korean perception that Japan continues to be untrustworthy in the
current day.

Explanation: 1. Political Parties and Elections

The relative success Presidents Rhee (1948-1960) and Park (1962 – 1979) found
during their presidencies in effectively imposing their anti-Japan is predominantly due to
the disproportionate amount of power held by the executive branch at a time where South
Korea had not yet fully transitioned into a democracy and still labored under a form of
military authoritarianism until the 80s. Therefore, even before achieving a more
democratic style of government, South Korean political parties have a history of being
weak and easily being spearheaded by charismatic, powerful politicians (Hellmann,
2014). These parties were typically used as political support for the individual politicians
who were “resource-rich” and the parties then connected them with political machines at
a local level.
Figure 1. The Development of South Korean Political Parties (1985-2015)

Since liberation, there had been around 200 political parties. Figure 1 demonstrates above by focusing on the main parties, that many faded into obscurity while others merged or frequently rebranded themselves due to the change in leadership thus highlighting the incredible instability among political parties (Steinberg & Shin, 2006; Wang, 2012). The current majority in the National Assembly, President Park’s Saenuri Party, was previously the Grand National Party, which was a merger of the New Korea Party and the United Democratic Party (though the party’s history may be traced back to the 60s as the Democratic Republican Party). The other three parties officially represented in the National Assembly are significantly younger, with the two liberal parties similarly having undergone rebranding following new leadership. Unique party brands were and continued to be difficult to maintain due to that instability and a reliance on charismatic leaders to provide personality to the parties in a period where South Korea had not truly been operating as a liberal democracy. As such, the parties attempted to differentiate themselves by taking distinct positions on key policies moving into the 2000s.

Public opinion has become a steadily growing influence in discussions of the direction and rationale for specific South Korean foreign policies as a result of democratization (Glosserman, 2015). Consequently, unlike before, citizen groups are also having increasing influence as stakeholders in domestic and foreign policy. Until recent elections, first in 2010 during the Seoul Mayoral Election then during the presidential race in 2012, voters had historically refrained from identifying with political parties and their policies; this is likely due to the widespread negative view of parties within the country – 70 percent believing the parties to be corrupt, while 15 percent think that
parties are entirely unnecessary (Hellmann, 2014). In addition, further polling revealed that South Korea placed lowest in “public perception that parties offer varied policies” (Steinberg & Shin 2006). Voters were historically motivated by personal biases towards the party leader, origin of the leader (regionalism), and a desire to express dissatisfaction against a current administration. Parties have therefore recognized a disconnect with their constituents, and since the introduction of additional political parties, tried to differentiate themselves on several issues to match a voting base that had become more ideologically oriented.

The two “liberal” parties currently in power, the Minjoo Party of Korea (MPK) and the People’s Party were only recently established as a result of leftist ideologies being marginalized for decades due to its association with the Korean War yet now seek to represent an alternative to the dominant conservative camp (Kwon, 2008). The conservative parties, essentially parties that have overwhelmingly maintained power since liberation within the government, established themselves on two issues: regarding foreign policy they seek to maintain a close alliance with the United States and act passively toward North Korea, while nationally they advocate pro-market policies, less social spending and a minimized state role in governing the economy. By comparison, the progressive parties (generally hesitant to label themselves as leftist) promoted reconciliation with North Korea, downplayed the need extensive relations with other countries, and supported additional social spending. According to data from the Democratic Accountability and Linkage Project (DALP), while those progressive parties push for an expansion of social welfare, they do not deviate as significantly on the issue of the state’s role in economic governance from the conservative camp (Kitschelt, 2013).
Furthermore, concerning overall left-right placement, the gap between the two sides was not as disparate: where 1= left and 10= right, the conservative and progressive parties placed at 7.5 and 4.4 respectively (by comparison, the Republican and Democratic Parties from the U.S. scored at 8.8 and 2.5)\(^1\). However, these parties have still had difficulty in uniquely appealing to voters on the basis of the social and macro economic issues, and realize that one way to appeal to voters is to take a stand on Japan.

In response to an increasingly active voting block that favors ideological political discussion, South Korean politicians will campaign to meet voter expectations and attempt to provide “unique” policy platforms. As mentioned earlier, anti-Japan rhetoric had always been present in political discourse, and often resulted in an intense public response. While the South Korean public may feel ambivalent and frequently frustrated with these parties on how they typically fail to differentiate themselves from one another, the issue of Japan has reliably appealed to voters on an emotional level easily understood by all ages. Taking a hard stance against Japan has been a popular method of portraying a powerful image, and thus current President Park from the Saenuri Party had accordingly spoken out against Japan before her presidency numerous times, once stating in 2013, “the historical relation between (Japan and Korea) as victimizer and victim does not change for 1,000 years” (Sato, 2015). Yet once she became President, she arranged and accepted the newest apology made by Japan, with the explicit understanding that this was the final one and consequently receiving $8 million for a fund for survivors as part of the deal. Predictably, seeing this as an opportunity to differentiate themselves on an issue that

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\(^1\) The data was derived from expert surveys created by political scientists at Duke University and administered to individuals within the country of interest who have extensive knowledge about the country’s parties, campaigns, and elections in 2008 and 2009. These individuals include university professors, political journalists, those in interest groups, non-profit agencies, and independent research institutes. Overall left-right placement was based upon overall policy positions and ideological framework.
the public is hyperaware of, opposition parties and leaders reignited the anti-Japan
rhetoric again by using Park’s acceptance as a sign that voters should not trust her. In turn
these parties increased their “vehement” stances against Japan, and so continuing their
cyclical treatment of Japan as a means to make their respective parties/platforms appear
competitive and appeal to voters with a contrasting position on an issue that might move
them to the voting booths.

Explanation: 2. Economic Focus Shift to China

Another element relevant to the renewed prevalence of anti-Japan rhetoric from
South Korean politicians is the current economic environment. As discussed earlier,
following the normalization of relations between South Korea and Japan in the 60s they
became economically close. South Korean politicians managed to fuel normalization of
relations at the time by arguing that it was absolutely critical for South Korean post-war
development. Thus Japan was South Korea’s number one trading partner through the 60s-
80s and South Korea was completely dependent upon this relationship for economic
growth.
Figure 2. Changing South Korean Export Destinations (1980-2013) ($billions)

However, moving into the 21st century, Figure 2 shows the United States pushing to usurp Japan’s position with China following shortly thereafter, leaving Japan in a distant third. South Koreans acknowledge the rising importance of China over other neighbors within the region, and additional survey data demonstrates that expectations of China remaining an economic power are high among the public (Glosserman, 2015). A quarter of South Korea’s exports in 2011 went to China, demonstrative of an ever-increasing dependency on a country that is not Japan, and since the 90s into 2011 trade increased from $6.37 billion to $220.63 billion (Suk-hee, 2012).

Due to this shift in trading partners and a clear prioritization of relations with the United States and China, the primary and secondary trading partners to South Korea by a compelling margin, South Korea’s strategic anti-Japan rhetoric would not cause as significant an impact as it may have long ago; South Korean politicians may consider the (personal) political gain from promoting that voter-attractive rhetoric worth any economic repercussions from Japan since they would not be substantial; that is a perspective that is supported by the substantial economic success the two countries shared upon normalizing relations following the Korean War, when anti-Japan rhetoric was at its highest in South Korea. South Korea is definitively no longer in a subordinate position to Japan in regards to their trading relationship, and possibly feels more relaxed in challenging Japan. Considering Japan’s status as a powerful trading partner to South Korea is declining along with the prevailing belief among South Koreans that their economy is improving as Japan’s is failing, politicians might no longer hesitate now as they would have before when they were powerfully motivated by a previously integral
economic relationship with Japan. In the face of a weakening Japanese economy and a strengthening South Korean economy, Japan’s value has decreased.

Though South Koreans acknowledge the tension that exists between their country and China due to Chinese relations with North Korea, many feel that cooperation with China specifically is critical (Glosserman, 2015). As such, a similar kind of rhetoric from South Korea against China would be potentially more damaging to trade relations that have since become essential for the contemporary South Korean economy. Furthermore, China does not share a violent colonial history with South Korea, thus trade relations with China might be an “easier pill to swallow” than Japan for most South Koreans. This is not to say that South Korea conducts this type of political maneuvering against Japan recklessly, but whereas before when they might have been beholden to maintain borderline friendly communication with Japan in the past, now there is less at stake due to powerful trading partners in China and the United States. Notably absent in this discussion is the perspective of Japan and their response to South Korea’s increasingly public anti-Japan views, which may provide additional reasoning for the confidence in which South Korean politicians speak negatively about Japan without fearing heavy backlash.

Explanation: 3. Japan’s Apathy to South Korean Politics

The majority of this discussion has engaged the issue of South Korean-Japan relations primarily from the South Korean perspective, and yet naturally the active encouragement and promotion by South Korean political parties of anti-Japan sentiments would invite the question of how Japan views this behavior. The Japanese have a
similarly negative view of South Koreans, with about 21% of Japanese “trusting South Korea” (Pew Research Center, 2015). However, in spite of a general negative public sentiment regarding South Korea and an understanding of the reciprocal views held in South Korea towards Japan, the Japanese opinion leaders and politicians are wholly unconcerned with South Korea in the political sphere. Instead, polls from numerous outlets have demonstrated that Japanese citizens overwhelmingly focused on security issues regarding North Korea, China, and other domestic-related cues as promoted by political leaders.

On the topic of China, 7 percent of Japanese view China as trustworthy, while 75 percent feel that they can trust the USA (Pew Research Center, 2015). An equally significant 78 percent of Japanese believe it is more important to have improved economic connections with the US, compared to 10 percent of Japanese who prefer strong connections with China. Acknowledging Chinese relations with North Korea and recent territorial disputes, 68 percent of Japanese consider China a serious threat (Pew Research Center, 2014). In fact, China’s growing military is their primary security concern, with North Korea placing a close second (Reynolds, 2015). Furthermore, a public poll by the Asahi Shinbun in 2014, a Japanese newspaper, revealed that the policy aspects considered “the most important factor(s) in the next election” were “Economy and Employment” (47 percent), “Reducing the number of diet members” (33 percent), and “Child education and women’s work” (30 percent) compared to issues of “collective self defense” (The Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation, 2014). Moreover, disregarding prevailing security concerns and Japanese voting tendencies that exclude strong preferences on Japan-South Korea relations, the Japanese persist in consuming
South Korean pop culture in the form of dramas and music. South Korean products, such as dramas, aesthetics, clothing, and even restaurants have an incredible presence within Japan and have attained immense popularity (Hanaki, Singhal, Han, Kim, & Chitnis, 2007). Many Japanese viewers of South Korean dramas in particular noted that since they watched those dramas that they have begun to feel more positively about South Korea as a country, demonstrated by increases in the purchases of Korean products as well as in Japanese tourism to the South Korea.

Thus, as outlined above, the Japanese remain unconcerned with South Korean anti-Japan rhetoric likely due to prioritizing focus on China and North Korea and preoccupation with numerous domestic issues (economy, population, etc.). Japanese politicians, even when pushing recent legislation and amendment proposals have specifically cited North Korea and China as the reason for increased military spending (Reynolds, 2015). Furthermore, Japanese citizens have not yet come out in force to demonstrate against South Korean politicians and their rhetoric, instead they have continued to buy into the Korean Wave, without regard for South Korean politicians using Japan as an easy target to garner support from South Korean voters. South Korean politicians may continue their anti-Japan tirades publicly because of a distinct lack of response from Japan. Simply put, the Japanese public could not care less, and this is shown through domestic issues taking precedence in the voting booth, which then informs the behaviors of Japanese politicians who decline to address issues with South Korea and instead belabor the tangible threats posed by China and North Korea. In the meantime, Japanese people continue to buy products made in South Korean products in substantial numbers.
Conclusion

In the past few years, contrary to expectations, anti-Japanese sentiment in South Korea has notably increased despite the seemingly positive upward trend in the early 21st century. Discussion of Japan-South Korean relations consistently include giving serious consideration to their shared history, which many have used to support the belief that those relations are inevitably marred by that history. South Korean politicians publicly cite past and current Japanese transgressions (i.e. when “honoring” Japanese soldiers at the Yasukuni Shrine) as the rationale for consistently hostile political rhetoric.

Regardless of this history, as outlined previously, this antagonistic attitude is unexpected and flies in the face of what we would assume are highly convincing motivations for more positive exchanges between Japan and South Korea. Both countries share a common ally in the United States, being the recipient of significant aid in the aftermath of World War II and the Korean War respectively. In addition, each country recognizes North Korea and China as potential threats to stability within the region. While trade between Japan and South Korea has decreased from previously all-time high rates in the 70s and 80s, as its third largest trading partner, South Korea should then still consider Japan important and prioritize strengthened relations.

However, in spite of these motivations, I argue that the reason for the ongoing anti-Japan sentiments cannot solely be attributed to lingering animosities from their violent history and instead, is the product of several developments. I argued in this thesis that political parties within South Korea are notoriously weak and unstable, frequently merging with other smaller or larger parties as well as undergoing naming changes as a means of rebranding themselves. As a result, parties coalesce around powerful
individuals and typically construct an image based upon the leaders in the party. A distinction between liberal and conservative parties exist, but the disparity in the overall left-right placement is not significant (especially when compared to the Democrat and Republican Parties in the United States). Parties rarely are recognized for ideological stances, yet leading into the 21st century voters exhibited an interest in ideological political discussion. Thus, parties struggled to differentiate themselves from one another on the issues and this is where the issue of Japan-South Korean relations became a focal point for parties. Compared to in-depth policy discussion, Japanese antagonism is easily understood and used by politicians as an emotional appeal to a voting population that has generally displayed ambivalence. Notwithstanding personal beliefs and progress recently being made with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s most recent apology/concession, politicians continue to take hard stances against Japan with the knowledge that this galvanizes voters.

This public antagonism may be made feasible by South Korea’s pivot to China and Japan’s relative apathy towards South Korean opinion and domestic politics. South Korea, though acknowledging China as a security threat, views its relationship with China as highly beneficial and worth cultivating, especially since China has surpassed the U.S. and Japan to become its number one trading partner. Unlike Japan, there is no shared, violent history to squabble over, and as South Koreans (claim to) remain open to the idea of reconciliation with North Korea, China’s relationship with North Korea does not serve as an obstacle to trade relations. As such with China, South Korean politicians do not risk aggravating a trading partner that composes of 25 percent of their total trade. Amongst all this negative rhetoric from South Korea, unlike their South Korean
counterparts, Japanese voters do not prioritize issues regarding South Korea when (and if) they vote. Instead, they have been surveyed and recorded, as being heavily concerned with China and domestic economic concerns, and South Korean relations is never cited.

Animosities based in historical grievances, for the reasons laid out above, cannot be the driving motivation for the recent increase in South Korean antagonism towards Japan when this negativity has already and always persisted since the end of World War II. At several points in the 90s and early 21st century, public opinion of Japan had even softened and improved. Nonetheless, South Korean political parties, with the assurance that Japan is no longer as critical a trading partner as before as they focus upon relations with China (and the U.S. to a lesser extent) in the past decade, have manipulated the issue into a major political one to attract voters and promote political parties that otherwise have very little to differentiate themselves with from the others. Japan’s indifference to this political maneuvering further alleviates any concerns South Korean politicians might feel regarding diplomatic relations with Japan. As Japan’s value as a trading partner continues to decline, South Korean politicians have absolutely no reason to desist in emotionally charged anti-Japan rhetoric, and all the more to gain by encouraging that type of public discourse into the future.
References


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